Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators

by Dr. Linda Hirsch and Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to our latest edition of From the Writing Desk. In this edition you will find articles written by our 2011-2012 Writing Fellows: Ryan Bazinet, Sophia Bishop, Kendra Brewster, Shana Lessing, Edwin Mayorga and Monica Steinberg, in which they share insights from their work with faculty and other program initiatives this past academic year. We hope you will find our work on online-professional development, the new WRAC website and blog, student voice, bilingualism, and assessment inspiring for the work that you do in your classes. Each of these articles speaks to the variety of ways the Hostos WRAC Initiative is working to enhance the already rich culture of writing that exists on our campus. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank our team of Writing Fellows for all the work that they have done in their yearlong fellowship and wish them much success as they continue along their educational and professional paths. In addition, we are pleased to announce that our upcoming WRAC workshop on May 31st will feature Dr. Michael W. Smith, author of Getting it right: Fresh approaches to teaching grammar, usage, and correctness. We are particularly excited about this professional development opportunity because we recognize that even as we focus on the development of ideas and acquisition of learning when responding to student writing, grammatical error remains a perennial and significant issue in the classroom. We look forward to seeing many of you there to join in what will certainly be a lively and fruitful discussion.

An Anatomy of “Voice”
Shana Lessing and Monica Steinberg share insights and strategies they learned from their work helping students understand the concept of “voice” in their writing assignments.

Interpreting Unscripted Feedback
Kendra Brewster analyzes student responses to WAC surveys in WI courses.

WI Certification Online
Ryan Bazinet writes about the role of Writing Fellows in collaborating with faculty members in WI certification online.

Emotions & Emergent Bilingualism
Edwin Mayorga discusses writing and learning strategies for bilingual students.

WAC Dot Edu
Sophia Bishop unveils the new WAC blog and website.

Pictured above, L-R: (top row) Shana Lessing, Monica Steinberg, Ryan Bazinet; (middle row) Sophia Bishop, Kendra Brewster, Edwin Mayorga; (bottom row) Andrea Fabrizio, Linda Hirsch
An Anatomy of “Voice”

by Shana Lessing and Monica Steinberg

From Student Writers to Student Authors

As Writing Fellows at Hostos, we have had the unique opportunity to work with both professors and students over the academic year. Consulting with several professors on their writing assignments and strategies for improving student writing, we also met one-on-one with their students to assist them with their course papers. Operating from a position receptive to both teacher and student concerns, we found that both students and professors were deeply concerned about writing, but were surprised to discover that those concerns did not always match up: what professors identified as the key ‘problem areas’ were often different than the problems students identified in their own writing process. Yet, in a fascinating alignment, we saw one dominant theme emerge out of these varied perspectives: the concept of ‘voice.’

Instructors frequently expressed a desire for students to voice their arguments in a particular way, to write in an appropriate academic “voice,” and to use their own voice rather than relying too much on words from authoritative texts. Yet we found that a majority of research paper assignments said very little about ‘voice,’ focusing, rather, on ‘guidelines’: possible topics, page lengths, citation formats, and statements such as “You must have a clear thesis statement that is developed in the body of your paper,” and “Back up your points with evidence from the text.” It occurred to us that paper assignments sometimes read like a recipe: a list of ingredients and instructions that will produce a successful paper – if only students would follow them!

Yet, in our conversations with students, the importance of ‘getting it right’ was often itself a major obstacle; it seemed that anxieties about writing often made it difficult for them to consider their own voice as a significant aspect of the writing process. For example, meeting with students in the early stages of a research paper, we heard them talk enthusiastically about all they were learning and what interested them about their topics. Then, when asked about their plans for the paper itself, faces would fall, voices would trail off, and conversations would reflect hesitation. Their indecision seemed to us less a problem of understanding guidelines, and more a problem of empowerment – these students did not feel empowered to take ownership of their own writing. Time and again we heard questions like, “What information should I include?” “What if it’s interesting to me, but not relevant to the paper?” “How do I know if I’m choosing the right sources?”

Our experiences with students drove home to us that while many students do need help understanding the mechanics of academic writing, they also need help finding their voice, and using it. Indeed, it may not occur to many students that papers and essays are more than simply ‘written,’ they are also authored. How can we help students to claim the role of ‘author’ in their academic writing?

In considering this question, we identified four key areas in which the concept of ‘voice’ can be a helpful tool for improving students’ writing.

1. Using the Voice of Authority

To quote, or not to quote, that is the question. A majority of the paper assignments we have reviewed over the year included phrases such as: “Papers must include at least four sources,” and “Quotes must be cited in APA or MLA format.” While students may understand the requirements to use and cite voices of authority, often the actual practice of referencing sources is full of uncertainty. Many students we met with understood the mechanics of citation formats, but did not know what to quote or when. For example, a particularly dedicated student in a history class composed this sentence: “The trial of Sacco and Vanzetti gained widespread publicity and support.” The quotation was taken from an authoritative source, but it neither established a particular argument nor provided an important piece of evidence. Rather, it only interrupted and cluttered the narrative flow of the text. The student understood the mechanics of citation, but she did not understand the concept. Systems of citation merely require an individual to follow guidelines, but successfully using quotations to establish evidence, perspective, and authority is a more nuanced practice. When the student was shown an example of writing that successfully integrated a quotation, she was better able to grasp the concept that voices of authority should be used to strengthen her own arguments or clarify particular points. Such examples and writing samples can be included with initial paper assignments, and discussed in class.

2. Voice-It

We have found that one of the best ways to address a concern relevant to both professors and students – that of grammar – is to have students read their papers out loud.

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The WAC Survey
At the end of each semester, the Hostos Community College Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program surveys faculty and students in Writing Intensive (WI) courses. This evaluation seeks to understand the ways that students have improved their writing proficiency while also gaining a deeper understanding of the curriculum. Distributed in class, the surveys take about ten minutes and ask participants about a variety of items, from the number of formal and informal assignments completed, specific elements of the writing and revision process, to an overall assessment of the course. All but one of the items has a closed-ended response with answers on a scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The one open-ended item is designed to solicit the participant’s voice and opinions. In fall 2011 the survey was completed by 422 participants.

Curiosities about the Data
Because of my interest in open-ended responses I wanted to explore the relationship between students’ responses to the open-ended item – Please tell us about your experience of writing in this WI course. How did your writing and the feedback in this class differ from others? – and their responses to the closed-ended item: This course did improve my writing overall.

Of the 422 participants that completed the survey, seventy-three percent responded to the open-ended item. Eighty-three percent of the participants agreed that their writing improved (these participants will be referred to as the IW group) compared to seventeen percent of

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83% of students believed their writing improved from taking a WI course, according to WI exit surveys.

WI Certification Online
by Ryan Bazinet

Collaboration and Faculty Development
From fall 2011 to spring 2012, I worked with adjunct faculty member Robert Baird as he became certified to teach a Writing Intensive (WI) section of “History of Electronic Music.” A longtime professional editor and music journalist, Professor Baird was no stranger to writing when he began the course, but teaching writing according to WAC principles was a new experience for him. As a Writing Fellow, I worked with Professor Baird to convey the skills and ideas I’d learned in the WAC program at Hostos. The online program was designed for faculty who were unable to be on campus for workshops. However, the members of the Hostos WAC program maintain that it is essential that Writing Fellows collaborate with faculty during the process, and it is this collaboration that makes the online workshop a success.

Professor Baird was the first Hostos faculty member to complete the online Hostos WI Certification Workshop, which was modeled on a four-part workshop series developed and administered by Hostos Writing Fellows in 2010-11. In the online version, the workshop is divided into eight one-week units, covering a wide range of topics, from the development of informal writing assignments to strategies for responding to student writing (see table).

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Emotions & Emergent Bilingualism
by Edwin Mayorga

As a Writing Fellow at Hostos, I have been able to work with a number of wonderful professors, including Sonia Maldonado in the Education Department. Over the year, Professor Maldonado and I have worked together, looking at student work and adapting writing assignments to meet different language and learning needs. In fall 201, she asked me to develop a workshop to help students with their grammar. To my surprise, however, this “brief” workshop turned into an hour long, bilingual, plática (talk) that has pushed me to reflect on emotions and emergent bilingualism in the higher education classroom.

Emergent Bilingualism
Hostos has an unusually vibrant, multilingual, and multicultural landscape which could be seen as both a strength and a challenge. Scholars have shown that for centuries, bilingualism and multilingualism have brought up contested notions of identity, culture, nation, and power. Personally, I stand on the belief that bilingualism is an asset, where additional language acquisition enhances overall academic and social success. Historically, this position has not been a popular one in the U.S., as many have held to the belief that bilingualism proves to be a major obstacle, particularly for those who have been culturally, racially, and economically marginal.

Spanish speakers in the classroom are often called “English Language Learners” (ELLs), but there are more accurate alternatives. Focusing on children, García, Kleifgen & Falchi state that ELLs are “...in fact emergent bilinguals. That is, through school and through acquiring English, these children become bilingual, able to continue to function in their home language as well as in English, their new language and that of school.”

I use the term emergent bilingual to hold steady the notion that home language and related social experiences are not forgotten or left at the door when students enter higher education. Rather, these experiences are part of the linguistic and intellectual toolkit that students bring with them in to the classroom, and can be key factors in facilitating English language and literacy skills.

Conversely, deficit perspectives, which include benign and subtle ways of ignoring bilingualism, can negatively affect academic success and sense of self amongst emergent bilinguals. Educational inequities are produced when we assume the educational needs of bilinguals are the same as monolingual students. As an academic, I think a lot about the anxieties these deficit perspectives have on students, and this past year at Hostos, I’ve wondered, “Do students at Hostos feel like this?”

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1 I use the word bilingualism instead of multilingualism because, though we live in a multilingual world, bilingualism better fits the context in which I am writing.
2 Ofelia. García et al., From English Language Learners to Emergent Bilinguals (New York, NY): Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008), 45.
It is no secret that the Internet plays a major role in our daily lives. Between smartphones, iPads, and open Wi-Fi connections, we can get online just about anytime and anywhere we want (ok, maybe not on a stopped subway train). So it should not be surprising that the online world has pervaded the educational realm: Blackboard is frequently used in classes, the most common way to contact a professor is via e-mail, and almost all student research begins with a Google search (sigh). For better or for worse, the Internet and our Internet-using students are here to stay. And so, this past year at the Hostos WAC initiative, in addition to our usual jobs of working with faculty to develop or re-develop Writing Intensive courses, we also thought about how we could use the Internet as a WAC tool. We took on two projects - one for ourselves, and one for the faculty and students at Hostos - a blog and a new website.

The Blog: “Footnotes”
The appeal of a blog is easy to see: Everyone is doing it. It’s cool. It’s young. It’s easy and fast. The purpose of a blog is a bit harder to see. Why do the Writing Fellows need a blog? Well, as Writing Fellows, we talk a lot about low-stakes and informal writing. However, as doctoral students and masters of the five-to-ten-thousand word term paper, we rarely write anything that isn’t high stakes (these are our future careers on the line! publications! conference invitations! tenure-track jobs!). And so we have the raison d’etre for our blog - it is our attempt to actively engage in informal writing. To do as we tell you to have your students do. The vision is simple: to have a place where Writing Fellows can write about being Writing Fellows. So check out our blog, “Footnotes” (available via the WRAC website).

The Redesigned WAC Website
After lots of looking, loading, clicking, browsing, and downloading, the Writing Fellows decided that it was time to re-design the Writing across the Curriculum website – a necessary housekeeping task for any self-respecting twenty-first century internet host. I bravely volunteered for the task. The impetus was not only to create a cooler, cleaner, site (we all know that aesthetically pleasing websites are more frequented), but to increase the functionality - user-friendliness – of the website. The previous website was a bit hard to navigate, none of the links or downloadable materials had any descriptions, and things seemed a bit cluttered; there were long lists of links and materials without a good sense of organization. In other words, we had lots of great stuff, but we felt it may have been hard to tell we had lots of great stuff. So the past several weeks have been spent sifting, evaluating, and organizing all of our great stuff so that it’s easy to identify and find. We’ve split the website into two sections, one page with content for instructors, and another with content for students. For example, our Instructors page has information for how to create a Writing Intensive course and sample syllabi, some strategies for improving student reading, and an 8-week research paper program, among other useful resources. On our Students page, students can find study strategies, plagiarism podcasts, and Power Point lessons on writing such as, “Organizing an Argument.” Additionally, our website hosts our annual newsletter, “From the Writing Desk” (so it’s okay if you choose to recycle this copy - we’ve immortalized it through the power of the Internets for your future viewing pleasure). Last but not least, you can also find our contact information on our website – it’s how you can find information about working with WAC and the Fellows.

Redesigning was a slow, laborious process, but we hope you’ll agree that the results are worth the effort. So make sure to check out our brand new website at: http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/wac

An Anatomy of “Voice”
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As both listener and speaker, students were more apt to recognize errors or points of confusion that had remained unnoticed while silently reading their text. While this strategy may be of greatest benefit to native English speakers, it can be helpful for non-native speakers as well.

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For example, a former ESL student in a radiologic technology class read out loud this sentence she had written: “Much research shows that low levels of radiation are safe and while others prove there is no threshold and that the lowest levels can still be biologic threatening.” After ‘voicing’ her words, the student was able to recognize her errors, and corrected the sentence to read: “While much research shows that low levels of radiation are safe, some studies have sought to prove that there is no threshold and that even the lowest levels can still be biologically threatening.” While many professors often include a byline for students to sign verifying that their papers are void of plagiarized text, one possibility is to include a clause requiring students to read papers out loud before submission. This can help to improve writing substantially, while also encouraging students to take responsibility for their formal papers. These kinds of questions can help encourage students to take responsibility for their own authorial voice, and to approach assignments as they begin to compose their formal papers. These kinds of questions can help encourage students to take responsibility for their own authorial voice, and to approach research papers not simply as assignments they are required to complete, but as opportunities to formulate and communicate powerful ideas.

3. Voice vs. Voyc (or, Why is this student using text-speak in a research paper?)

Students we have worked with over the last year have consistently composed papers in two different voices: 1) a ‘false formal voice’ consisting of awkward and overly wordy sentences, and 2) a ‘chatty- or text-voice’ resembling a conversation rather than a written paper. For example, one student wrote a sentence that extended over five lines and consisted of sixty-six words, beginning with: “Contrary to what is believed by the populace of America, current evidence demonstrates discrepancies underlying these assumptions...” While mimicking the ‘voice’ of academic writing, the student’s well-researched and logical argument was lost within the wording. On the other hand, some students’ writing could be mis-taken for a spoken or even ‘texted’ conversation. A student in a history class composed these sentences in a first draft of his paper: “Judge Thayer was a POS. He didn’t like Italians and anarchists. Sacco and Vanzetti were victims of conspiracy and everyone knew it.” While the ideas are clear, the tone is too casual. In both of these situations, the reader is distracted from what is being said by how it is being said. One exercise we found extremely helpful is to have students analyze ‘voice’ in different writing samples. Students in Political Systems of Latin America, for example, were asked to compare paragraphs from two different student essays on a chapter from Howard Zinn’s The People’s History of the United States. Although both excerpts were grammatically and structurally sound, one used the third-person and supported key points with facts and analysis of the text – e.g., “Zinn argues that American history is generally taught from the perspective of European explorers of the ‘new world,’ rather than that of the millions of people already living there. He shows that history is not just a story of ‘human progress,’ but also a story of the tragic human costs of ‘progress.’” – while the other was written in the first person and relied heavily on emotional and moral appeals – e.g., “I think it’s devastating and shameful that history books don’t tell us the whole story; it truly saddens me to think of how innocent people are written out of history and future generations robbed of the chance to learn from past mistakes.” Reading aloud and discussing the excerpts in pairs, students were able to characterize the different voices, and reflect on their own authorial voice.

4. A Voice of One’s Own

One simple strategy that we highly recommend is to tell students: “There is no single, correct way to write this paper. If ten of your classmates choose the same topic, they will write ten different papers. Your job as the paper-writer is to figure out what story you want to tell about this topic, and then to tell it.” The students we worked with seemed to find this idea both exciting and scary. It puts them in charge, but also requires them to claim responsibility for the ‘story’ they are writing – and thus to claim their own voice. Students can begin to ask themselves: “What is my story about?” “How can I be a responsible storyteller?” “What information do I need to tell my story effectively?” “What kind of author do I want to be?” All of these questions can be presented to students as prompts for informal writing assignments as they begin to compose their formal papers. These kinds of questions can help encourage students to take responsibility for their own authorial voice, and to approach research papers not simply as assignments they are required to complete, but as opportunities to formulate and communicate powerful ideas.

Unscripted Feedback

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participants who strongly disagreed or disagreed that their writing improved, or who were neutral about their improvements (these participants will be referred to as the NIW group).

Matching Subsamples

To consider NIW and IW differences, I chose to analyze a subset of the data from those who perceived improvements and those who did not. Using the random selection feature in the statistical software SPSS, I randomly selected forty-five surveys from the 350 responses in the IW
group and forty-five surveys from the seventy-two responses in the NIW group. Then I analyzed each group for whether a response was written to the open-ended question. If there was a response I analyzed it for the word count and the number of positive and negative adjectives. I also performed a content analysis of the responses to identify common themes.

Closed-ended Responses and Text Features in the Subsample
In the subsamples, the IW group was less likely to respond to the item than the NIW group, with the rate of response at fifty-seven percent and sixty-eight percent respectively. Both groups wrote similar amounts based on the average word count of twelve and fifteen words respectively. Similarly, the groups wrote the same number of positive (e.g. engaging) and neutral adjectives (e.g. challenging). However, negative adjectives (e.g. boring) only appeared in the responses from NIW participants.

Content-Analysis of Participant Responses
A grounded theory approach was used to categorize responses based on themes that emerged from the responses themselves. The five emergent themes are represented below with participant text.

Professor Evaluation: "I think it was good. Teacher explained very good & understandable." (NIW Participant)

Content/Field Related Knowledge: "Was helpful course, I recommend this course for those who pursue medical degrees as well as liberal arts." (IW Participant)

Specific Assignments/Workload: "There's so much pressure on students that are not good writers. 10 page essay are a little over the edge. Stupid." (NIW Participant)

Feedback: "The subject...was tough enough that I didn't have enough of will to write long reports, and papers aside from studying for in class exams." (NIW Participant)

Writing Process: "I thought this was an English class because of the way we wrote our journals every week. Spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization have to be perfect and talk about citations/references? All of these made me improve my writing." (IW Participant)

In the subsample, references to specific professors and course content/field-related knowledge were almost equal across the groups. But there were differences in three of the emergent themes. Students in the IW group were more likely to reference aspects of writing process. Alternatively, students in the NIW group were more likely to refer to the course workload. Participants in the NIW group were also more likely to discuss the role of feedback about their writing.

Analysis Summary
The data suggest that participants' decisions to comment on their experiences were influenced by self-perceived improvements in their writing. While the NIW group reflected a small percentage of the entire sample of surveys, they responded to the surveys at a greater rate within the subsample. Participants in the NIW group were more likely to have negative adjectives, but they also included a similar amount of positive adjectives compared to IW participants. The themes raised across groups also differed and suggested that the groups focused on different aspects of the prompts, because the IW group emphasized writing while the NIW group emphasized feedback.

Future Evaluations and Research Questions
This exploratory analysis indicates the value of providing students the opportunity to encourage students' voices in WAC evaluation, especially in ways that can become post-hoc measures of how students write and how that writing functions to voice different concerns. It also raises the possibility that items in subsequent evaluations be designed to evaluate students' perceptions, for example: how does student writing change given specific mechanics and processes? How do students use writing to express, critique, and think? How do students incorporate feedback?

WI Certification Online
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All of the online exercises are designed to build towards the completion of the faculty participants' Writing Intensive syllabuses, including specific reading and writing exercises to help in the design and construction of WI sections. The workshop mirrors the pedagogy of a WI section: all of the writing exercises are commonly used in WI classrooms, and thus can be adapted directly into the WI class. The activities faculty members complete in the workshop are activities they could use in the classroom, such as informal writing, assignment scaffolding, and revision.

As a Writing Fellow, I acted as the online "instructor" – I reviewed his work and gave feedback where appropriate. More importantly, I had periodic meetings with Professor Baird, via phone, the web, or in per-

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son, to discuss his progress in the course and questions he had. When he started the online coursework, Professor Baird read articles by Peter Elbow and others, regarding informal writing, and he completed writing assignments dealing with the topic. Yet, in our first face-to-face meeting, he was unsure about how to actually use informal writing in the classroom. “Won’t it be a waste of class time?” he asked, wondering about the value of spending time on assignments that wouldn’t be graded. In response, I explained ways that I had used informal writing in my own teaching experience (as an adjunct at John Jay), and reiterated a fundamental WAC philosophy: informal, ungraded writing assignments are not at all a waste of class time because informal writing stimulates student thinking about course material, and can also be essential preparation for formal assignments. To quote Peter Elbow, “we get to throw away the low stakes writing itself but keep the neural changes it produced in students’ heads.” Following our conversation, Professor Baird expressed relief and excitement with the idea that not all student writing needs to be done in high pressure situations, and devised several creative informal writing prompts for low stakes writing assignments, such as, “Imagine a world without recorded music,” and “Has recording technology been a help or hindrance to musicians?” He was then able to use these prompts in his WI course.

In an outgoing assessment of the course, Professor Baird wrote that working with a Hostos Writing Fellow while undertaking the online course was “an absolutely essential part of the process. Ryan has helped me immeasurably in both the WAC course and in my larger approach to teaching.” By pairing Writing Fellows with faculty members, the Hostos WAC Initiative has developed a workshop that has much to offer, and one that can ultimately improve the performance of students as they write across the curriculum.

Emotions and Emergent Bilingualism
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I was coming in as a stranger, but by focusing on how challenging writing was – and is – for me (as a child of Spanish-speaking immigrants who became a doctoral student) I hoped to build off of the relationship Professor Maldonado and the students had already established. Sharing my “writerly” struggles was acknowledged with head nods, “yeses,” or “yeah, that’s so true.” I was able to make these shared feelings a starting point for developing a sense of respect and academic collegiality between the students and me, and we all had a productive conversation over the course of the workshop.

The workshop affirmed for me that despite the myriad responsibilities that pull on their attention, Hostos students are eager to learn and grow as multilingual thinkers and professionals. At the same time, the students we work with are struggling with the emotional and academic challenges of speaking, reading and writing in academic English language and culture. Working through these emotional and academic struggles requires time and sustained effort from the individual student, but it also requires that educators afford their students opportunities to develop.

Conclusion
As an educator at the higher education level I want to continue exploring both transcribing and translanguaging. The writing struggles that emergent bilinguals face is apparent in their work, but without concerted efforts by an academic community, as a whole, the frameworks and skills needed to identify and address language-based academic struggles (as opposed to a struggle based on cognition, for example) will fail to be sufficiently implemented to have a profound impact. What is crucial to take away from this work is that having a clear vision for thinking about language teaching within our writing and content-related instruction and overall institutional practices can have a transformative impact on emergent bilinguals and, in fact, all members of the college community.