



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Writing Across the Curriculum: "What's In It for Me?"

Pragmatists say we should evaluate deeds, not words, and judge ideas by how they work, rather than by how well they look on paper.

Many sadder-but-wiser people have failed to follow this advice when considering the development of a writing-across-the-curriculum program. They learned the hard way what David Russel's research revealed: "Revival meeting or consciousness-raising efforts, however useful as springboards, cannot sustain interest after founders have gone...WAC must be part of an institution-wide plan with realistic goals and clear steps marked out toward them."

So, you ask, "What's the solution? How do we add writing across the curriculum without becoming composition teachers and burying ourselves in an avalanche of paper grading?"

The simple approach is often the best. I think Monroe County Community College (MCCC) has developed a program that works. And it works for everyone involved: students and faculty.

MCCC had the "useful springboards"—retreats, workshops, seminars. They were interesting and helpful, but not absolutely necessary. These sessions encouraged faculty in the disciplines to develop non-graded, writing-to-learn activities. However, we have taken our WAC approach one important step beyond the workshop stage. When our instructors decide to transform the expressive, exploratory writing activities into transactional, graded writing, we offer them assistance. This, after all, is the part of the process that instructors find most frustrating—evaluating hastily prepared, poorly conceived, last-minute writing.

We have a way to improve the quality of instruction without placing a heavy burden on our faculty. We have no panacea, but we do offer valuable assistance at a crucial point in the writing process.

Writing Fellows Program

MCCC has brought the Writing Fellows program—which began a few years ago at Brown University—to our campus. Here, very briefly, is how it works.

We have an advanced composition class—open to only a few of our best students. These students, good

writers before taking the class, spend a semester becoming better writers and becoming writing consultants for their fellow students. These writing fellows work in a writing center—available to all students in all courses on campus—and each is also assigned to work with students in one class across the disciplines. For this assigned class, our writing fellows look at the early drafts of students' themes. They take each paper home, prepare a written commentary, and meet with the student writer to discuss the first draft. After that, the student writer has the opportunity to revise the draft and submit both drafts and the writing fellows' commentary to the instructor. Everyone in the "fellowed" classes must participate.

Last semester our "fellowed" classes included: Nursing Seminar, Political Science, Geometrical Drafting, Engineering Physics, Organic Chemistry, Respiratory Therapy, Logic, Western Philosophy, Basic Music for Classroom Teachers, General Physics, Children's Literature, Speech, Exploring Teaching, Poetry and Drama, Art History, Sociology, and Psychology. The instructors for these classes knew they were getting a second draft that had received the attention of a capable and concerned student tutor. (Instructors for other classes were also encouraged to require students to take first drafts to the Writing Center.) At the end of the year, we surveyed the students and faculty involved with the Writing Fellows Program.

Evaluation: Students With Writing Fellows

More than 97 percent of these students found their work with the writing fellows to be helpful. When you consider that these students were required to do *more* than students might have done in past semesters (write two drafts of each paper and meet with their writing fellows to discuss each), the approval rate is encouraging.

Some of the comments from these surveys are revealing: "I was pleased to find at MCCC the individual attention given to the students." "It helps to get an unbiased opinion of one's work before the professor sees it." "It is helpful to know that I had somewhere to go to get help with questions and problems."



Evaluation: Faculty Working With Writing Fellows

The faculty were pleased with the work of their writing fellows. Over 80 percent felt the papers they received were better than those submitted in comparable classes without a writing fellow. One faculty member summed it up: "Students are learning to focus on the complexities of the writing process. They are learning not to be content with one draft. More real learning is taking place."

Perhaps most noteworthy of all were the numerous comments by faculty who said they had initiated or expanded their use of writing solely because of the availability of the writing fellows. For example, one faculty member said: "Rarely have I required writing in this course. The two assignments this term were central to the goals of the course. I plan to make these assignments standard from now on. Regular daily writing will increase in all my classes."

Evaluation: Writing Fellows' Experiences

The writing fellows benefit the most—and they know it. Each writing fellow spends two hours a week in the writing center and is also assigned to work with up to 20 students in one course. At the end of the semester, each writing fellow receives a \$200 fellowship grant. Frankly, if calculated on an hourly basis, the money is a small incentive. Other major incentives come in the form of academic credentials, campus recognition, and their own eagerness to learn and to help others learn. These students also enjoy working closely with faculty members.

In conclusion, if a faculty member or student on our campus wants to know "What's in it for me?" the answer is this: "We offer something for everyone." Faculty members are pleased that their students get feedback at an important time in the writing process, when it really matters—before a grade ends the process. Faculty are also delighted to know they will not be reading last-minute efforts. And, of course, students are wise enough to know that, even though this does not guarantee success, it does help them write the best paper they are capable of writing.

John Holladay, *Instructor, Humanities & Social Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at Monroe County Community College, 1555 South Raisinville Road, Monroe, MI 48161.

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Administrators' sessions on Monday and Tuesday will focus on contemporary leadership issues, such as managing change, partnerships, institutional culture and climate, professional development rewards and incentives, and institutional effectiveness measures.

General sessions will be held at the Hyatt Regency and Four Seasons hotels; the Conference of Administrators will be held at the Four Seasons.

For further information, contact Dr. Suanne D. Roueche, Director, NISOD, at the address at the bottom of this page.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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