



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

## Writing in the Disciplines

In many colleges, the responsibilities for teaching writing are placed predominantly on the English department. Faculty in other disciplines frequently feel uncertain about assigning and assessing written work. They are unaware of techniques for using writing as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. As a result of a writing across the curriculum movement at Santa Fe Community College, faculty in the arts and sciences disciplines effectively use writing to enhance the teaching and learning process.

In recent years, many colleges have established writing across the curriculum programs to remediate deficiencies in students' writing and thinking skills. Some have established a "writing center" where students and faculty can go for help. Students are given help with writing assignments by tutors at such a center, and the faculty gain information on assigning and grading written work. Other colleges have broadened the responsibility for teaching writing to all faculty. Santa Fe Community College chose to involve faculty in every discipline in the writing movement because writing is seen as a necessary skill to be taught and as a tool to teach thinking and collaborative learning.

The goals were: to infuse the practice of writing into all disciplines, to use writing to foster learning, to stress the importance of collaboration in the teaching/learning process, and to foster scholarship among the faculty by using writing as a vehicle to share good classroom practices.

A series of workshops were held over two years (1988-1990). Seventy-two of 106 arts and sciences faculty attended these workshops over the two-year span. Every faculty in the physical sciences department, 83% of biology faculty, and 80% of the English faculty participated in the writing workshops. The creative arts faculty had the fewest number of participants (only 1 out of 11), and 73% of the humanities faculty took part in the workshops. The social sciences and history faculty had the same level of participation (64%), and 52% of the mathematics faculty took part in the workshops.

A possible reason for the low participation rate by the creative arts faculty may be that they are more interested in visual and physical performance as forms of expression. However, the one faculty member from the creative arts

area who did take part has integrated journal writing into her classes, requiring her students to generate ideas and think through the process for creating a work of art. In the same way, on a surface level, writing may not seem to be an integral part of teaching mathematics, which may explain the low level of interest; but for those who did attend, the workshops gave them another tool to add to their teaching repertoire.

In April 1991, a year after the last workshop, the following question was sent to each participant who was still teaching at the college: "In the past two years, we held a series of workshops on writing for the arts and sciences faculty. You were one of 72 people who participated in that project. Would you take 5 to 10 minutes and do a 'free write' on ways you use the techniques you learned at that workshop?"

The response rate was 81%. The most frequently mentioned technique faculty found useful was the free write. This technique, which uses writing to generate ideas, has only a few rules:

- *It is timed:* write for 5 to 10 minutes without stopping.
- *It encourages free association:* the writing can be completely free or it can focus on a particular topic.
- *It is fast:* erasures, corrections, or thinking about what to write next are discouraged.
- *It is private:* no others will see the writing unless you want them to see it.

For many, this was a new technique, and there were as many different uses as there were respondents. Several faculty commented on the useful feedback they received when they asked their students to summarize the day's lecture. This gave them insights into the students' perceptions and understandings. One faculty "uses the five minutes at the end of every class for students to commit their thoughts to paper. These writings form the second part of each day's notes. The first part is the record of what happened. The second is what it means and how it feels."

The second most frequently mentioned technique was the use of the journals. A history instructor suggests to his class that they keep a journal for themselves, and include the names of people they meet and their impressions of people and events. "Imagine 50 or more years after their death some great-grandchild—born years removed from



the author—will be able to know their ancestors intimately, and will wish they had known that person personally. THAT'S HISTORY!"

Several mentioned personal benefits from the workshop. One faculty mentioned that he "wrote small 'abstracts' of a pending lecture." Doing so helps him gain insights for preparing his lesson plans. This same instructor has adopted the practice of writing "impressions of each class meeting." This allows him to make a smoother transition from one class meeting to the next.

For those faculty in disciplines other than English, the workshops gave them a greater appreciation for the difficulty in teaching students to write. One humanities faculty uses a "mystery slide" which is shown many times over the course of the semester. At the end of every instructional unit, the students are asked to discuss the same slide in terms of what they had just learned in the unit of the course. At the end of the semester the students' comments are photocopied and given out to everyone. Those who earnestly do the work can see their own growth and understanding of the subjects studied. "Those who did not put in the effort could see what they had lost."

The science faculty has always assigned laboratory reports, but most of them were not in narrative form. Many were diagrammatic, fill-in-the-blank, data displays, and calculations. After the workshops, the vast majority of the science faculty incorporated free writes, journals, and narrative lab reports into their courses. Many faculty mentioned the pleasure of getting to know their students better through their writing. Interestingly, this group took the most risks in assigning innovative writing assignments. A chemistry faculty gives his students an assignment entitled "Living Scientist." He asks them to interview a practicing chemist at a research university in the same town and write a short paper. One student who interviewed her own father gained insights into who he was professionally and understood for the first time why the family had made decisions to move so frequently. The scientists themselves were happy to talk to someone other than their colleagues about what they did as a professional, and the students learned much about the kinds of people who make the discoveries they read about in their texts.

Collaboration, working together in groups to find solutions or create a product, is common in the workplace. Yet in the classroom, such collaboration is not always encouraged. As a matter of fact, we often consider such cooperation "cheating." Ways to use collaborative learning were introduced as part of the writing workshops but have not yet been widely accepted. Collaborative learning requires the instructor to give up

some of her control over the class and requires more time than the one-hour class period. The value is that the students take an active role in the learning process. Future projects will focus on ways to encourage more collaboration as a tool for learning.

The workshops did encourage collaborative work among faculty. As a direct result of these workshops, a group of faculty created two interdisciplinary publications. The student arts journal *Tracings*, with writing and art from students in a variety of disciplines, and *The Santa Fe Review*, a journal of writings by faculty and staff, are published annually. The science faculty have also used the writing techniques and collaborative process to revise courses and write competitive grants. They have successfully received two National Science Foundation grants, as well as other state and local grants, using the collaborative writing process.

By placing an emphasis on the importance of writing, providing the opportunities to learn new pedagogy via the workshops, and encouraging faculty to take some risks and try new ideas and methods, the college has made a crucial difference in the quality of instruction students receive. Many faculty, who were already dissatisfied with short-answer and multiple-choice evaluations, have been given new vision to coax their students to write, to use writing as a tool for learning, and to confidently assign and evaluate written work, including essay exams. The techniques of writing to think and writing to foster collaborative work by students have added a new dimension to the course content in many discipline areas.

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March 27, 1992, Vol. XIV, No. 9

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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms. ISSN 0189-106X.