

Hostos WAC Initiative: *From the Writing Desk*



Greetings from the W/RAC Coordinators

by Drs. Linda Hirsch & Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to the Spring 2015 edition of *From the Writing Desk*, the newsletter of the Hostos WAC/RAC Initiative. We are pleased to share with you a special edition devoted to Writing in the Disciplines (WID). Now celebrating its 15th year, the Hostos WAC/RAC Initiative has evolved to focus on reading as well as writing and has witnessed a tremendous growth in the number of Writing Intensive (WI) sections offered to our students. The more than 100 WIs developed by faculty, most in collaboration with our CUNY WAC Fellows, speak to the campus-wide recognition that writing has a place in all disciplines and in all majors.

The articles in this edition of the newsletter examine writing practices in diverse offerings including dental hygiene, business, physics, radiologic technology, chemistry and game design. We hope these features will not only keep you informed about the work of your colleagues, but will also inspire you to think about ways of engaging your students in meaningful reading and writing practices that reflect the unique aspects of writing in your discipline.

Join us in saying thank you to our team of WAC Fellows, Ryan DeChant, Sean Gerrity, Janne Gillespie, Rebecca Salois, Katherine Shloznikova, Emily Williamson, and Fang Xu, for their outstanding commitment and contributions to the Hostos WAC/RAC Initiative this year. We hope you will join us in wishing them much success in their future endeavors. They have been indispensable to the success of WAC at Hostos. In the fall, we will be welcoming a new group of Fellows. By mid-September they will be available to work with you on developing a Writing Intensive (WI) course, revising/revisiting an existing WI, building reading/writing assignments into your



L to R: Katherine Shloznikova, Janne Gillespie, Andrea Fabrizio, Sean Gerrity, Linda Hirsch, Fang Xu, Emily Williamson, and Rebecca Salois

Inside the Issue:

- Greetings from the W/RAC Coordinators 1
- Writing in the Sciences 2
- From Outsider to Insider 3
- Dental Hygiene and Moral Philosophy: A Match Made through WAC 4
- Creating a WI Syllabus: Business as Usual? 5
- Chemistry + Writing = Formula for Success 6
- Writing in the RAD Lab 7

non-WI course, running mini-workshops for your students, or certifying you to teach an existing WI.

Please contact us if you would like to collaborate with WAC in any way. We encourage you to visit our website: <http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/> where you can find a variety of support materials for yourself and your students.

Wishing all a wonderful summer,

Linda Hirsch and Andrea Fabrizio, WRAC Coordinators

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KEY WORDS of WAC

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC): Is a pedagogical movement that began in the 1980s. Generally, WAC programs share the philosophy that writing and reading instruction should happen across the academic community and throughout a student's undergraduate education. WAC programs also value writing and reading as methods of learning. Finally, WAC acknowledges the differences in writing conventions across the disciplines, and believes that students can best learn to write in their areas by practicing those discipline-specific writing conventions.

Writing in the Sciences

by Katherine Shloznikova

That writing is an integral part of the humanities is a given. Humanities are deeply welded to language, a common medium for communication within its disciplines. When it comes to writing in the sciences, one only wonders. Why bother with writing when one has numbers, signs, formulas, data and other means of communication that are deemed more mathematical and more precise? In fact, a skeptic might say that language would just obfuscate the clarity of pure numbers and formulas. But the truth of the matter is that writing is still indispensable in the sciences as it is in the humanities. How can one communicate one's findings, one's activities and ideas if not in words? After all, formulas, data and equations are usually

themselves objects of scientific discussion. So what exactly is scientific writing and what is its purpose? If one takes an example of an environmental studies course, it becomes evident that experimental and scientific data are used to develop discussion in class and a written report as homework. Learning to write a report of an environmental experiment is no simple task. First of all, it involves learning how to master the structure of the report and the appropriate jargon or style. But most importantly, students have to learn how to formulate their hypotheses, how to design ways to verify or reject hypotheses, and to choose and interpret the results of experimental tests. All of that has to be expressed with clarity

and efficiency. Very often well-written reports are submitted for publication in scientific journals. In other courses, like nursing or dental hygiene, writing is devoted to describing and explaining, as, for example, in assessing patients' condition or writing comments for doctors or another nurse. If a patient has a particularly lengthy history of illness, his file would read like a long book.

Writing in the sciences has its own disciplinary language with its own unique conventions and characteristics that differ from those in both the humanities and the social sciences. It can take many forms from a lab notebook to a project report, or from a paper in an academic journal to an article in a

scientific magazine. Most importantly, scientific writing is expected to be clear, simple, logical, accurate and objective.

This is something our Hostos students are given a chance to learn in the writing intensive science courses.



KEY WORDS of WAC

Informal Writing (a.k.a. low-stakes writing): Activities which provide students with opportunities to experiment with ideas on paper without the pressure associated with correctness. Such writing-to-learn assignments involve students in their own learning by teaching them to become active learners; help them discover what they already know and what they still have to learn; and relate subjects to their lives and values. Any one informal writing assignment should count very little (if at all) toward the student's final grade. Examples: journals, reflective responses, creative drafting and free-writing.

From Outsider to Insider

by Fang Xu

With a background in Sociology, and having taught Advanced Research Methods, a Writing Intensive (WI) course in that very discipline for five semesters at Lehman College before joining the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Hostos, I came with a clear idea of what a WI syllabus would look like in Sociology. I also assumed that my work would involve helping faculty in Sociology or other social sciences to develop WI syllabi. Instead, I was granted the opportunity to work with Prof. Bethancourt in Humanities to fashion his game design course syllabus into a WI one. The fellowship experience has broadened my understanding of WAC principles and provided me with the valuable experience of working with faculty outside of the social sciences to recognize the importance of writing in their respective disciplines. Through the collaboration, those faculty too

became insiders of WAC knowledge.

In the fall of 2014, I began my fellowship by working with Prof. Bethancourt to finalize his GD102 Beyond Games syllabus and the final project, which is to design an education game, either a video game or a tabletop card/board game. Instead of a research paper, as is the usual case in the social sciences, the specification of this course is to give students focusing on game design the opportunity to experience a real-world game development circle. It includes pitching to investors and designing characters, interactive fiction, core mechanics and rules. Other than narrative writing, graphs, images, and diagrams are also required. They all are essential components of the design and complement each other to provide a complete picture of what the future game would be like.

Being quite different from a research paper, we successfully incorporated the WAC principles of scaffolding and writing-to-learn for creating a video or tabletop game to be used in a 5th grade class to teach a lesson plan. To create the ten-page Game Design Document, students need to figure out the pitch, setting, embedded conflict, mechanics such as attainable collectibles, character description and images, as well as diagram of (game) world navigation. Both the game and the game design document would go through two rounds of revision and polishing. When in-class presentation, playtest and faculty feedback are built into each step, students turn out to be well prepared to tackle an ambitious course project like designing a real-world game. What they learn through each step will also translate into valuable knowledge and skills after they graduate.

A WI course in Humanities does not necessarily mean a text-dominated research paper with extensive literature review

or critique. What I also learned from the collaboration is that regardless of discipline or discipline-specific outcomes, writing is an essential part of

students' learning experiences. Only through writing can they play an active role in their own education and become insiders of the discipline of their degree.

KEY WORDS of WAC

Writing Intensive Course (WI): An academic course in which a substantial part of the final grade is based on writing projects which incorporate opportunities for feedback and revision, and in which writing to learn activities take place frequently.

Dental Hygiene and Moral Philosophy: A Match Made through WAC

by Sean Gerrity

When, as my first assignment as a WAC Fellow at Hostos, I was paired with Professor Diana Macri in the Dental Hygiene department to help her develop a Writing Intensive (WI) version of her course DEN 223: Ethics, Jurisprudence, and Practice Management in Dental Hygiene, I was way more than a little nervous. As a Ph.D. candidate in the English program at the CUNY Graduate Center, and having taken a graduate course in Teaching College English, taught writing for three years at LaGuardia Community College and the College of Staten Island, and worked in the College Writing Program at my undergraduate institution for three years, I felt confident in my knowledge of WAC/RAC/WID principles and was fully on board with regard

to their value for students. But dental hygienics: I didn't know the first thing about it, nor did I have any idea how writing might be a part of a course on it.

Then I met with Professor Macri for the first time, looked at the non-WI syllabus she had used previously to teach the course, and saw that she was teaching the students about Immanuel Kant and moral and ethical philosophy. In a dental hygiene course? I was extremely surprised—but even more curious to keep learning. According to Prof. Macri, “While we may think decision making regarding ethical dilemmas is something that is inherent, that we as healthcare providers ‘automatically’ know how to go about making these decisions, it is actually a skill that requires practice and reinforcement. Providing formal education on the history of ethical theory and practice allows the student to lay a foundation from which to build upon.” Students learn about the

writings of philosophers like Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and John Rawls, after which they answer low-stakes, open-ended discussion questions on Blackboard that ask them to connect the philosophical concepts to real-world ethical dilemmas they might encounter as dental hygienists.

As it turned out, Prof. Macri and I were a fantastic match as collaborators. Like me, she is a voracious reader and writer, a consumer of all kinds of literature and texts, from novels and films, to works of philosophy, to a broad spectrum of news and current events both inside and outside her field and in academic journals and popular publications. Her belief in a well-rounded, humanistic education for her students gelled almost exactly with my own thoughts about teaching community college students. What now seems obvious to me, after learning so much from Prof. Macri—that the allied health professions and the



humanities are deeply intertwined, and that future allied health professionals can benefit tremendously from some humanities education (and vice versa!)—was at first hard to perceive. But now it’s hard for me to believe that I hadn’t realized this sooner. Not only do dental hygienists need to be extremely proficient in written and verbal communication of all kinds, but they also work in a field centered on caring for *people*: individuals with diverse backgrounds, needs, beliefs, medical conditions, and fears and questions about dental work

and overall health. Now more than ever, Prof. Macri says, “recognizing the severe access to care issues that many Americans face, legislation all across the country is allowing for dental hygienists to perform expanded functions in independent practice settings.” And Prof. Macri firmly believes that incorporating writing into her course will help prepare her students for increased job duties and heavier workloads when they become practicing dental hygienists.

With a little help from me on WAC/RAC principles, Prof. Macri has masterfully created a WI syllabus for her course that incorporates both low and high stakes writing assignments designed to bridge the gap between the science of dental hygiene and its humanistic, moral and ethical dimensions. In this way, her course prepares students to be both proficient health professionals and empathetic, kind, understanding caretakers. Who said the sciences and humanities have nothing to learn from each other?!

KEY WORDS of WAC

Scaffolding: Scaffolding is the support given to students before they can handle a learning task independently. This refers to implementing multiple small, informal (or semi-formal) writing assignments that build up to a more formal high-stakes project in a course.

Creating a WI Syllabus: Business as Usual?

by Rebecca L. Salois

As a PhD Candidate in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages Program at the Graduate Center, I joined the WAC program at Hostos this year expecting to use my literature reading and writing skills to help professors and students with their WI requirements. And while I have had fruitful collaborations with multiple English professors to develop WI syllabi, it was the non-English department syllabus I worked on that proved to be one of the most rewarding experiences. In the fall semester of 2014, as a newly appointed WAC fellow, I

was asked to work with Professor Jorge Silva Puras in the business department to help him develop a syllabus for his Entrepreneurship course, BUS 240. I will be the first to admit that I do not know a thing about starting a business. My husband runs his own business, but that’s his job, not mine! Needless to say, I was slightly apprehensive about taking on this task, especially as one of my first WI projects here at Hostos. Luckily, I was not doing this alone! WAC is a collaboration. Professor Silva Puras knew his subject and I knew about WAC pedagogy and WI guidelines.

We each brought to the table important and critical elements of creating a successful WI syllabus. To develop this syllabus, we took a look at what he already had and figured out what worked and what didn’t. We reviewed assignments that he had already implemented in his non-WI version of the class and applied WAC principles to these assignments. One of these projects was a previously optional extra credit assignment in which students were asked to read a book called *Raving Fans* and to answer a series of questions in short paragraphs. We decided that this assignment

would now be mandatory, and we reworked it into a writing prompt with guiding questions which would require two drafts. We were able to adapt the assignment to meet the WI requirements without taking away the essence of what Professor Silva Puras wanted to get from that assignment in the first place.

To me, this is the most important thing to remember for those who are considering creating a WI course in the disciplines: odds are you will not have to start from scratch. If you are doing reading and writing in your class, you are most likely applying some of these WAC/WI principles already, and it is up to you and the fellow you are working with to help adapt what you do to meet these guidelines. Sometimes this will mean creating brand new

assignments, but other times it simply entails modifying what already exists. For BUS 240, we created new, informal prompts that related to each week's course materials and opened up a discussion forum on Blackboard for students to respond to these topics. We changed that extra credit assignment to be mandatory, and most importantly, we looked at the class's major project, a business plan, and adapted it ever so slightly so that it allowed for draft work and individual grading.

This collaboration was helpful to both of us. It showed me, as a WAC fellow, that I could help create WI assignments and a syllabus outside of my field. And it showed Professor Silva Puras that he didn't have to completely change his course and start from scratch in order to make it a successful and

enjoyable writing intensive course.

This seems to be something many professors worry about and perhaps struggle with when deciding whether or not to create a WI syllabus, especially for those in disciplines outside of English and the Humanities. But it can be done, and it can be done well. And especially for those students with specific career tracts in mind, it can help them complete their WI requirements in their own fields if they so choose.



Chemistry + Writing = Formula for Success

by Janne Gillespie

Starting out as a Writing Fellow last fall, I assumed that in helping to develop new Writing Intensive courses, I would mainly focus on courses in the humanities and social sciences. After all, STEM courses are all about multiple-choice tests and writing math-like formulas, right? I soon learned how wrong I was, but despite my Writing Fellow colleagues' enthusiastic reports of fruitful collaborations with instructors

of classes like dental hygiene and radiography, I still felt a tinge of anxiety as I raised my hand during our first WAC meeting of the spring semester to volunteer to work with a chemistry professor. However, all my worries vanished when I met with Anna Manukyan, Assistant Professor of Chemistry at Hostos. Her enthusiasm and eagerness to incorporate even more writing into her courses convinced me

once and for all that writing should be an integral part of any STEM course and can certainly be implemented with great success.

Dr. Manukyan already knew the pedagogical value of writing before she became acquainted with the WAC program at Hostos: "Coming to graduate school in the U.S. from Armenia, which has an educational system that

emphasizes the ability to present material cogently both orally and in writing, I was well aware of how writing helps students, myself included, to understand and remember scientific information.” As she started her teaching career here at Hostos, Dr. Manukyan quickly came to realize that although all students need to be explicitly taught the techniques of both laboratory work and scientific writing, the diverse student population at Hostos particularly benefits from using writing as a tool to process the challenging chemistry curriculum, hone their communication skills, and learn to produce the kinds of professional writing they are required to deliver as science majors, such as writing research/newspaper articles, experimental reports and protocols, equipment manuals, and other forms of technical

writing. Dr. Manukyan, therefore, assigned her students tasks that required a lot of writing, such as pre-lab assignments that help students prepare for and understand their upcoming laboratory experiments, reports from the annual Science Fair, and summaries of textbook readings, even before she started the process of developing a WI course and becoming certified as a WI instructor.

Starting this spring, Dr. Manukyan has been working enthusiastically to develop a WI section of CHE 220. In addition to the mandatory lab reports, Dr. Manukyan’s course will feature formal writing assignments which help students process the chemistry curriculum and apply it to every-day life, a feature that clearly engages the students.

They will therefore write research essays on the advantages and disadvantages of nuclear power as well as the impact of acidification on local oyster farms. The course also incorporates excellent writing-to-learn activities, for instance, posting on the class Blackboard discussion forum and responding to prepared questions at home and in class. These activities will not only help the students process their readings but also help them reflect on various issues of science and society and use web resources to expand upon scientific ideas and principles. By having chemistry courses incorporate writing as an essential component, Dr. Manukyan’s students are enabled to become a part of and participate in the vibrant science community at Hostos and beyond.

KEY WORDS of WAC

Formal Writing (a.k.a. high-stakes writing): Assignments that are expected to be completed according to formal academic and disciplinary conventions and often count for a significant part of a student’s grade. Examples: essays, research papers, lab reports, essay exams and critical response papers.

Writing in the RAD Lab

by Emily Williamson

Every Friday, students arrive for the required lab section of RAD 102 (Radiologic Technology). Most students enter the room with purpose, setting their bags and notebooks down at their lab team tables, immediately signing out their

radiation monitors and putting them on. After a few minutes of settling, the lab begins. The professor asks the students, holding a box-like object in his hand, “If the X-ray enters the object at a 45° angle, how will the image appear on the digital



detector?” Most students seem unsure at first, and some attempt to answer without worrying about making a mistake. For this lab the students were applying X-rays to objects from different angles, in trial-and-error fashion, to understand how to better position an object for accurate X-ray images. (Think of positioning a body part, like a hand or foot for a broken bone diagnosis).

For this spring semester, I have collaborated with Professor Jarek Stelmark to develop a Writing-Intensive syllabus for his RAD 102 course. The scenario described above offers a window into the very practical and hands-on environment of the X-ray lab. Often, the idea of “writing” in a STEM course seems difficult to implement. However, the practical skills that Prof. Stelmark’s students are learning in the lab can translate into both practical writing skills for their scientific field and future career, and

writing-to-learn exercises that push students to think three-dimensionally and critically about method, outcomes, and real-world applications.

The future WI syllabus for RAD 201 will ask students to draw the predicted images (45° x-ray image, for example), and then, in an informal, in-class writing assignment, describe why they expect the x-ray image to look that way. After the lab is finished, students will have their predictions and results side by side. From these before and after materials, they can then write the formal lab report, in which they explain the procedure and methods that were used to obtain the results. Eventually, all of the formal lab reports will be revised and collected into a final lab portfolio. For this final portfolio, the students will write a reflective essay, describing their favorite or most successful lab experiment.

Prof. Stelmark has a difficult task: he must prepare x-ray professionals in a short, two-year degree program. Because of this, he feels that a WI RAD 102 course will train his students better and more effectively for their future careers. In the RAD lab Prof. Stelmark maintains a relaxed and positive atmosphere, one that allows students to think freely, experiment, and make mistakes. In a conversation about the lab’s environment, Prof. Stelmark remarked that the lab must be a non-judgmental space that allows students to make mistakes. This attitude reflects not only his approach to lab instruction but also to writing. Students need the opportunity to troubleshoot both lab procedures and scientific concepts, and writing through these tasks will let them better retain this important information, hone their skills in radiologics, and express themselves as x-ray professionals.

