

Featured in this issue:

WRITING AT SVSU

From the Editors:

*The purpose of the **Literacy Link** is to share with faculty across the university information and ideas about the teaching of reading, writing, and thinking. We believe that all teachers at the university are teachers of literacy; therefore, we hope you will find this newsletter informative. This first issue is devoted exclusively to writing; however, the next two issues (due out in March and mid-April) will include articles on reading and thinking as well. We welcome any and all suggestions and submissions.*

Handling the Paper Load

One of the major problems of writing across the curriculum continues to be the amount of time required to grade papers, especially for large class sections. While I know of no perfect solution to this problem, I have heard discussions of one approach which seems to me to combine practicality for the instructor with a high level of value for the student.

In this method, instructors in non-Composition classes do not attempt to "correct" all errors in a paper or to provide comprehensive commentary on the student's writing performance. Instead, they look for the most typical writing problems in a particular student's papers and prescribe specific kinds of improvement. Although a student may have a variety of writing problems and the instructor may decide to make general comments about them, the emphasis is on choosing one or two particular

problems which occur repeatedly in the student's papers, commenting on those problems and asking the student to work on specific kinds of improvement.

This approach seems to me to have several virtues. For one, neither the instructor nor the student is overwhelmed. Even if there are a lot of diverse problems, the instructor can focus on eliciting specific new writing behavior and give fairly specific suggestions, rather than spending time marking every error and struggling with how to "fix" every awkward or incorrect sentence.

General comments about the full range of problems may be appropriate, especially in the first paper, but the student can be required to concentrate on one or two specific types of problems, where improvement should be expected. The student is more likely to get problem areas under control when

dealing with them one or two at a time, and will begin to develop more sense of mastery. If significant improvement is evident and several papers are being assigned, the instructor can later move on to a second, less critical area for improvement.

This permits the instructor to read papers for content and argument and for improvement in the specific problem areas, rather than searching for all possible errors and trying to suggest corrections for every one. The approach does require faith in the long-term process of writing improvement. However, we all know that we are unlikely to solve a student's writing problems single-handedly, and it allows us to hope for at least some short-term progress while also cutting down on grading time.

*Dean Judy Kerman,
College of Arts and
Behavioral Sciences*

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The SVSU Writing Center, 135 Wickes Hall, offers tutorial services for students working on writing. Trained student tutors help writers organize and develop ideas and materials; use reference works, quotations, and documentation (both MLA and APA formats); eliminate basic errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage; and revise a paper that has already been evaluated. Student tutors will not fix papers for students by proofreading or rewriting.

How can you use the Center? Urge your students to come to the Writing Center early and often. Make clear their assignments so that tutors can help them meet your expectations. Explain the value of having a "friendly reader" respond to their words. If you require students to work in the Center, we can arrange tutorials that address the problems you want addressed. Our records allow you to monitor attendance and progress. Finally, clarify what we cannot and should not do--you expect their work to be theirs; though we collaborate and advise, we will not do work for them.

*Chris Looney,
Coordinator of Basic
Skills-English*

PLAGIARISM

Students and Plagiarism: A Not Uncommon Pair

Note from the Editor:

Plagiarism is a serious and complex issue. Consequently, this article is the first in a three part series on plagiarism.

Plagiarism does exist at SVSU. In one case, two SVSU freshmen copied disk files from two other students, changed the author's name in the heading to their own, and handed the printouts in. Unfortunately for them, they handed the papers in to the same composition instructor who had assigned and read them the previous semester! In another case, an upper division SVSU literature student became so absorbed in Harold Bloom's psychomatic theory that she adopted his position and phraseology as her own. She had absorbed the source, using it so exclusively that its thinking and even its phrases displaced hers.

The two freshmen were deliberate and malicious in misrepresenting the source of their writing. The literature student was neither deliberate nor malicious in misrepresenting the source of hers. But all were guilty of plagiarism, taking words, facts, or ideas (including concepts, opinions, or lines of argument) from another and passing them off as one's own. Lynn Quitman Troyka wisely observes that college students must "learn the 'rules of the game'" to avoid plagiarism, which she rightly emphasizes may be intentional or unintentional (*Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, 2nd ed., 581; see also the SVSU *Student Handbook* under "Academic Dishonesty," 20).

Many cases of plagiarism are simple enough to identify. However, plagiarism in one writing situation may not be plagiarism in another. Frequently, professors offer information and insights in class that they did not originate. They know that "common knowledge" need not be documented--and

common knowledge for a history professor, for example, includes a wide range and considerable quantity of both facts and generalizations common to most historians but not to most students. Students writing a research paper in a history class need to acknowledge the sources of their facts and ideas at a much higher rate than professors because the students in general gain their facts and ideas from a single source while the history professor gained those same facts and ideas from a variety of sources. Put another way, without citing sources the student historian lacks authority for his or her utterance and passes off another's writing as his or her own.

However, students, especially advanced students, can rival the authority of professors in some arenas of knowledge, in which case what might appear to an English 300 teacher and others as plagiarism may indeed be common knowledge to the student writer. In this case, the context, especially the reader, needs to be clearly defined. If the readers are historians, certain facts and ideas might not need documentation that would need documentation for nonhistorians.

In general, all writers need to ask, Is my common knowledge the reader's mystery? If it is, then the writer needs to identify the source of his or her utterance, even if the identification is only, "Experts on the Civil War agree that . . ." (But even historians would like to know that the writer has read these experts--citation would only enhance the writer's authority in the eyes of both historians and nonhistorians.)

Dr. Paul Munn

ON STUDENT WRITING

Perceptions of Student Writing Ability: Students vs. Faculty

Surveys from introductory history, political science, management, philosophy and sociology classes which participated in a Write-to-Learn project at SVSU revealed that student perceptions of their writing abilities are greater than faculty perceptions of those abilities. While students said that they believe writing is important for professional success, that they are willing to work to enhance their writing skills, and that most college students do not have adequate writing skills, they nonetheless assessed their own writing skills as more than adequate and did not perceive a need for more help with writing assignments across the curriculum. Faculty, however, felt students are often misperceiving their own writing ability, lack adequate skills, and are not seeking out tutorial help when they should. As former management

faculty member Will Mulvaney commented, the students' "perception seems to be that they know how to write. This is clearly not the case. Perhaps

this is a key aspect to the problem--unless they think they have a problem, why should they change?"

Two possible causes for the gap between student and faculty perceptions of student writing ability are:

1 that students and faculty are defining what is needed to write well in different terms, with students thinking of good writing only in terms of being free of errors, overlooking the role played by organization, clarity, and the use of evidence and

2 that while faculty in workshops may stress how integral the ability to communicate in writing is to mastery of their discipline, their

grading policies in particular courses often do not reflect this belief as they separate "writing" from "content."

Four suggestions emerged from the Write-to-Learn project:

1 Educate faculty outside of English about what entrance level skills in writing they might realistically expect through having them read a selection of placement writing samples to understand the range of abilities of entering students. This would enable faculty to plan and sequence their assignments more effectively.

2 Provide students with some detailed assessments of their writing ability in several courses. If only a single content-area instructor or only a composition instructor provides this assessment, students appear to dismiss it.

3 Explore with composition faculty how to balance the roles of coach and judge so as to both foster student confidence and development in the writing

process, and provide students with assessments of their "products" that have some equivalence to those made by faculty across the university.

4 Help students perceive and apply approaches learned in one context to new contexts. Analysis of assignments in introductory general education courses at SVSU shows that faculty are making quite consistent writing demands on students and share assumptions about kinds of writing appropriate to an academic discourse community; students need to understand these connections.

Dr. Kay Harley

Writing Across the Curriculum: Graduate Students in Nursing

If you can write, you can write. Right? Well, not exactly. Students entering Saginaw Valley's graduate program in nursing have discovered that their writing assignments have brought new challenges; some would call it grief. Nursing faculty were concerned with students' problems and wanted to help them make the transition from the factual, abbreviation-filled writing required in their BSN-level jobs to the theory-oriented, explanatory writing demanded in the MSN curriculum. Dr. Sally Decker, Dr. Jan Blecke, and Dr. Peggy Flatt applied for and received a grant from the Teaching Improvement and Innovation committee to produce a videotape for new students and enlisted Dr. Phyllis Hastings from the English Department to work as consultant on the project.

They first identified problem areas. These were diverse: difficulties understanding the demands of the assignment, selecting appropriate material, creating a coherent pattern of ideas and examples, and testing a draft to determine if their reader could follow and understand the development. Finished papers were sometimes weak, with anemic paragraphs or rambling, disconnected sequences.

Documentation form was not always accurate. The team worked with new students on early papers to help them interpret the assignment, create appropriate structural patterns, clarify their points and correct their errors.

The next phase is producing a videotape for future classes. Will it solve all the problems of incoming students? Probably not. But it should help incoming students see the importance of their writing development and guide them in producing the papers required of them as graduate students and as nursing professionals.

Dr. Phyllis Hastings

The students' "perception seems to be that they know how to write. This is clearly not the case. Perhaps this is a key aspect to the problem--unless they think they have a problem, why should they change?"

—Will Mulvaney

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