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Critical Thinking at Work: 3rd Grade Class Outthinks MEAP Test Makers

Educator capitalizes on Real Life Reading/Writing Problem

The *Lansing State Journal* recently told the story of an alert teacher, her class of thinkers, inter-disciplinary learning, and the writing such learning prompted. After reading a *Journal* article which contained sample problems from the Michigan Educational Assessment Program's test, Ms. Goering's class found a flaw in the test makers' thinking.

own party?" They insisted that 41 cans of pop would be needed, and only one would be left. delighted with the students' response, Ms. Goering encouraged them to write to both the MEAP and the *Journal* with their findings. They did. Several of their letters, along with a picture of the entire class appeared in a special "Opinions" column on the editorial page.

A problem read: "Fred invited 40 friends to his party. How many six-packs of pop would he need so everyone would get a can? Would he have any leftover pop?" According to the MEAP, the answer is seven six-packs with two cans of pop left over.

Regardless of our disciplines at SVSU we, like Ms. Goering, must alert our students to the many possibilities for inter-disciplinary reading and writing. We must encourage students to write about their learning by helping them find real purposes and real audiences for their writing. In short, we, and they, must seek out and connect literacy links.

"What about Fred?" asked Ms. Goering's third graders. "Wouldn't he drink pop at his

— Mary Harmon

Critical Thinking:

Discovering Our Cultural Lenses Through Which We View the World

by Dr. Marianne Barnett

Critical thinking implies that a subject is actively engaged in applying certain evaluative criteria to an object. As limited as this definition may be, it supplies a loose working definitional base to discuss some of the recent theoretical concerns that are surfacing in many university departments across the United States. Many theorists argue that the act of thinking itself is a critical process which our cultural/historical/social conditioning constructs, and thus serves to shape not only the individual subject, but also that subject's perceptions and criteria. In fact, as one theorist argues, what you are even aware of, what you see, is a critical weeding out. In other words, our very perceptions, the object you choose to focus on; what you choose to notice about the object, are not self evident or the "natural" way to perceive the object. All perceptions are culturally, historically, and socially bound. There is no value/uncritical free way of knowing the world. What may appear to be

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WRITING

Learning to Write for Behavioral Science

by Dr. Steve Yanca

Last year I accepted my first full-time appointment to teach Social Work at the university level. Prior to that I had been a full-time Social Work practitioner with part-time teaching experience. I must admit that I experienced a form of "culture shock" when I read the first research papers from my sophomore level classes. I know that many students were also shocked when their papers were returned to them with marks substantially lower than the grades they expected. Some students seemed confused and stated that they had come to expect an A, B or C and not a D or an F on their papers.

I spent a lot of time analyzing this situation. I wondered if my expectations were too high. I asked for feedback from my colleagues in Social Work as well as from faculty in Psychology and Sociology. I found that I had had my first exposure to what apparently has been an ongoing concern.

After further thought and analysis, I developed the hypothesis that the problem is not that students *cannot* learn to write for the discipline, but they *have not* learned to write for the discipline. This hypothesis was derived from my observation of the improvement made in the rewritten papers from my first two classes. It was also

based on my experience with several upperclassmen in another class where I found considerable improvement, but some of the same mistakes.

As I analyzed the situation, several problem areas began to emerge as four distinct patterns.

Under mechanical deficits, I included problems with grammar, spelling, punctuation and basic sentence structure. Some of these can be caught by teaching proofreading practices, such as reading out loud, having others read out loud, accessing software programs, and the like. Some students have considerable deficits that would require remediation.

Under structural deficits, I included organization of the paper, paragraph structure, appropriate methods of citing sources, etc. Some of these might fall under the domain of composition courses, but others could be included under the discipline.

Under technical deficits, I included lack of skills in literature research, ignorance of the professional literature for the Behavioral Sciences, inability to grasp highly technical (and heavily jargoned) concepts, and the like. In my opinion, this is the domain of the discipline.

Under analytical deficits, I included difficulty in

separating out the main points of an article, in comparing and contrasting information, in critical analysis of information, in developing a hypothesis and using sources to support it, and the like. Once again, I see these areas as better suited to the discipline involved.

These experiences and the support of several colleagues has lead me to begin the development of a course which would assist students in writing for courses in the Behavioral Sciences. My use of the term "Behavioral Science" is intended to address the fact that students in Social Work are also required to take course work in other areas as foundation courses and as either a minor or a multidisciplinary major. I plan to offer the course as SW 290 under special topics as "Writing for Behavioral Sciences" during Winter semester, 1993.

I will use a "building block" type of an approach, and will utilize reading, writing and oral approaches to improve communication in course work for Behavioral Science. I plan to assess the students' deficits based on writing samples and papers which they have submitted in previous classes. The course will expose them to

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Please send us information on any *writing across the curriculum* activities that have worked for you.

Grading Project *continued from page 3*

grading sessions, supported by SVSU Research Grants. Workshops based on the project and a final report with sample papers will contribute to the ongoing development of adjunct, ancillary and full-time faculty. The project may eventually be extended beyond the English Department to look at cross-departmental evaluation of writing. And results go beyond SVSU. Last summer, papers were presented at two national conferences: the Wyoming Conference on English and the annual conference of Writing Program administrators. In addition, a panel discussed various facets of the work at Michigan Council of Teachers of English Fall Conference. In March, panel presentations by Paul Munn, Kay Harley, and Judy Moehs (an adjunct faculty member) will be on the program at the national Conference on College Composition and Communication in Cincinnati, a highly competitive arena for sharing research and pedagogy on writing instruction. As grading sessions continue, both the project director and participants will be sharing experiences and insights through workshops, conferences and publications. We may not get the attention given to judges in Olympic competition, but we will be increasing the effectiveness of our teaching and our writing program.

Behavioral Science *continued from page 2*

methods of researching the literature in the Behavioral Sciences. They will be taught to indentify the main points in articles written for various disciplines. Skills in topic selection, hypothesis development, and critical and comparative analysis of articles will be covered. Organizing and writing the paper will be the next focus, along with proofreading approaches. The final product for this class will be a research paper which will also be orally presented in class. Frequent reading and writing assignments will be given. Those students with basic mechanical deficits will be required to schedule time in the Writing Center.

I realize this is an ambitious undertaking, but I am anxious to see how far the students are able to progress with a concentrated effort. I believe that this approach to meeting the challenge of writing deficits has applications within each department and college in the university. My efforts will not be limited to this course. I am already looking at ways of implementing "writing to learn" approaches in all of my courses. I am interested in participating in a dialogue with other faculty who have similar interests and ideas.

Plagiarism *continued from page 3*

do the library work necessary to find the source, if any.

Instructors can make plagiarism less likely to occur by scheduling papers earlier, and by requiring that drafts routinely be turned in along with finished papers. Once a student, who had to that point a C, presented an essay of publishable quality--along with a handwritten draft nearly word for word the same as the finished version. When I asked for a xerox copy of the article cited, he said he'd gotten it at another library, as SVSU's didn't have that article. Indeed, this was the truth--because someone had used a razor blade to cut it out. Delta's copy of the journal quickly showed passages had been taken word for word from the piece.

Presumably the student had vandalized the library's copy in order to cover his tracks. In this case, he a) failed the paper; b) failed the course; and c) had a hearing before the judicial board. But without the requirement that students keep their drafts and cite sources, the matter would probably never have been discovered.

The root of the problem is that students often are not grounded in the conventions of academic discourse. While these may vary somewhat among disciplines, faculty are generally in agreement about the distinction between work done independently and done with secondary resources, and about the necessity of keeping these distinct.

On Making the Grades: Evaluating Student Writing

by Dr. Phyllis Hastings, Grading Project Director

As the Olympic games flashed across out television screens, commentators paused occasionally to discuss the judging--how a beautiful figure skating performance, for example, full of seemingly impossible leaping twists, gliding turns and graceful falls was translated into a collection of seven fairly consistent numerical scores. Students occasionally ask the same kind of question about the grading of their writing, and often find the answers less than satisfying. As in Olympic games, some of the judging of students' work seems quite straightforward: the counting of "correct answers" like the measuring of seconds or meters or number of falls. Writing assignments, however, like figure skating competitions, require a different kind of evaluation, more difficult to explain and defend. Though the grades on papers seem less significant than the scores which lead to Olympic medals, development of college-level writers depends on their receiving consistent, thoughtful, well-articulated judgments on their work.

To test and increase the consistency of grading and better articulate qualities developed in composition courses, English faculty have been engaged in research on their grading of student writing. Teams of seven collaboratively grade papers written in English 111 and 112 classes, using the kind of holistic scoring methods developed by national and state testing programs. Graders use two important tools. The first is a rubric, a loose definition of qualities to be found in papers at each grade level, based on the various ways students might succeed or fail in a given assignment. The second is a set of papers which graders select to represent the various grades to be given. Using the rubric and anchor papers, two graders score each paper, with third readings for those whose initial scores were more than one grade apart.

As they work, graders share insights not only on particular grades and the evaluation process itself but also on the ways particular assignments affect student performance and on alternate methods for preparing students to handle given tasks. While faculty may normally experience grading as an isolated struggle, the project creates a grading community, with participants facing the challenges of evaluation together. It also provides a way to increase accountability for their work as instructor/graders by making graded papers and the rubrics and overall results available for review by others.

Fifteen English faculty and staff have participated in group

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Plagiarism: Part Two

by Dr. Gary Thompson

In the last issue, Dr. Paul Munn addressed the definition and extent of plagiarism. In this issue, Dr. Gary Thompson discusses what instructors should do, and what students should expect to happen, in cases of plagiarism.

The student handbook stresses that plagiarism is a serious offense, which might result in failing a course or even in expulsion from the university

Deciding on a response to plagiarism can be tricky. It's best to try to ascertain the student's intentions, and temper the severity of the response accordingly. Some assume that the purpose of the assignment is to present a "correct" answer, and, finding something in print that does that better than they could hope to, take the substance of that article--either the idea or the actual words--and represent it as their own. This is a serious violation, but it is frequently unwitting--in such cases, they often provide the author's name, title, and even page reference--and can be best addressed by assigning a revision, with grade appropriately reduced.

Some present a paper whose language is suspiciously beyond what has been done so far, but with no sources acknowledged. Here the choices are 1) to ignore the problem, in which case the student may have gotten away with dishonesty; 2) to consult the student, which might result in admission--the paper could then be rewritten--or in denial; 3) to

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READING

Overcoming Barriers to Learning from Textbooks: A Classroom Module for Instructors

Textbooks may be published for classroom use, but they often don't seem to be developed with the student in mind. Typically they are linguistically complex--heavy subordination, uncommon syntactic structures, abstract latinized vocabulary, and lengthy sentences. On the basis of linguistic complexity alone, such textbooks are two or four grade levels above what the student can read independently. Secondly, the density of information per unit of textbook prose exceeds the learner's capacity to readily absorb and keep in mind while encountering subsequent information. This compression of information results in a rhetorical style which includes a minimum of restatement and summarizing, thus depriving the reader of a much-needed aid to learning. Thirdly, the reader has to wade through more complexity and density-- the typical textbook is 200 pages longer than twenty years ago. Finally, even those aspects of the textbook designed to facilitate learning-- introductions, learning goals, headings, charts and graphs, summaries, and practice tests-- vary so widely in form, use and relative benefit across texts that a system of textbook study appropriate to one book in one course will not work for another. Taken together, these four all-to-common characteristics of textbooks present a substantial barrier to learning. Add to these characteristics students with limited background knowledge and little experience with effective approaches to learning, and it should be clear that students need support beyond their own resources.

Enter the instructor. More than ever, the key person in facilitating a successful learning experience must be the instructor. The instructor knows the field and has successfully dealt with complex texts. He/she also has some expectations of what type of learning is to take place as a result of student interaction with the textbook. It is the instructor who can choose the most user-friendly text and provide instruction in textbook reading strategies appropriate to that text. However, few instructors can afford the time to design an evaluation instrument and develop an efficient learning system that students will find effective. It is to aid instructors in promoting effective learning strategies for students that the "textbook learning effectiveness" module is being developed.

The purpose of the textbook learning effectiveness project is to create a module that will assist the instructor in promoting, presenting, and evaluating effective textbook learning. The module is a packet of materials-- transparencies, photocopy masters, and instruction sheets-- that will provide faculty with an efficient method of textbook study. A sampling of items in the module include: a three-stage study system, techniques for textbook marking, presentation templates adaptable to a wide variety of course textbooks, a guide to textbook readability, and a student survey of text book learning. Information sheets will accompany each aid or instrument. Materials will be designed to require a minimum preparation time.

For further information call me at x5611 or drop a note to my office (S353).

— Dr. Kerry Segel

Critical Thinking *continued from page 1*

"universal" values, "just the way the world is" judgments, "realism" concepts, or "objective" positions within our fields are quickly being uncovered by theorists as value-laden judgments, value-laden criteria and unspoken assumptions that

support a limited and select class, race and gender group.

As university demographics change, both in student populations and professors, these issues become conflicts not only within the classes we teach

or offer to students, but also in the course material and our approaches to this material. For example, teaching a "Great Books" course implies that there are such things as "Great Books" and that the course can not only articulate what

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Critical Thinking *continued from page 5*

those books are but also can account for the inclusion and exclusion of certain texts. While this course traditionally taught such texts as "Great Books" which supposedly embodied and passed on certain "universal" values and truths, now my course focuses on the social, historical and political contexts in which these books have been defined as great and whose values and "truths" they represent. My course focus is a shift from sustaining certain texts as "great" or "universal" to looking at the methodologies of interpretations, readings, and the very selection process of the objects we study and classify as texts. Students learn to re-think their "givens," conceptional frames or lenses by which they view the world around them. What may appear to be "natural" cultural acts, "uncritical" or "critical" ideas, and "universal" stories or myths are reconstituted and challenged at the very roots of their construction and perpetuation.

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