the SVSU Literacy Link

March 1993 Vol. II, No. 3

Editor's Note

Last semester's *Literacy Link* articles focused on how writing is looked at and utilized in disciplines outside of English, and readers could see just how vital writing is to learning in areas as diverse as criminal justice and mechanical engineering.

In this issue, the articles also address cross-curricular issues. Steve Yanca describes his new "Writing for Behavioral Science" course, while Judy Mimken describes an assignment which she feels would work as well in other disciplines as it works in her Literary Analysis class. We also get the results of two pilot projects from fall 1992. Gail Sype reports her findings on her "Organizational Behavior" course, a course in which writing was an integral part of the instruction. Finally, Sally Cannon discusses her "cautiously optimistic" thoughts on a course she and Kay Harley offered.

All of these articles discuss the important link between writing and learning and demonstrate the need for greater student *and* instructor involvement in the process. They also indicate, I think, the successful learning that students may achieve through writing as well as the successful teaching instructors may achieve by assigning it. Enjoy!

— JIM GEISTMAN

IN THIS ISSUE

Writing for Behavioral Science

By Steve Yanca

Last winter I wrote an article for *Literacy Link* describing my initial experience with writing difficulties for students. The article described some observations I had made about areas of concern. I labeled these areas as mechanical, organizational, analytical, and technical. I indicated some plans to offer a course in "Writing for Behavioral Science" this year. This is an update on that article.

In order to increase attendance for the course, it was decided that Winter semester might be the best time to offer the course. It was assumed that recollection of shortcomings with writing would be distant for many students with the absence of pain or agony over the summer. In addition, Fall semester could afford time to publicize the course and to identify potential candidates from new admissions to the Social Work major and from transfer students. The course is being piloted under a "290" designation as a special topic. An amusing flyer was developed to market the class to students and faculty in Social Work classes. Recruitment was successful in securing 10 registered students so the class is up and running.

The focus of the course is on developing skills in scholarly research, critical analysis, organization, technical writing and mechanics. A "Research Paper Assessment Form" was developed and is being used to establish baseline skill levels by evaluating recent papers. Individual grading contracts will be formulated from this and the form will be used for final assessment.

Assignments are geared toward a "building block" approach. Students are asked to locate an article and write a summary of the main points, an assessment of supporting and contradictory information, and a description of their reactions. They will do the same exercise for two additional articles. For the next assignment, students will do an analysis of information from all three articles, comparing and contrasting the information they have discovered.

Assignments follow which will lead up to the completion of a research paper. These include an outline, a draft of the body, a draft of the summary and conclusions, and a draft of the introduction. This sequence is intentionally being used to illustrate an approach to constructing a research paper which highlights the body of the paper. The body contains the essence of the research data and analysis. It is the core of the paper and many technical writers will develop this first after identifying a preliminary theme, hypothesis, or topical sentence. The summary and conclusion should flow from the body. The introduction is then developed to appeal to the intended audience and to introduce the topical

(See 'Behavioral Science,' page 4)

Informal Response Essays

By Judy Mimken

A writing assignment that I have found useful in assessing what students are learning in my literature classes is the informal response essay. I recommend it as a way of determining what students think about what they are reading for classes in any discipline where reading is required.

The informal response essay is similar to a journal entry in that it invites personal reactions rather than predetermined answers. I collect essays on the day that the reading assignment on which they are based is discussed and return them with my comments the next class period.

I do not usually give specific assignments for these responses, and I tell students that anything goes as long as they write thoughtful, serious reactions to the reading. I discourage them from merely summarizing and rambling too far afield. If they do run out of ideas on what to write about, I have them refer to the syllabus, where I discuss course objectives and active reading. I am deliberately not prescriptive because I want to learn what they understand about the story, poem, or play.

I have learned, for example, that I need to provide more historical and social background than I otherwise would have assumed necessary for William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," a story set in a small Mississippi town circa 1870 and circa 1925. I have also learned about misunderstandings that are not apparent from discussions, as I did when two students commented in their essays that Homer Barron, a character in the story, was gay. This was something that had not come up in the initial discussion, and it gave me the opportunity to discuss how language changes and how Faulkner's description of Homer could imply something to today's audience that it did not to Faulkner's original readers.

Or someone will ask a direct question, such as "Why did Colonel Sartoris remit Emily's taxes?" that she hesitated to ask in class. I also discover that the shy girl who never speaks had some good insights about the origin of Emily's bizarre behavior and needed encouragement to share them. Generally, class discussions are livelier and more interesting when students have been required to write a response essay because they are more likely to have read the assignment and to have spent the time organizing their thoughts in order to put them on paper.

While not graded, the responses are evaluated as *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*, and I require a minimum number of words. The response grade for the semester is determined by the number of *satisfactory* responses turned in. I respond to the essays by answering questions and encouraging good thinking. I let the students know that these essays are practice, just like the practice that good basketball players do that no one sees in preparation for games. And just as such practice pays off in those games, so should the informal response essays pay off in the writing of formal papers.

I spend from twenty to thirty minutes grading a formal paper and only five to ten minutes on an informal response. This lets me assign more of the informal response essays and give students the writing practice they need as well as giving myself further insight into what they are learning. And frequently I find that students, freed of the pressure of a formal paper, relax and produce interesting, insightful analyses that are a pleasure to read.

Developing Writing Skills: Management 328 Revisited

By Gail Sype

In a recent *Literacy Link* I described a writing/group presentation project that I was trying for the first time in two sections of Management 328 (Organizational Behavior). The project, outlined in the December 1992 *Link*, required students to "choose one topic related to the course and conduct an in-depth analysis of that topic." Groups were asked to present that analysis through both an in-class oral presentation and the submission of a group paper. Groups chose their own topics; each group was encouraged to clear its topic with me (to ensure that the subject chosen was within the limitations of the course) before developing its presentation or paper.

This first pass was neither an unalloyed success nor a dismal failure. I found that students required more structure than I initially provided; I had hoped to provide them sufficient flexibility to allow for innovation, but I think they simply perceived it as ambiguity.

I had indicated to the students that I expected the paper to be a coherent whole, with similar style throughout, rather than a "stacking up" of individual members' written contributions. I am not sure that this always happened; in some cases, it was clear that no effort had been made to integrate the subsections of the paper, and students were duly penalized. In other cases, however, it is simply possible that the students had just "stacked up" their written contributions, but since all these sections were equally badly-written, I didn't realize what had happened.

I found that students did not always distinguish between the type of material, such as case histories, that lent itself to in-class presentation versus that which was best presented in a written format. I also found that students tended (though not always) to simply stand up and read their papers rather than using the two different formats as opportunities to maximize information. Many of them seemed very uncomfortable presenting in front of a group and did not do justice to interesting and relevant material.

I might use this project again, but given lots of time, resources, and energy, I would do several things differently:

- I would require students to clear with me not only a topic but a *detailed* outline and description, and to do so at least two weeks before the presentation.
- I would require students to choose topics with a narrower focus. Students chose very broad categories such as "substance abuse" and then felt very restricted by the eight-page limit set on the paper. I would encourage them instead to choose topics where they could investigate a specific question or take a position and defend it.
- I would suggest that students videotape a "dry run" of their presentation in order to be able to critique it and perhaps avail themselves of the opportunity to enliven it a bit. A variation on this would be to videotape the in-class presentations and then provide each group with a copy afterwards which could be reviewed and critiqued after the fact.

(See 'Mgt 328,' page 3)

English 080/111: Intensive Freshman Writing

By Sally Cannon

Introduction:

Last Fall semester, Dr. Kay Harley and I developed a pilot project to explore the feasibility of combining English 080 (Writing Skills) with English 111 (Freshman Composition I). Our hypothesis was that for students whose writing skills placed them "at risk," a program of intensive small group work and individual tutoring to supplement an English 111 course could be at least as effective—and potentially more so—than English 080 followed by another semester of English 111. We further believed that a combined course would reduce the stigma of being placed in a remedial class, a stigma that only intensifies "at risk" students' already low self-esteem. As part of the project we would train upper class student writing assistants who could be used both in our program and beyond—in the Writing Center, for example, or to assist in general education classes.

The Arts and Behavioral Sciences' Unit Committee funded our pilot project, and we began to recruit students and student writing assistants. Although we had hoped to enroll 60 students, we were able to enroll only 36, perhaps because of students' reluctance to try a new course, and/or advisors' reluctance to recommend it, and/or an 8:30 a.m. Friday meeting time. The course itself included 3 hours per week of writing instruction, 1 hour per week of small group work, and 20-30 minutes per week of individual conferences with student writing assistants. The student writing assistants—11 of them—were concurrently enrolled in English 491, or Tutoring Writing, taught by Dr. Harley.

The students' progress in writing was assessed at the end of the semester through the portfolio method. Students were required to write six papers plus two impromptu essays; however, of those eight, only four pieces representing specified genres were placed in their portfolios to be graded. If a student completed all of the work and compiled a passing portfolio, the student was given credit for both English 080 and 111. If a student completed all of the assignments but failed the portfolio, she was given credit for English 080 but was given "NC" (no credit) for English 111 and would need to retake 111. Three external graders assisted us in our evaluation of the portfolios: Dr. Phyllis Hastings, Dr. Paul Munn, and Ms. Mary Harmon. Their help was crucial in ensuring that the portfolios met the standards for passing work in English 111.

Findings:

Although we have just begun to analyze and reflect upon the results of our project, we are cautiously optimistic. Of the thirty-three students who completed the course (2 never showed; 1 dropped), twenty-six students compiled a passing portfolio. In other words, twenty-six students (roughly 79%) wrote essays that were holistically rated a "C" or better, using English 111 standards. The students themselves responded quite positively to the project in their course evaluations, commenting on the amount of extra attention and support the project gave to them and their writing, the amount of interaction they were able to have with their peers, and the helpfulness of the student writing assistants.

The tutoring component, in fact, turned out to be one of the biggest successes of the project. Many of the students established strong relationships with their student writing assistants which helped to improve their attitudes toward writing, their writing itself, and their general adjustment to SVSU and university life. The student writing assistants, many of whom aspire to be teachers, genuinely enjoyed the experience, gaining invaluable practice responding to student writing as they read, discussed, wrote about, and applied composition theory to their tutoring sessions. One student assistant joined us on a panel on the project at the Michigan Council of Teachers of English conference last October, and the whole 491 class plans to share their insights about tutoring under prepared students with the SVSU community in late March and with participants at the Spring Conference on the English Language Arts through a series of dramatic sketches based on their experience in the pilot. Several student assistants are now tutoring through the Office of Minority Services.

Implications:

While the high pass rate of our students is encouraging, a truer indication of how much they've learned and of the merits of the combined course can only be assessed over the long term. That is, tracking our students' performance in English 112 and beyond and then comparing their performance with students who followed the "normal" writing sequence should tell us something about how successful we were. Other factors, however, are equally important. Do our students have better retention rates, as we suspect, than students who did not have the benefit of intensive support their freshman year? Are our students more rigorous in or committed to completing their composition requirements, that is, less likely to put off English 111 or 112 after completing 080? Do our students feel less stigmatized and more confident in their writing abilities as a result of our project?

While obtaining answers to these questions poses some difficulty and will take several years to assess, we look forward to pursuing them to the end. In the meantime, we have been funded again for Fall '93, and we hope to gather a larger pool of students to help us begin to answer these questions. We encourage faculty members to recommend potential student writing assistants for the project.

Mgt 328 (Continued from page 2)

- I would offer to read rough drafts of papers in order to catch spelling, grammatical, and other errors *before* having to deduct points for them.
- I would ask talented colleagues (like the readers of *Literacy Link*) to make suggestions about how to improve the assignment.
- I would encourage students to use speakers, graphics, posters, handouts, etc., to give their in-class presentations, for lack of a more elegant term, "pizzazz."

Behavioral Science (Continued from page 1)

area and subject. The final paper is then written after receiving feedback from the instructor and other students. The final assignment is an oral presentation of the student's work.

A cooperative learning approach is being used throughout the course and lecture formats are minimal. Class and small group discussion is used to stimulate critical thinking, peer review, and scholarly debate. It is planned that a "study group" process will evolve which students will carry with them and use to enrich their learning in future projects.

Much of this course is still in the pilot stage in that modifications and development will need to take place as experience is gained. Suggestions and feedback from colleagues are welcome. Copies of the syllabus are available for any faculty who might be interested. Just call me at ext. 5679 or drop by 336 Brown Hall. I believe that many aspects of this course could be adapted for use in writing for other disciplines. I would like to develop a dialogue with other faculty who have an interest in this area.

***the* SVSU *Literacy* Link**

Published by
Saginaw Valley State University
Department of English

Editor
Jim Geistman
Instructor of English

Layout
Tim Inman, Assistant Director
Office of Marketing Research & Information Services

Printed by
Perry Toyzan
Supervisor, Graphics Center

The SVSU Literacy Link is published two times per semester. If you are interested in submitting an article, please contact Jim Geistman at ext. 4156, or mail your contribution to: SVSU Department of English, 7400 Bay Road, University Center, MI 48710.

***the* SVSU *Literacy* Link**

Department of English
2250 Pierce Road
University Center, MI 48710