

# Beats Broke Through the Norms— But Where Are They in Textbooks?

**L**Eric Patterson

Where should I begin? I have never been the A-typical student—well, I was once, but those days had been left far in the past when I first began my scholastic career at Saginaw Valley. I was a kid, and like any other college student I wanted to have fun—that did not include sitting home studying. Somewhere along the line I had a life-altering epiphany: the truly great people of this world, I thought (and still think) are, as Jack Kerouac put it, "...the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars...." You see, I was never an intellectual—I always thought I was smart, but I was thinking about things most people do not learn about in the classroom: the universe, society's relationship with its youth, and philosophies of living.

Realizing I was destined for more than a mediocre existence, I began getting serious about school because, let's face it, no one wants to listen to a rambling idiot. I saw in English—more specifically literature and writing—an outlet for my ideas. I never saw myself as a poet or novelist, but ironically I was able to excel in the field because I had the same ideas going through my head as some of most well-known poets we learn about in the establishment. As I began getting further and further into the English program, I had this very uncomfortable feeling that there was something missing in my education. We are not living in the time of Shakespeare or Whitman (not to say they weren't great poets), so there was always an element of the now missing from my readings of their texts; while I could appreciate the craft and talent of the canonized greats, I always thought poetry and literature were supposed to convey some sort of message to the reader—I wasn't getting any message from the greats, simply a better depth of understanding of English.

Around my sophomore year in college—knowing there had to be something tangible out

there for me to get a hold of—I began studying the poets and philosophers that influenced my childhood heroes. Now, most kids idolize sports greats or historical figures—for me it was musicians; I am not talking about the watered down pop stars we see on MTV today, I am talking about the true greats: Jimi Hendrix, The Grateful Dead, The Who, and The Doors. I took a special interest in Jim Morrison, the lead singer and rebel poet of The Doors. I think I was intrigued with him because he was a person breaking all the norms of a society, and yet the lyrics of his songs and the poetry he wrote made me think about things I never thought about before. That is where I first heard the name that would change my outlook on life and literature: Jack Kerouac. Like my 'rock-star' idols, Kerouac and the rest of his generation—the Beat Generation—were adamantly seeking a better understanding of the world and their own lives.

Tragically, I soon learned that those poets and novelists I could connect with most were generally shunned by the academy that I was a part of. I can still remember opening my books to the index each time I enrolled in a new literature course, and the disappointment I felt when virtually every time I performed that act my authors were not a part of the literary history being taught to me. I can understand the reason why the Beats are generally looked over; however, I will never understand why universities base the Beats' talent on their chosen lifestyles rather than their literary styles. Isn't it funny how every time someone comes along who tries to tell us something about our world, we always seem to suppress them like we have some sort of dirty secret to keep from the world?

By the winter term of 2002, I thought it was time to forget about academic convention and do what I wanted to do for several years—study something that intrigued me. For the first time, I had a platform to do it on, that is, a class that dealt solely with contemporary American fiction. Even though we read just about everything in the spectrum of contemporary American literature except the Beats, the class provided me with the background information

that later allowed me to take an even stronger analytic stance the Beats—more specifically Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. One of the concepts we learned about in class—one, by the way, I strongly disagree with—was the concept of the "Death of the Author." I began wondering why exactly all these literary critics tended to believe, as Roland Barthes proclaims, "...to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." You see, I have always believed in authenticity, and for literature to be truly authentic and have a true-to-life aesthetic the text itself should have some sense of reality built into it—and what better way to do so than to make it as autobiographical as possible without sacrificing the art of fiction writing? I used Barthes's concept to look at Kerouac's *On the Road*, and after months of researching both the text and the ideology of the Beats, I came to the conclusion that it was the autobiographical style and spontaneity of Kerouac's writing that brought the novel to life—that allowed it to speak to me as well as a whole generation of lost souls.

Months after my first ever 'real' study of the Beats, I am still feverously trying to understand their generation and subsequent generations of lost and/or abandoned generations (the hippies, Generation X, and my own generation). I am currently looking at how the Beats were the beginning of a social and literary revolution that has shaped our world today. I am also learning from them how to lead a pure and authentic existence without conforming to what everyone else seems to think is right with our world. Sadly, I will be leaving my temporary home at Saginaw Valley in December, hopefully to show others how meaningful and life-changing it can be simply to pick up a book—I know it worked for me. Oh yeah...that little paper I wrote just because I wanted to learn more about the Beats...it has since been accepted to the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, and I leave for Hawaii on January 11th to spread the Beat gospel. I guess it pays off every once in a while to break through established norms and do what you want.

# What Freshmen Students “Know” About Writing: A Frame of Reference

**Diane Boehm**  
Instructional Support Programs Director

Each semester, the Writing Center invites all sections of ENGL 111 (Composition I) into the Writing Center; this semester we gave 47 presentations. Developed and led by the WC mentors, freshman presentations focus on such topics as analyzing assignments, generating ideas, and revising drafts. When the presentations have concluded, we review what we have observed regarding the literacy patterns and composing needs of incoming freshman students.

We often begin the WC presentations by asking students to identify the best and worst writing advice they ever received. Few responses indicate understanding that literacy is rhetorical—that communication in any situation is always dependent on the interplay between writer and reader, between purpose and document, between conventions which must be observed and insight which provides a new perspective. Rather, most incoming students think of writing as following formulas:

Sentences should have 7-9 words, paragraphs should have 5-7 sentences, and essays should have 5 paragraphs.

The best writing just comes naturally.

Get your grammar and mechanics correct, and the paper will get a good grade.

Never start a sentence with and or but. Never start a paragraph with the same word as any other paragraph.

It doesn't matter where your information came from; a source is a source.

Don't worry about what others think or say, [sic] it is your writing. Write what you feel.

Given this formulaic understanding of writing, is it any wonder that students may confront the wide array of writing tasks in our courses with perplexity? Not only must students learn a wide array of document formats, become familiar with at least two documentation styles, and write more papers in a semester than some may have written in their entire high school career. Many must first unlearn

the ways they think about writing.

Many students may approach university writing with vivid memories of frustration and/or failure. Decades later, my husband still recalls his freshman writing experience at Ohio U, where grading was error-counting—a paper with more than three errors of any type received an F. Students focused, of course, on avoiding errors: they wrote simple sentences, limited their vocabulary to words they could spell, and checked for errors. They paid little or no attention to clear focus or logical progression or depth of development or effective word choice or quality of evidence—qualities which most of us consider as important as correctness, qualities which require a much greater investment of student thought and effort. When students learn the value system of a writing context, most respond accordingly.

R. Gerald Nelms, Professor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, observed in recent posts on the Writing Program Administrator's listserv (October 25, 2002) that “much of what must be done in first-year composition is ‘remedial’ in the sense of shifting writing and rhetorical paradigms.” Effective teaching of writing, he argues, begins with understanding our student audience:

If we're not going into these writing classes envisioning something of a restorative mission, we're usually missing a crucial part of audience analysis. . . . It takes years of careful training to convince [students] that they're not good writers, or that if they are good writers, the one thing they really ought to work on is their grammar. (And if they believe they're not good writers, grammar is almost always the reason why, right?)

Whether students bring excellent or weak previous instruction to our classes, most are still entering unfamiliar territory without a map. This has significant implications for the way all of us interact with student writers. When Writing Center staff review writing assignments with student clients, we generally see “how to” information—due date, documentation format, number of sources. What we rarely see is the “why”: why do philosophers or historians or scientists write the way they do? What kind of learning is this assignment designed to engender? How is this assignment connected to the goals of the course? What sources are considered “authoritative”—and why? Why are first person pronouns used in some contexts but not in others? Why are headings expected in some documents but not in

all? If the rhetorical situation and value system of the writing context are not made explicit, students may not see them at all and instead revert to formulas to get by.

Literacy requires that a writer understand the conventions of the community he/she wishes to participate in. As the student “learns to speak the language” of the community, he/she internalizes its values. For many students, that means first learning the general conventions of academic writing, then mastering the traditions and rhetorical “moves” of the disciplines in which he/she will be writing. When students understand clearly what is expected, and what criteria will be used to evaluate their work, they can construct a mental framework for that type of writing and begin to acquire appropriate literacy.

Understanding these conventions also reduces anxiety and frustration. Literacy rarely flourishes in an atmosphere of fear or intimidation. The literacy we wish to develop in students requires risk-taking—the ability to travel into unfamiliar territory with their thinking, to experiment with unfamiliar forms of writing, to recognize connections they hadn't seen before. Students achieve higher levels of literacy when they build on a clearly defined scaffold.

Developing rhetorical awareness in our students' writing is also likely to enhance their reading. Writing is a cognitive process, not merely a recording process. Writers who engage with their topics soon begin to think of it in new ways; they make connections they hadn't made previously; they begin to care about their readers, not merely about word count or margins. And as they develop a frame of reference for the writing patterns of a specific field or task, they begin to understand why professional writers choose the methods they do, and how to interact with reading materials with the understanding of an “insider,” rather than the confusion of the baffled outsider unable to recognize a writer's purpose or choices. Thus they acquire literacy, a mark of the educated person.

## Reference

Nelms, R. G. (2002, October 25). Student Writer Culture. Messages posted to Writing Program Administrators listserv, archived at <http://lists.asu.edu/archives/wpa-l.html>

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# To Purloin or Not to Purloin: It's Not a Question

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Plagiarism—the will to commit plagiarism and the will to control it—seems to be in the air these days. Students in all 47 sections of English 111 this semester wrote mid-term summary/response papers based on an essay by Gillian Silverman in which she describes her experiences with plagiarism. To address the issue, members of the English 111 Committee are working toward a plagiarism policy, so that there is a process and a predictable way to proceed when students, in Ms. Silverman's words, engage in "purloining of ideas." At the upper division, one of the small groups in my section of English 300 has created a proposal for a plagiarism seminar for our campus, in which faculty and students participate in teaching and learning about the "p" word—a proposal that might actually come to realization. At the university level, the Writing Program continues to encourage faculty to use "turnitin.com" as a tool for student use and as a deterrent for potential plagiarists.

Not too many days ago, one of the English 111 part-time instructors arrived in my office, asked me to read a student paper that she suspected was plagiarized, and when I had read a page or so, she fished out a matching paper that she had printed from the web. Very few words were changed. The elegant phrases and the stepped up vocabulary that hadn't been part of the student's writing repertoire up to this point in the semester were tell-tale signs of theft. For a moment, I thought Gillian Silverman was sitting in that very room with me. I suggested a zero for the assignment and a conversation with the student, who in desperation had purloined the text.

When my English 111 students wrote their mid-term summary/response papers, I took the opportunity to write with them and summarized Silverman's essay in the following way: Reading Gillian Silverman's essay, "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Plagiarism Buster," teaches us many things about the teacher's view of plagiarism. She presents the ins and outs of plagiarism, the ways in which she spots it in students' texts, and she also discusses possible ways to address the problem. She speaks of her visceral reaction to plagiarism, how she gets fired up when she suspects it, and how she comforts herself after the confrontations. She is ambivalent, though, about her mission to bust plagiarism—even though plagiarism is an insult to her attempt to teach documented writing, she doesn't want to be a plagiarism cop.

I think a good many of us are dealing with these issues of academic dishonesty, with the pervasiveness of plagiarism, and the ease with which students can lift material from the web. While every instance of plagiarism is problematic, and while every instance has its own peculiarities, in the midst of the curricular conversations about plagiarism, and in the midst of teaching to the very topic, I, too, found myself in the very tough position having to make a determination about plagiarized material. As a result of a variety of circumstances, I found myself conducting an independent study with an international student, a lovely young woman who was very willing to do the work so that she could finish her undergraduate degree. For a number of reasons, she was missing one required course. And there was a second level of complication: she

needed to complete the bachelor's in English prior to being awarded a graduate degree. The student and I agreed that a portfolio of papers that demonstrated her knowledge and writing abilities would be an appropriate way to earn credit for this course. When I began to read the papers submitted, it was clear that nothing was documented—no works cited list, no references, no internal documentation. It didn't seem consistent with what English majors ought to be able to do at the close of their four year degree program.

The student and I talked, and I tried to learn what she knew about documentation, the process and the logic behind the process. I told her that there was material in her essay that needed documentation, and she agreed to provide that evidence the following week. She returned with the essay on the appointed day, documented appropriately, she assured me. When I read the paper a few days later, nothing in the text was changed, but there were two URLs attached to the final page. More teaching needed to be done. And when two additional papers were added to the portfolio, it was clear that this student hadn't learned the lessons of attribution, of documenting her sources. I began wondering not only about my responsibilities to this particular student, but about the strength of the major in English. What was happening in the thirteen or so classes that she had presumably taken? Why was the process of citing her sources such a surprise to this student? And why was I feeling that I was holding her hostage from her degree because I was the last line of instruction before being awarded both bachelor's and master's degrees?

In the previously mentioned essay, Ms. Silverman uses a "super-hero" metaphor as a way to organize her paper; she borrows from the tried and true voice-over from the Superman television show of the fifties: "It's a Bird, It's a Plane," and instead of the expected "Superman," we get "Plagiarism Buster." She extends the superhero, crime fighter metaphor throughout her essay, as she explains the ways in which she detects stolen material and searches for it on the Web. She has great ambivalence about finding and pursuing cases of suspected plagiarism, but feels compelled to do so. She keenly understands the situation of her students, many of whom work full-time, many of whom sincerely don't understand the ramifications of plagiarism, and some of whom are not interested in the ethics of the situation. She knows her students are not just lazy college students, who would rather borrow than study or research; she knows her students have difficult lives, where they work "twelve-hour night shifts" and try to be students as well.

Well, I am certainly no super-hero, nor do I claim to be "Plagiarism Buster" sweeping down from the skies on unsuspecting students. Caught between the student's need to bring closure to her degree and the need to be sure that a degree in English had validity, I agonized. How much are graduates in English expected to know about the importance of careful documentation? Because I hadn't overtly said "document your work," the student assumed that that wasn't expected for this portfolio. How much responsibility was mine and how much was others? Why did I feel that I was holding the student and her degree hostage, as I continued to ask for another level of documentation in the papers?

Gillian Silverman knows that some students are

pushed to plagiarism by the pressures that they face, and my independent study student is no exception. She was caught needing to finish an undergraduate degree, even as she neared completion of a graduate course of study. The degrees were within sight, and she had made travel plans to return to her country of origin. Many, many other faculty had given her passing grades; others had given their stamp of approval. Who was I to interfere with so many other positive judgements?

What is my concern here? That one student, by doing minimal work and questionable documentation, could succeed in getting her degree? My concerns are not so much with this one student and her extenuating circumstances, but rather my worries are about the larger implications of plagiarism and whether documentation is taught well or at all. It is a serious subject, one that extends to the larger issues of intellectual property and copyright laws. Students are at the low end of the gene pool when it comes to plagiarism and its ramifications; students might suffer a zero, or in the extreme, students might fail a course or be expelled. But it is the larger context of plagiarism that concerns me. The statistics on students who have copied or plagiarized work are burgeoning. The numbers of faculty and/or administrators who turn the other way is also disturbing. But given my recent experience, I can understand how these things happen when push comes to shove.

So what do we do? We teach to the topic; we have seminars. We build a core of student mentors who can instruct their peers in the nuts and bolts of citing sources and giving academic credit to previous authors or thinkers. We spread the word that MLA and APA guidelines are available at the library and in the Writing Center, and that both places have personnel who can help them format their sources. We can teach to the topic by including URLs in Blackboard with sample Works Cited Lists, by linking to the myriad websites that address form and function for documentation. We can listen to the misconceptions that students seem to have about plagiarism; we can educate ourselves about the ways in which plagiarism is historically and culturally situated.

Finally, we need to understand that Silverman's "mission," along with my own, is framed by capitalism and the idea of ownership that have given rise to intellectual property and ownership of words and ideas. While the internet originated as a place for sharing and "share-ware," there has been a wave of ownership and proprietary feeling about words as well as other kinds of properties. In a culture where basketball players copyright their jump shots, plagiarism will be considered a serious crime, indeed. I would recommend that we all pay critical attention to plagiarism, that we begin to make writing with sources a focus in all our courses, and that we look at all the cultural readings of plagiarism. It may be that students are plagiarizing more, or it may be that because we have the instruments with which to catch plagiarism, we are more alert. In any case, we can maintain our vigilance for plagiarism, and turn it into a lesson in how to use sources correctly and ethically.

## Reference

Silverman, Gillian. "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's a Plagiarism Buster!" *Newsweek*, 15 July 2002.

# General Education: A Literacy Foundation

L Sally Shepardson

Scientific literacy has become a goal at most educational institutions because it is an essential part of helping citizens meaningfully participate in the complex decisions that must be made in our society. Issues requiring scientific understanding range from global problems such as those associated with the environment, to federal and state health care, research (e.g., stem cells), agricultural policies (e.g., genetically modified foods), and military policies (e.g., biological- and nuclear-based defense systems) down to local challenges (e.g., school board decisions). Additionally, many professional positions demand scientific understanding. For example, a pharmaceutical representative selling prescription drugs will need to understand their metabolic effects or a journalist reporting on cancer therapies will have to understand basic human physiology. On a personal level, when illness strikes, the ability to comprehend and evaluate medical information supplied by a physician or in advertisements for health aides is essential. Of paramount importance in all these scenarios is the ability to discriminate between what is truly scientific and what is not.

Many people believe science consists merely of an endless stream of facts. To these people, scientific literacy means one has acquired a large body of facts, usually specializing in a particular field of science. There is no denying that the body of scientific information is enormous. However, a complete understanding of science must also include the realization that the true significance of science lies in its procedure for acquiring all that information. This process is known as the scientific method. Only information which is derived using the scientific method can be considered truly scientific. Employment of the scientific method sets science and scientific knowledge apart from many other disciplines and the information they encompass. A person cannot be considered scientifically literate if she can not distinguish the difference between scientific information and opinions, philosophical stands, anecdotal observation, or positions accepted on faith. While philosophy, anecdotes, opinions, and faith all have a legitimate place and purpose in conversation, learning, debates, and life, equating them with scientific information is an error which leads to grave misunderstandings and the inability to make accurate, informed decisions regarding the issues confronting us all. Understanding the scientific method as a process of deriving information is essential to scientific literacy. It is fundamentally impossible to understand science without knowing how the scientific method works.

The purpose of the scientific method is to produce accurate, repeatable, reliable, and challengeable information which describes phenomena in the natural world. There are five steps to the scientific method when experimentation is possible. Initially, an observation regarding the natural world is made. Once the observation is in hand, the investigator forms an hypothesis in an attempt to explain what has been observed. Inductive reasoning is used to

arrive at the hypothesis, and it is considered a reasonable explanation. The third step of the scientific method consists of using deductive reasoning to make predictions based on the hypothesis. The prediction is often constructed in the form of an if...then statement. Experiments are designed and performed in the fourth step. They are based upon the previously derived predictions. The scientific method demands specific criteria be met in the experimental stage. Controls, replications, and elimination of personal bias are critical elements of the experimental design. Accurate record keeping and data collection are also essential. In the final step, data are analyzed and conclusions drawn. Relevant statistical analysis is usually employed and conclusions are strictly based upon data.

Some scientific investigations, especially those concerning the historical sciences, cannot employ experimentation directly. Scientists in disciplines such as geology, astronomy, and paleontology often study and describe natural phenomena and events which occurred in the distant past through geological time. While it is often not possible to directly observe what has happened in the past in the natural world, it is absolutely possible to gather scientific data that is evidence of what occurred and use it to explain historical phenomena. These scientists also start with observations, form a hypothesis, and make a prediction. However, they build a data set, not through experimentation, but by scientifically gathering a body of currently available observations which demonstrate a pattern. They then draw a conclusion based on how well the pattern explains their hypothesis. Note that the accumulation of observations regarding past events must strictly adhere to scientific principles. For example, if the study tries to discern if an existing crater on the earth's surface was the result of an asteroid impacting the earth, scientists would build their data set of observations using scientifically vetted techniques such as radiometric dating. Scientists would not use insupportable assumptions, anecdotal observations, or mere guesses on which to base their conclusions. In other words, a scientist's data consists of scientifically gathered observations which are used to determine whether a pattern of evidence available in today's world can scientifically explain a natural phenomenon which occurred in the distant past.

In both types of scientific studies, conclusions that cannot be supported by data are prohibited. The entire body of work is communicated to the scientific community to be criticized and challenged. Other scientists will repeat the work and judge whether steps of the scientific method have been appropriately adhered to, whether the work is reliable and repeatable, and whether the conclusions are justified by the data. If the investigation and its product of conclusions withstand this judgment phase, then the information is considered scientifically valid and becomes part of the body of scientific information. Acquiring scientific knowledge is a dynamic process where ideas can be challenged indefinitely using new techniques and technology until no uncertainty remains. Through time, this knowledge will expand and change. It is very rare that a single study pro-

duces the definitive description of a natural phenomenon. Typically, results of many studies are combined to build a large base of knowledge that can serve as the foundation for future studies. Understanding that scientific information is built layer by layer through the results of many studies is also an important part of becoming scientifically literate. It is then possible to judge whether current information is complete or if additional studies are required before conclusions are considered reliable and valid.

Once the scientific method is understood, scientific literacy becomes possible. A person can then appreciate why scientific information is not an opinion, a philosophical stand, or a position accepted on faith. The importance of scientific information as a basis for decision making also becomes clear. For example, if there is a discussion about regulation of a drug as a matter of public policy, scientific information will establish the specific effects of the drug and at what dose they occur. Mere opinions and anecdotal observations without a scientific basis cannot provide accurate data upon which to draw valid conclusions. The same scenario could occur with personal decisions on matters of health. People can competently evaluate information claimed to be scientific by investigating the process by which it was derived as long as they understand that process. If that procedure did not follow the criteria of the scientific method, then they will know that the information has no value as scientific knowledge. This is where true scientific literacy begins. Incidentally, the scientific method also teaches quantitative, analytical, and logical reasoning along with critical thinking and reinforces communication skills. These are all skills that are valuable and can be transferred to other facets of professional and personal endeavors.

Information bombards us from numerous sources. It is wise to reflect upon and consider all to the extent that is practically possible. However, it is also imperative to understand that how the information is constructed is essential to deciding how it should be used. It is dangerous and foolish to make decisions about matters with scientific underpinnings such as technology or medicine if scientific information is not available. Logically, it is also foolish and dangerous for such decisions to be made by someone who is scientifically illiterate and cannot or does not appreciate what makes information truly scientifically reliable, repeatable, and valid.

Understanding the scientific method is a cornerstone of scientific literacy. It is literally how we decide whether information deserves the label scientific. No one can use scientific knowledge appropriately without the ability to evaluate it. Only an appreciation of the scientific method can provide this skill. If instilling scientific literacy is a goal of an educational institution, then teaching the scientific method must be a high priority in classes which teach science.

The author wishes to thank Dr. David Dalgarn, Dr. Gary Lange, Dr. Jonathan Leonard, and Dr. David Stanton for providing helpful criticism and advice regarding this article.

# English 111 Committee Report

**Mary Harmon**  
Coordinator of First Year Writing

The English 111 Program is a year old this week. The Program, now more coherent and more consistent than in the past, has been re-organized to achieve more consistency between sections, and more coherency as all instructors use the same course framework, work toward the same set of outcomes, evaluate papers using the same scoring rubric, and participate in regular norming sessions at which group consensus for evaluative standards is achieved. Thanks to Diane Boehm

and Sandra Claypool, who coordinated the Writing Center's efforts, English 111 students are oriented to and actively use the Writing Center.

In addition, each semester, all English 111 students participate in a uniform mid-semester assessment, so their instructors can articulate what students seem to be doing well and what instruction should be emphasized as the semester continues.

The body that over-see and assesses the English 111 program, chaired by Dr. Mary Harmon, is busy reviewing and selecting texts for next year, reading papers to determine

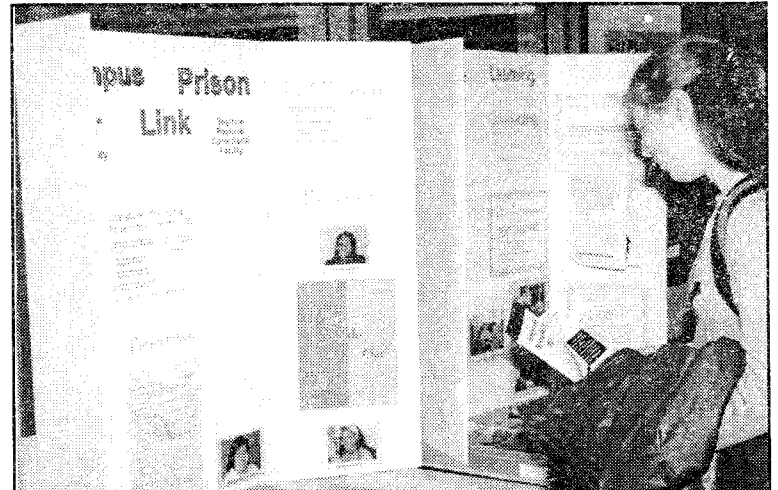
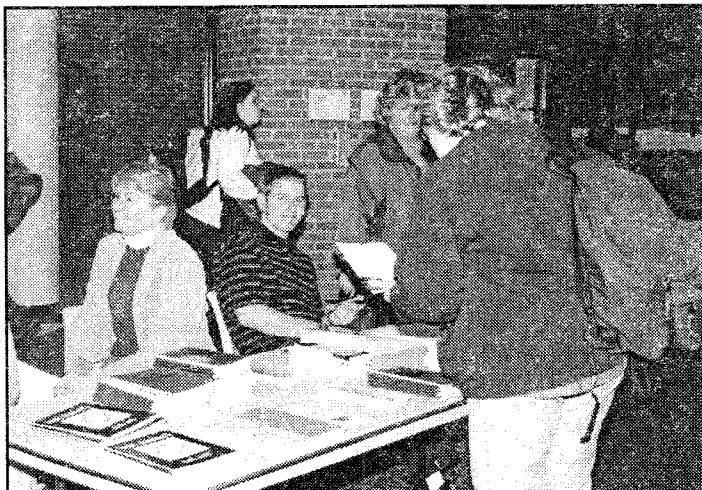
winners of the Freshman Award in Writing, and creating a plagiarism policy for use in all English 111 classes, and, eventually, it is hoped, in all English classes taught at SVSU. Members of the English 111 Committee are: Diane Boehm, Chris Giroux, Lynne Graft, Helen Raica-Klotz, Thoman Meehan, Ruth Sawyers, Melissa Seitz, Janice Wolff. This hard-working committee meets regularly throughout the academic year.

Any of its members would be interested in and encourage any feedback about English 111 SVSU faculty might provide them. Send any comments to mharmon@svsu.edu.



The English Dept. held its first Information Day last winter semester. The event was held on the first floor of the Herbert Dow Doan Science Building. Danika Willis pages through a booklet provided at the Information Day as English Professors Patricia Cavanaugh and Debra Combs occupied one of the booths. (bottom left) Cavanaugh and Writing Center employee Bob Filter answered questions for students. (bottom right) Willis views English classroom projects.

photos courtesy of Stacie Piotrowski/  
Valley Vanguard



# General Education: A Literacy Foundation

Kim Good and Sandra Nagel Randall

Thinking critically, reasoning logically and communicating effectively are the primary goals of SVSU's General Education Program. These essential and transferable goals and skills serve as the foundation of this program, which was implemented in the fall of 2001. At the prompting of our external accrediting agency, North Central Association/Higher Learning Commission (NCA/HLC), SVSU has revised the previously existing program into one that is more focused, having both the set of overarching principles described above and more specific categorical objectives. A program assessment plan was developed and implemented at the same time as a means of monitoring the realization of the goals and objectives of this new coherent program. Additionally, a governing body, the General Education Committee, was instituted.

This article, written in a question and answer format, will begin with defining general education as it is used in SVSU's context. An overview of the assessment plan being used to measure our progress towards attaining the outlined goals will follow. Finally, the article concludes with baseline data on our students' entry level abilities and skills as they relate to the general education goals.

## What is General Education?

General education, as defined by SVSU, is the part of a student's education that contributes to the breadth of knowledge needed to be a more effective citizen of a complex and culturally diverse world. It supports the student with the skills and perspectives that will not always be gained from a specialized program of study and provides a basis for a common educational experience all students and graduates of the University can share. It is intended to help the students become more broadly knowledgeable, adaptable, and capable in their many life roles. By graduation, students will have been given opportunities to develop their insight, creativity, and intellectual curiosity, as well as analytical and critical skills. The General Education Program is designed to develop in each student: appreciation of a wide range of perspectives and experiences acquaintance with the many ways of experiencing and acquiring knowledge broad knowledge about the human and natural world understanding of the structure and order of the natural world, including human thought processes appreciation of the arts for aesthetic value and for their usefulness in exploring complex human truths knowledge of the history of civilizations competence in communication exploration and development of individual values and ethics.

SVSU's General Education Program enhances the graduate's ability to learn and function as an educated person in the many demanding roles of contemporary life. The General Education Program comprises 35 credit hours in 10 categories, each with a learning objective, a required number of credit hours, and an approved group of courses from which to choose.

How do we know if SVSU students are successfully in attaining the goals and objectives and thus the program is effective? Upon adoption of the new Program, a substantial assessment plan was developed to gather evidence as to how well the students were doing in attaining the outlined goals and objectives. The assessment plan has two major components: course level and programmatic assessment. Each of the general education courses have individual assessment plans which link to the three major goals of the General Education Program as well as tie to one of the 10 categorical objectives of the program. This level of assessment occurs within the individual departments. At the program level, the General Education

Committee with the assistance of Kim Good, Academic Assessment Director, and Sandra Nagel Randall, General Education Assessment Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Psychology, are measuring students' progress in development of the three major goals as well as gathering perceptual data about students' experiences as they relate to the developmental areas bulleted above.

The measures used at the programmatic assessment level are also a part of a longitudinal study designed to study the overall effectiveness of the new General Education Program. One of the two measures being used in this study is the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), a measure developed by American College Testing (ACT). This nationally standardized assessment will be used to help determine how effective the SVSU community has been in improving critical thinking, logical reasoning, and effective communication in our students. The second measure is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey that was developed by The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA and the American Council on Education. As pretests of students' abilities and experiences prior to college, the CIRP and CAAP are administered at students' entry into SVSU. The CAAP and College Student Survey (CSS) will be given to these same students in years two, three, and four.

What do we know about our students as they arrive at SVSU? In the fall of 2001, a pilot group of FTICs (approximately 19% of incoming freshmen) were administered the three CAAP subtests: Writing Skills, Critical Thinking, and Writing Essay. The Writing Skills Test measures the student's understanding of standard written English in usage/mechanics and rhetorical skills. The Critical Thinking Skills Test measures the ability to clarify, analyze, evaluate, and extend arguments. The third test, Essay Writing, consists of two short prompts that identify a specific hypothetical situation and audience. The hypothetical situation involves an issue on which the student is asked to both take a position and present arguments to support this position.

When compared with freshmen students from other four-year colleges, our SVSU students tended to perform at or slightly above the national mean in their objective writing skills and their ability to write a convincing essay, but slightly below the national mean in critical thinking skills. A comparison between students enrolled in English 111 and 080 revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups of students across all areas tested. English 111 students outperformed English 080 students.

With the valuable assistance of the English Department, the majority of FTICs (84%) completed the CIRP survey in their English 111 or English 080 classes. The self-report CIRP survey provided a wealth of information on a number of areas, including student and parent demographics, senior-year in high school activities and achievement, projected college activities and achievement, life/educational/professional objectives and goals, attitudes and values, self-rated skills and traits, and past and projected remedial needs.

Prior to analysis, items from the CIRP survey were organized into categories or themes that were thought to be useful in understanding student characteristics relevant to the learning outcomes targeted by the General Education Program. These themes included the following: communication skills, critical thinking and reasoning, broad education, personal ethic and values, civic responsibility, community and political activism, cultural and artistic activities, technology skill and use, diversity awareness and interaction, sense of health and wellness, cooperative stance, political views, professional goals, communication with educators, sources of motivation and

level of academic engagement, and religious preference and activities.

Comparing SVSU students with their national counterparts, SVSU students reported less confidence in their communication, academic, artistic, and creative abilities than their national counterparts. They are, however, seeking support from the university in developing these skills.

SVSU-FTIC students of 2001 reported that they place little value in developing themselves culturally, in defining their personal values and ethics, and in developing a broad education compared to the national reference group. SVSU-FTIC students are less interested in diversity issues and less interested in community, political, artistic, and cultural events and issues than their national reference group. They are, however, interested in some university support in all of the above mentioned areas. SVSU-FTIC students are more interested and engaged in the use of computers and technology than the reference group. SVSU students reported a reduced level of emotional health and a reduced tendency to communicate with educators as compared with their national counterparts. They also reported a greater influence of extrinsic motivators than intrinsic motivators in reaching their professional goals. These professional goals are significantly less ambitious than those reported by their national counterparts.

A more detailed summary of these results is provided at <http://selfstudy.svsu.edu/docs/ge2001.html>. What does all of this information tell us? The data collected from the CAAP and CIRP are intended to be a part of a longitudinal study that will assess the effectiveness of the General Education Program in achieving the identified goals and objectives. However, the information we have collected on students as they enter the institution is also important in understanding the skills students possess when they arrive at SVSU and the prior experiences that shape their values and interests particularly as they relate to the objectives of the General Education Program.

Academically (using the CAAP as the primary measure) students entering SVSU have adequate skill in writing and critically thinking as compared with the reference group. There is room, however, for helping them to increase their abilities across all the categories of the GE program.

This cohort of beginning SVSU students seems eager for support in developing those areas where they report weak interest, experience, and skill. Greater problems exist, perhaps in the realm of the personal characteristics that would help to support our students' contributions to the learning process. There is, however, an abundant literature that describes the factors known to influence student learning and success.

This literature indicates that interpersonal skills, an openness and tolerance for diversity in people, a sense of personal responsibility and self-discipline, clear goals and aspirations, intrinsic sources of motivation, academic engagement, and a sense of personal satisfaction, health and wellness are all factors that act as strong modulators of success. These qualities can be fostered in our classrooms.

The insights into our student body that these tests, as well as other sources of data, provide can be used by faculty and staff in determining the appropriate type of courses and instruction to maximize students' success in attaining the General Education Program goals and objectives.

These baseline measures should also guide the General Education committee in their ongoing assessment and revision of the program itself. This work will ensure that our students develop their critical thinking skills, which will make them more literate members of our academic and social communities.

# SVSU ENGLISH 111 WRITING AWARD

A new award to showcase outstanding English 111 Fall Semester writers has been established. Students have already submitted their papers for the Dec. 6 deadline. The papers followed the criteria listed below.

- \* Papers are to be newly created during the Fall 111 course and written in response to an assignment in that course.
- \* Papers should stand alone except in the case of a summary/response entry, in which case a copy of the piece summarized must be included.
- \* Papers should be engaging and significant within their genre.
- \* Papers should exhibit the fine qualities endorsed by the English 111 rubric.
- \* Papers should be word processed in a format appropriate to their genre and accompanied by a title page that includes the piece's title, the entrant's name, address, phone #, email address and course instructor.

Citations, if used, should be formatted in MLA or APA style.

- \* Papers will be judged by a committee comprised of the 111 Faculty Coordinator, the co-Editors of the Literacy Link, and 3 members of the 111 Committee.

Five cash prizes will be awarded:

- 1st \$500.00
- 2nd \$400.00
- 3rd \$300.00
- 4th \$200.00
- 5th \$100.00

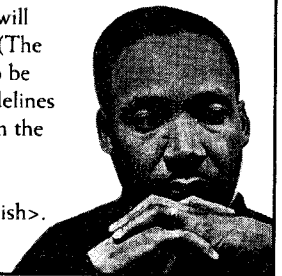
Winners will be announced at a campus-wide reception where Dr. Robert Yien, Vice President of Academic Affairs, will present awards to the writers.

Winning papers will be published in the Literacy Link during Winter Semester.

Dr. Mary R. Harmon  
989-964-7117  
mharmon@svsu.edu

## Essay contest

Students are invited to enter their essays for an SVSU-sponsored writing contest that will be a part of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration in January 2003. The winner's paper will be read at a dinner honoring the memory of Dr. King's work. Papers should address the idea, "Why Dr. King is Important to Me," which can include stories of personal inspiration or reflections on the ways in which Dr. King's legacy has had a positive effect on the world that we live in. The maximum number of words is 1,000 and should be given to the Campus Life Office by December 1, 2003. There is no entry fee, but winners will receive monetary awards. (The amount of the awards is to be announced.) Detailed guidelines are available on a link from the News page of the English Department's website <<http://www.svsu.edu/english>>.



# Statistics Regarding the Problem of Digital Cheating in Academia

—taken from Turnitin.com

Our schools are currently experiencing an unprecedented crisis in ethics. Here are some recent findings:

Almost 80% of college students admit to cheating at least once—The Center for Academic Integrity Studies.

36% of undergraduates have admitted to plagiarizing written material—Psychological Record Survey.

90% of students believe that cheaters are either never caught or have never been appropriately disciplined—US News and World Report poll.

58.3% of high school students let someone else copy their work in 1969, and 97.5% did so in 1989—The State of Americans: This Generation and the Next.

257 chief student affairs officers across the country believe that colleges and universities have not addressed the cheating problem adequately—from a study by Ronald M. Aaron and Robert T. Georgia: Administrator Perceptions of Student Academic Dishonesty in Collegiate Institutions.

"In four focus-group discussions conducted by the Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University, many students appeared blasé about academic dishonesty. 'I guess the first time you do it, you feel really bad, but then you get used to it,' one said. Another asserted: 'People cheat. It doesn't make you less of a person or worse of a person. There are times when you just are in need of a little help.'" —New York Times, Education Life Section, January 7, 2001, p 15.

According to the Gallup Organization, the top two problems facing the country today are: 1) Education and 2) Decline in Ethics (both were ranked over crime, poverty, drugs, taxes, guns, environment, and racism, to name a few) —Gallup Organization, October 6-9, 2000.

30% of a large sampling of Berkeley students were recently caught plagiarizing directly from the Internet —results of a Turnitin.com test, conducted from April-May 2000.

Although many instructors are aware of the problem, most feel powerless to stop it.

55% of faculty "would not be willing to devote any real effort to documenting suspected incidents

of student cheating"—from a study by Donald L. McCabe: "Faculty Responses to Academic Dishonesty: The Influence of Honor Codes."

"With respect to cheating, I'm just in denial. I just don't want to deal with it because I know it is a huge problem."—a San Luis Obispo Professor, as reported in Net Learning.

"Who wants to sit around looking for Web sites trying to find out if a paper is plagiarized or not—pretty soon you're a private investigator."—a Stanford University Professor, from an article in TechWeb News.

"[Plagiarism] is one of those areas in the academy that no one wants to talk about and is often rewarded for not addressing actively."—an Associate VP of Student Life, as posted in The Chronicle of Higher Education's "Colloquy."

"Too few universities are willing to back up their professors when they catch students cheating, according to academic observers. The schools are simply not willing to expend the effort required to get to the bottom of cheating cases" — as stated by The National Center for Policy Analysis.