

# Literacy Link

Winter 2010

## From the Editors' Desktops



So, our normal *modus operandi* is that we start off with some witty metaphor about literacy, our teaching philosophies, or what works in the classroom. Then we use that as a bridge to the articles we're including in the current issue of *Literacy Link*. For the sake of variety, however, we're going to cut to the chase—but not to worry, the metaphor is coming.



As with the Fall 2009 issue, we are happy to include insights from two winners of faculty awards from last year. First, we have “Writing History’: A Literacy Narrative,” by Brad Jarvis, who won the 2009 Innovative Writing in Teaching Award; Brad tells us about his own beginnings as a writer and the ways in which he infuses his history courses with writing. Joshua Ode, who won last year’s House Teacher Impact Award, shares his insights on teaching in “What Does It Take To Be a Successful Teacher?”

As editors, we always work with the hope that *Literacy Link* spurs faculty at SVSU to think more deeply about our own practices, and so we are excited to include Andrew Tierman’s “Forsaking Facebook,” which was written in response to Mike Mosher’s recent article about using Facebook as a pedagogical tool. (Thank you, Andrew, for being willing to share your thoughts with us in this larger forum.) We round out the issue with an article about the Student Research and Creativity Initiative

(SRCI) as a means of promoting writing, “Proposal Writing Proposes a Worthy Skill,” by Kirsten McIlvenna, whom we hope will be our *Literacy Link* intern next fall.

And now we segue to our metaphor.... Sara Kitchen, our current *Literacy Link* intern, will be graduating this spring. We met Sara for the first time during her freshman year—a newly declared professional and technical writing major who was quiet, shy, and more than a little unsure of her new assignment with *Literacy Link*. It was clear to us that Sara was a gifted and intelligent student, but it wasn’t clear that she knew this—at least, not right away.

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However, over the past three years, we have seen Sara do remarkable things. For *Literacy Link*, she has worked to refine our layout, write various articles, and edit multiple essays by faculty and students. And in other parts of our university, Sara has excelled as well—as a Writing Center mentor, as the *Vanguard* editor-in-chief, and in travel abroad programs—to say nothing of her work for two New York production companies over the summer months. In this short time, Sara has become everything we knew she could be—thanks in part to the faculty here at SVSU, who have worked to promote and encourage her talents.

We close with Sara as our metaphor. We believe Sara is a great example of how SVSU works for our students to help them develop their full potential. We also believe that there are many students like Sara who are in our classrooms, waiting to be encouraged, supported, and engaged in the process of learning about themselves and the world around them. As you read this issue of *Literacy Link*, we hope it reminds you of the good work we all do and must continue to do in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Helen and Chris

## “Writing History”: A Literacy Narrative



*Brad D. E. Jarvis*

*Assistant Professor of History*

*2009 Innovative Writing in Teaching Faculty Award Winner*

While an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, I realized very quickly that I was not fully prepared for the rigors of academic discourse at the collegiate level. My professors asked me to analyze primary and secondary source documents and write arguments based on my interpretations. Unfortunately, on two occasions, instructors accused me of plagiarism. During my first semester in college, I enrolled in an honors section of a survey of US History, which is basically the survey course I teach here at SVSU. The professor asked us to use information from the textbook to describe the economic

and cultural differences between the New England, Middle, and Southern colonies of British North America. I submitted what I believed to be a good paper only to be crushed when I received it back with a bright red D on top. At the bottom was a note informing me that I had plagiarized the assignment by copying, verbatim, information from the textbook. I had taken the assignment literally and had used exact passages from the textbook to support my claims. At the time, I did not fully understand what constituted plagiarism, and I had submitted the same sort of report that had proven so effective for me in high school. My professor succinctly informed me that this would not cut it in college for, as he put it, “this is a place for scholarship!”

One would think that such admonishment from my first history professor would set me straight, but a few semesters later, I found myself accused of plagiarism once more. In an anthropology course, after being instructed by the teaching assistant

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to use the textbook as the source for all supporting information, I submitted an assignment that again copied material. I would have been happy to receive a D this time, for the instructor indicated that she was going to report me to the University's Office for Student Conduct and Academic Integrity for appropriate discipline. Luckily for me, my plight was shared by many other students in the class, and we successfully negotiated permission to redo the assignment. Finally, the lesson had been learned. If I was to succeed in college, I was going to have to learn how to write within the academic discipline. With work and the assistance of some wonderful teachers, I eventually did learn how to research, find evidence, and support an argument properly, skills that have been vital in my career.

I think of these experiences each time I grade papers in my history courses. I see many students who are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the expectations of academic writing, and frequently their papers are merely descriptive, lack analysis, or present a superficial understanding of the readings. Occasionally I get plagiarized papers in which it is obvious that the student is struggling with how to use information to support an argument. I empathize with these students, many of whom are bright and do quite well on their exams. Yet I also know how important it is for their future success that they learn how to write. Attention to writing technique supports the development of skills in critical analysis and argumentation, which are vital to success in whatever their chosen major might be.

For this reason, I emphasize writing in all of my history courses, even those at the introductory level. HIST 100B is a survey course covering United States history from the pre-Columbian era through the Civil War, and each section typically fills with 55 students. Most of these students are freshmen interested in fulfilling General Education requirements, and only a few of them will become history or education majors and take additional upper-

division history courses. As a result, I try to structure the course as an introduction to American history, hopefully providing students with a basic understanding of some of the broader themes in our nation's past, albeit punctuated with deeper analysis of certain topics along the way. Students take three exams during the term, but must also complete three short writing assignments.

Each semester, I assign three short autobiographies that discuss certain themes I wish to cover in class. For each book, there is a writing assignment requiring that students use information from the autobiography, from the textbook, and from other course materials to support their answer to a particular question. For instance, in the fall of 2008, my students used *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* to critique the concept of the self-made man in early American history, they used *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* to explore the impact of Euro-American expansion on American Indian communities, and they used Harriet Jacobs's painful story, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to explore issues of race and gender in antebellum America. More than a book review or an essay exam response, these assignments force students to take a relatively wide array of information and collect it together into a coherent argument. Students receive the paper assignments on the first day of class, and I tell them to keep these in mind as they progress through the course. Students are instructed to read actively to find evidence that can be used to support the argument they wish to make. I also encourage them to record information from lectures, from class discussions, from analyses of primary sources, and from the course textbook to support their thesis.

Not all students like the additional reading and writing, especially for a 100-level survey course. On my course evaluations, some students tell me as much and criticize me for grading papers

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too harshly. My favorite comment came from a student who complained that “[I] graded papers like an English professor,” as if this were a bad thing. However, included within the evaluations are comments from many other students who tell me that these assignments make understanding history easier. Instead of getting lost in details (or, to be frank, bored with the story), many discovered that reading to find specific information helped them better remember key concepts and arguments. As one student wrote, “I liked his book/paper strategies because they connected real stories to the course material.” Moreover, by requiring that they support their claims with cited evidence, students learn the importance of stating to the reader (or to an audience) where they found their information. As students work on these papers during the semester, we as a class often engage in debates that illustrate how different scholars can develop different arguments based on the same evidence. The students’ papers usually represent such differences as well, and I remind students that this is why it is important to support arguments clearly with solid evidence.

Good writing is a process that includes much revision, and I encourage students to rework and improve their course papers. In the syllabus and in class, I emphasize that students can have me review paper drafts with them, and I encourage them to use the resources available at the Writing Center. Towards the end of the semester,

I also allow students to rewrite one of their papers and resubmit it for a new grade. To take advantage of this though, students must make an appointment with me so that we can carefully go over the original paper in detail. At that time, I can make my expectations clear while I learn what the student thought he or she was doing with the paper. In these sorts of informal discussions, I find that students more readily grasp the concepts of supporting arguments and referencing sources.

Since implementing this writing assignment in my survey classes, I’ve noticed an overall improvement in writing skills amongst first-year students. I find that most of the students who complain about their grades on the papers fail to take advantage of the rewrite opportunity, or they resubmit papers with superficial changes, such as fixing typos and correcting spelling. But I am heartened when I read the work of other students who have completely restructured their original paper to present a more logical argument or who have gone back into the sources to find the evidence necessary to support their claims. In one case, a student worked very hard to improve her paper marginally from a B to a B+, but she acknowledged that after the process she felt much more comfortable when approaching writing assignments in her other courses. In another instance, a bright student was discouraged when she received a C on her first paper. After a series

## Call for Papers

The editors of *Literacy Link* invite members of the campus community to submit articles for review and possible inclusion in the Fall 2010 issue.

Articles may address a variety of literacy practices including such topics as teaching strategies, activities, and research; critical thinking; writing across the curriculum; or book reviews. The editors are especially interested in how literacy is defined by different disciplines, how professors use literacy in their various classes, what professors encounter in student writing, and how students respond to literacy expectations.

Articles for *Literacy Link* should run 500 to 1,500 words in length. Authors should follow either MLA or APA format.

Submit articles to

SVSU Department of English  
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Submission deadline for the Fall 2010 issue is **September 30, 2010**.

of meetings with me to discuss drafts for the subsequent two assignments as well as a revision of her first paper, she ended up submitting work that was amongst the strongest I have seen in any of my survey courses. Students who take advantage of the revision opportunity have told me that they appreciate that I am “there to give ... guidance” and that the process “[is] very fair and help[s] resolve any problems.” In these cases, I think the assignments have served the students well by preparing them for what is expected in their upper-division courses. I am encouraged when students report on their evaluations that “I definitely am stronger in this area because of this class.” And it makes me feel better, especially after being accused of grading like an English professor.

One of the undergraduate professors who helped me with my writing once told me that historians do not truly understand a topic until they have to teach it. Only by thinking about the proper way to present information to an audience do we scholars begin to synthesize information in ways that allow for deeper understanding. This is essentially what we ask of our students when they write: to take information, analyze it, and produce an argument that explains. But not all of our students arrive here at SVSU having developed those skills. By taking the time to help our students develop them, we, as college instructors, are guiding them beyond the gathering of knowledge and giving students the tools necessary to learn and to enlighten others.

## Forsaking Facebook: A Response to Mike Mosher’s “Facebook—For Classroom, Community, and Communication”

*Anderw Tierman*  
*Lecturer of Mathematical Sciences*

I appreciated Mike Mosher’s article “Facebook—For Classroom, Community, and Communication” in the last issue of *Literacy Link*, but it did not answer my questions about registering on Facebook. Mike’s focus included use of Facebook in teaching; mine regards its value for personal use, along with concern for privacy, specifically for one who teaches college students. I have so far decided against putting myself on Facebook, although I am curious about its utility for communicating with past friends and associates long out of contact. (Since this writing, *The New York Review of Books* published a review of two books, respectively treating Facebook and MySpace [see Charles Petersen’s “In the World of Facebook,” *The New York Review of Books*, 25 February 2010, pp. 8-11], to which I would have deferred without consenting to submit what began as a personal response to Mike.)

For general communication with people whose identity and electronic location I know, email is extremely useful, supplanting to a large extent communication via both telephone and letters. This includes family members of my own or younger generation, present colleagues and friends, a few past colleagues and old friends with whom I have maintained or regained contact and shared email addresses, and the ongoing ranks of students we face as college teachers. Indeed, email has the potential to revive and sustain the epistolary tradition. One can even tarry over a letter for weeks, developing its substance and style in an email draft facility or word processing file until it is satisfactory. I do not need a virtual billboard, formally exclusive in access but filled with self-advertising visible to millions who submit to the formality of access, despite that occasional rumination that somewhere a long-lost acquaintance,



as ignorant of my whereabouts as I am of his or hers, perhaps someone I knew during the major part of my lifetime which pre-dated the Internet, may be wondering about me—as indeed I may wonder about him or her.

Email has great value in student-instructor communication. I can use it to answer some students' questions in mathematics courses,

and it has generally been very helpful with questions my statistics students send and thus a means for encouraging home practice. It is equally important in staying in touch with students who are sick or miss class; who have job-related conflicts; who are struggling and need encouragement or status reports, or who need to arrange meetings; or generally to communicate

information and resources—which extends to VSpace, essentially piggybacked on the email system. And then there are emails such as one I received (and responded to in kind) toward last semester's end, from a student several years past his teens whose efforts to learn in class had been frustrated by a few disrespectful students and various classroom-related factors. This was a long, revealing, and candid epistle—the kind of communication one might never receive without the opportunity email provides to concentrate alone and compose an articulate, thoughtful, heartfelt, informative letter—and, when the work is satisfactory, send it promptly to someone with whom you may have never before spoken, but still with whom you share the relationship of spending a semester together in the classroom, as student and teacher.

We in post-secondary education realize that finding each other—including unacquainted, both literally and figuratively long-distanced colleagues of whom we may read—and communicating via email is usually not difficult: at most, it may take some minor detective work. On the other hand, finding someone like an old college roommate of mine who has

a fairly common name—one shared with an athlete of moderate, past fame—is frustrating on the modern Internet. I may find Internet “phone books” with a hundred instances of his name, and I am not inclined towards the extreme of paying an online search agency \$29.99. I suspect this person, somewhere in the “private” world outside academia, has at least an email address, but I know of no sure way to locate him without becoming a private eye on my own, perhaps an interesting sideline but outside the sphere of my current aspirations. However, he may have a presence on a social-networking site such as Facebook, as may any number of people with whom I have been acquainted in my woefully numerous decades on Earth.

But I am not interested in corresponding or interacting with students on Facebook. Email is satisfactory for me in my role as instructor, and for students who need to communicate with me as their instructor. The form of such interaction enabled by Facebook, or what little I know about it, raises apprehensions about a difficult-to-impossible-to-control aperture for exposure. Requests for being someone's “friend” could be intimidating and manipulative, intentionally or not. I do not wish to post lists of personal preferences or photographs of myself or others, for the world to see—and I do not want others to presume the association implied by the capacity to post similar information relating to myself. The penumbra of this ethereal existence is complicated by the possibility that, without having been voluntarily provided such identifying material, students may secretly make sound, photographic, or video recordings of someone whose day-to-day, semester-to-semester work involves encountering, and making quasi-public presentations before, new groups of young people, a significant number of whom may harbor a less than sacred (or a not-yet matured) view of the implicit trust and respect between teacher and learner—or between civil adults generally.

I may not have a reputation for doing anything of great importance, but suspect at least that I am not reputed for any severe

**S**ocial networking sites may represent a phenomenon that has affected American education for the worse—the over-emphasis on self, self-description, and self-enthralment, and the ubiquitous commodification of everyday human sentiment.

misdoings or breaches of social mores. On the other hand, I suppose that I am seen by some students as fodder for a hearty laugh, and perhaps as a butt for practical joking, however ill-humored. I would not be surprised—although I would remain happy unenlightened—if cellphone video of myself in class during some dramatic moment were posted for all with access to see—diminishing any point I may have had concerning the glory of statistics or mathematics and presenting me as a ready-made object for derision, contempt, sarcasm, ridicule, and general hilarity, not without exploitation of the absurd last stand of my tousled widow's peak to conceal a hairline receding in an ineluctable sequel of bad hair years. Having spent a year or two substituting in secondary-level classrooms, I know that of which teenagers are capable, though I may try to forget for peace of mind in the classroom. And I do not wish for a venue on the Internet where, outside my control, I can appear in association with salacious stories, photographs, and persons who advertise themselves in such connection.

So my question is whether, for one who teaches, it is possible to enjoy the potential benefits of Facebook, for searching or being searched—in the wider grown-up world that we have inhabited where, for instance, those whom we may have known long before Facebook or the Internet itself began may have found a social presence online for similar reasons; is it possible for us to do so, without exposing ourselves to untoward consequences of our specific renown among the least civil we encounter in our roles as educators? I imagine that, were I to register for Facebook, I might attach a statement on my homepage (or whatever it is called) advising “my students” summarily that I will not respond to requests to be “friended,” because they well know how to contact me in person or by email for any legitimate communication relative to the student-instructor relationship.

Mike said he used only his first name, though his last name in his email ultimately revealed him to someone searching his name. Does this mean that if an old friend

who is on Facebook were looking for you, he or she would not be able to see your full name in a search and would thus miss an opportunity to contact you and you could miss the opportunity to be contacted by that person? Is it possible to use a “handle” like “9Thermidor” or “spinoza789” and still be contacted through real name background by someone searching for you? Is it possible to use your real name, first and last, and escape disreputable association by simply refusing contact by anyone not known to you? Is it possible, before agreeing to “friend” somebody, to ask for background information that may reveal a legitimate common interest? My impression, from having received a few “friend” requests from persons who are on Facebook, although I am not, is that this is not possible, but, of course, responding to such requests requires that you first register for Facebook, and the protocol for dealing with such requests is not explained to an outsider beforehand.

Perhaps I am exaggerating the utility of a facility such as Facebook. A relative who is on Facebook but far too busy to be harassed by me at a distance for use of her access permitted me to look up the distinctive name of an old friend (not the roommate previously mentioned), and I briefly saw that one of his “friends” was a mutual acquaintance, years back when we were living and working in the same location. So how does all that work? Maybe we must seek an answer in our “real” worlds of non-electronic phenomena as well as the technical one. Generally, we—those of us well past the quarter-century mark at least—eventually, one or more times, make new lives for ourselves that for the most part do not intersect with old lives, and it may be best to leave the past in its place; others have also made new lives, and human beings in most instances play what becomes in the perspective of many years only a very restricted role in other, separated lives. Still, something like Facebook seems to hold out the potential that mutual curiosity about old acquaintances can be explored, even if left aside again. That was the case a few years ago when a former colleague with a busy professional life in Chicago emailed me—I never asked

how he obtained my email address but mutual friends or professional resources were most likely the source—when his son started at the University of Michigan, a couple years after mine. We never did meet in Ann Arbor as we had discussed doing in a relatively brief succession of messages, fully understandable, although it is entirely possible that on occasion we both visited our sons on the same day, within a few city blocks of each other.

In the end, social networking sites may represent a phenomenon that has affected American education for the worse—the over-emphasis on self: self-description, self-enthralment, self-endorsement without sense of irony or doubt, self-esteem for its own sake, and the ubiquitous commodification of everyday human sentiment. Until this changes, I have to humbly disagree with Mike Mosher and leave this particular technology outside of my classroom.

## What Does It Take To Be a Successful Teacher?



*Joshua Ode*

*Assistant Professor of Kinesiology*

*2009 Winner of the House Family Award for Teaching Impact*

John Wooden, UCLA's head basketball coach, once said, "Success is a peace of mind which is a direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable." This quote has inspired me to consider the same question every day: "What does it take to be a successful teacher?" Although the answer to this question is fluid and complex, I believe it revolves around helping students become the best they can be. A great teacher personalizes education and recognizes that learning occurs when a student feels an individual connection to her education. Therefore, it is my goal to personalize education and provide as many opportunities as possible to help my students succeed. For me, that success focuses on five critical components of effective teaching: caring about students and my research, helping students take ownership of their work, being committed to students and the research process, helping students to grasp the content, and encouraging them to think critically.

To encourage student success, my teaching practices involve caring tremendously about the topics and students I teach. I have devoted my career to kinesiology and have an unwavering passion for the field. To convince my students of this

passion, I prepare for class with great attention to detail, I enter a classroom with a tremendous amount of energy, and I engage my class with enthusiasm. I believe it is essential that my students understand that I care about their success. In the classroom, this requires an atmosphere in which students are comfortable, challenged, and involved. Additionally, I believe that an atmosphere promoting conversation in the classroom often results in conversation outside the classroom. I make it a point to engage in conversation with my students about topics unrelated to school to reduce the intimidation that is often present when talking with a professor. In return, when I challenge my students and ask for more than is typically expected, I encounter very little resistance. I believe that students are more apt to succeed when I set high expectations and challenge them beyond what is typical.

Additionally, I encourage students to take ownership of the class and their grade. For example, students are required to complete assignments, projects, and exams by specific due dates. I stress that they have ownership of these assignments and are allowed to make corrections or changes to their original work, but I do not



provide specific details about the mistakes they make. For example, when a student receives 7 out of 10 points on an exam question, I will not provide a specific reason for the deduction. Instead, I will make a general statement about the mistake such as “need more detail as it relates to...” or “clarify the following statement....” Each student then has the opportunity to revise his answer to a question by addressing my comment. Each revision, however, must include a justification of the correct portion of the original answer, as well as a detailed revision of the incorrect portion of the original answer. In other words, by their own initiative, they have the opportunity to correct a mistake and receive a percentage of the points that they missed on the original exam. I find students who partake in this strategy, not only improve their grade, but develop a deeper understanding of the material.

My teaching also includes a commitment to my students and to research. I want students to know I am willing to devote the time and effort needed to help them succeed. Firstly, I make it a point to introduce myself to every kinesiology major and attempt to know something about each student that extends beyond the classroom. Secondly, I promptly assist students when they have questions regarding class, programs on campus, career aspirations, or situations that are not school related. I want students to know that their success is my highest priority, and I feel that devoting time to each individual student is critical. I also use my commitment to research as a tool to enhance student learning. Specifically, I use research to actively involve students in study design, data collection, and data analysis. For example, two kinesiology students conducted a research project evaluating cardiovascular disease risk factors and fitness levels in local firefighters. This project exposed these two students to the detail needed to develop a research study. In addition, approximately twenty other kinesiology majors were involved in data collection. As a result, the initiative became a “department” project because many students were

able to experience the rigors of research while putting into practice many of the concepts taught in class. Furthermore, these research projects have resulted in multiple student-led presentations and many students’ first articles in peer-reviewed publications. In this way, the commitment to involve students in research has provided ample opportunities for success outside of the classroom.

Next, understanding the content within any field is obviously a major priority for professors. I believe college students want detailed information, which requires a tremendous commitment on behalf of the professor. However, content knowledge is only a small piece of facilitating student learning. I believe that the delivery of content is essential for student success. I spend time searching for teaching strategies to enhance learning, and, as a result, my teaching strategies are diverse. One of my biggest goals is to engage students in conversation during my presentation. To accomplish this, I cover a topic by asking a series of questions. The initial question is usually very broad and uncomplicated with the goal of initiating student involvement. For example, for a lecture on cardiovascular disease, I may begin by asking the question “What is a heart attack?” Student responses will include such answers as “myocardial tissue death,” “lack of oxygen,” and “lack of blood flow.” I write these answers on the board and then follow this question with a series of additional prompts that require more detailed, thoughtful answers. For example, I may ask the follow-up question “Why is there inadequate oxygen delivery to the myocardial tissue?” Common answers that students provide include “the atherosclerotic process,” “blood clot formation,” or “increased demand of exercise.” Each of these answers serves as a foundation for additional questions that we explore as a class. I also use PowerPoint presentations, which include many pictures and minimal text, to guide

*In my eyes, the most rewarding aspect of teaching occurs when a student is able to critically analyze a topic with idealism while maintaining a sense of skepticism.*

this process. However, for this lesson to be effective, I need a clear plan of what information I want to cover during the class and then utilize the answers given by the students to guide the presentation. This strategy enables students to develop the answer, rather than me providing the answer.

Finally, I believe the goal of most professors is to encourage their students to think critically. To this end, I challenge each student to view topics with idealism and skepticism. I purposely ask questions that challenge students to organize their thoughts to answer a question. Often, there is neither a right nor wrong answer, but a requirement to justify the answer with critical thought. In my eyes, the most rewarding aspect of teaching occurs when a student is able to critically analyze a topic with idealism while maintaining a sense of skepticism. To promote idealism and skepticism, I use recent research articles from the leading medical journals for class assignments. Although students are asked to summarize the article, the main purpose of this assignment is to answer the question “How do the results of this study impact the general public?” Often, this is not an easy question to answer and requires the students to look at the study more critically. For example, earlier this semester I assigned an article

to a group of students regarding health care reform in America. It was clearly the most difficult article I have ever assigned, and initially, I was hesitant to assign it due to its complexity. However, I was amazed by the attention to detail, energy, and effort that the students put into understanding the text. They were able to critically evaluate the health care system in this country and provide me with the pros and cons of various health care reform strategies. What they gained from this assignment was far beyond what I initially expected. In conclusion, not only did I encourage my students to think critically, I set high expectations and challenged them to complete a difficult task. They succeeded.

I take great pride in the success of my students and will continue to care about their success, to allow them to have ownership of their education, and to commit more time and effort to them. I will continue to adapt and find new methods to effectively deliver content and will constantly challenge my students to think critically about a variety of topics. I believe it is a teacher’s responsibility to not become complacent; therefore, I will continue to ask the same important question “What does it take to be a successful teacher?”—and I challenge you to do the same.

## *Proposal Writing Proposes a Worthy Skill*



*Kirsten McIlvenna*  
*SVSU Junior, Professional and Technical Writing Major*

For students paying their way through college, it’s hard to imagine being given up to \$10,000 to study and research outside the classroom. With the Student Research and Creativity Initiative (SRCI) however, this dream isn’t out of reach for SVSU students. SRCI is University funded and awards up to \$50,000 in grant money a year to undergraduate and

graduate students for research or study projects. Up to \$10,000 can be given to one student/project, but this isn’t to say that this money is simply handed to students without the hard work of writing that comes first.

Interested students write and submit grant proposals to the SRCI committee,

which then reviews, votes on, and selects the recipients. Dr. Marc Peretz, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, said that they look for projects that are original, feasible, and able to contribute to knowledge, and that enhance the reputation of the department and University. Each project is voted on by the committee using a number scale; the scores are averaged, and then each proposal is discussed. “The idea is that there will be some concrete outcome,” said Daniel Cook, English professor and member of the SRCI committee. Projects have ranged from painting murals in elementary schools, integrating classroom-based physical activity into schools, and conducting wellness programs for firefighters, to designing a self-playing acoustic guitar and building an outdoor wheelchair-accessible merry-go-round.

A good idea for a project, however, isn’t enough to earn the money. Grant proposals are written in a format unfamiliar to most students. Knowing that, Diane Boehm, director of the Writing Center, offers workshops about proposal writing about a month before each SRCI deadline. “The good idea needs an equally good proposal,” Boehm said. During these workshops, students are able to work on their own drafts and see samples of successful proposals.

Approximately five projects are funded each semester, and it is impossible to highlight all past projects in one article. What is easy to summarize is that the program draws in students from various majors at different times in their college careers, as can be seen in the following vignettes. The common feature between these students, though, may be the valuable lessons they have learned about writing.

### **The Freshman Perspective**

Although it certainly is not typical for students to apply for the SRCI program in their freshman year, Tyler Beyett, a biochemistry major, did just that. While

he was still a student at Carrollton High School, he first heard about SRCI at a science conference where a presenter gave thanks to the program, which piqued Beyett’s interest immediately. “I was planning on submitting [a proposal] as soon as I was actually a student,” said Beyett. Following through on that thought, he turned in a proposal in Fall 2009, has already received the grant, and has begun work on his project.

*“The idea is that there will be some concrete outcome.”*

Beyett’s research focuses on a chemical called diisononyl phthalate (DINP), which is added to plastics to make them flexible and more resilient. As DINP is used in a lot of plastic water bottles and is water soluble, Beyett plans to study whether the amount contained in the plastic will be harmful to consumers. More specifically, Beyett wishes to find genetic proof. “In the science community, if you have the genetics to back something up, it makes it undisputable,” said Beyett.

This project, however, wasn’t possible without writing the proposal first. “It has a form different than anything I’ve ever written before,” said Beyett. He went to the Writing Center to look at examples and found help from other students who were also applying for a SRCI grant. He explained that he is glad that he now has this writing skill as anyone going into science needs to be able to obtain funds for research projects. More importantly, Beyett feels that now that he has this skill, he can continue to apply for money for future projects. “Even from my short time here, I’m seeing the benefits of being able to write a grant,” said Beyett.

### **Learning through Revision**

Korey Force, a Spanish and international studies major, is in the Honors Program and was getting ready to make a proposal for her required Honors thesis. She decided she wanted to discuss two movements that occurred in Mexico City

in 1968. However, to get the research that she would need, she had to find a way to travel to Mexico, and when her professors told her about SRCI, she wrote up a proposal.

Force took her first draft to Diane Boehm in the Writing Center and found out that what she had written was not really in the proposal format. “I like to view myself as an above average writer,” said Force, “but I realized I had no idea what I was doing.” She started over, brought in a second draft, and was again disappointed. By the time she had a third draft, she was on track. “It

was an intense process of rewriting and revision,” she said. After finally finishing her proposal and actually being rewarded the grant, Force was happy with her accomplishment. She said that even though money was the obvious reward of the process, she is glad that she now has the skill of writing a proposal—a skill she can take with her even after she finishes this project. “I think that’s a great feat in itself,” she said.

When in Mexico, Force will be looking at firsthand accounts of the movements through letters or interviews. She said that she has done a lot of reading in Spanish, but this will be her first time immersing herself in the research process in a foreign language. After staying in Mexico for a week, she will return and have the summer to write up her thesis. After she presents her thesis, she hopes to eventually get it published somewhere, a literary experience she could not even consider without applying for funds first.

### **A Goal of Publication**

Nathan Hepworth is an alumnus who graduated in May 2008 and who received money a couple of years ago to research in England. Wanting to study the reason for England and Ireland’s bad relations in the past, he quickly learned that in the US

all he could find were secondary sources, and he needed to travel to England to gain access to primary texts. Like Force and Beyett, he too worked with the Writing Center and Diane Boehm to structure his proposal. He said he learned that “[w]riting a proposal is a whole different writing process than simply writing an essay with bullet-points. Different language and conventions apply.”

During his five-day stay, Hepworth said that he spent almost every minute in the library researching. “I probably looked at between 3,000 and 4,000 manuscripts,” he said. The result of this research is a twenty-six-page essay titled “The Letters of Law,” which he submitted to the *Cambridge Historical Journal*. “It was not accepted, as this is a journal that even most history professors have trouble getting into, but having to edit my paper for publication was a valuable experience,” said Hepworth. Hepworth, however, is not dismayed and still plans to publish it somewhere, even adapting it into a book after he receives his Ph.D. in history. Perhaps more important is what he learned about writing and that a polished essay for a journal takes much more than one for a class: “Word count, precision of language, [and] controversial treatments of touchy subjects, as Irish history is, all have to be reconsidered when you go to publish.”

All of these students, along with others who have received grant money, and even those who wrote the proposals and didn’t get the money, have been given an opportunity to partake in an exercise that the average student doesn’t ever consider dabbling in while in college. There is a grant proposal writing class in the Professional and Technical Writing program, but students outside this major rarely have a chance to pick up the proposal writing skills it offers. Beyond the great projects that SRCI can fund, SRCI provides the opportunity for students to learn how to write and revise grant proposals—and to understand firsthand the hard work that goes into this process.

***One of the common features among SRCI projects may be the valuable lessons learned about writing.***