

Writing Around Richmond

Issue 1, Fall 1998

From the WAC Director

Joe Essid, Writing Center

This fall, Terry Dolson and I have attempted to fill some big shoes. Dona Hickey, founder of the WAC program here at University of Richmond, has handed over the responsibilities of Director to me. Terry adopted the job of Writing Fellows coordinator from Daniel Hocutt, web wizard, who continues to maintain the superb WAC site which he helped develop (<http://www.richmond.edu/~wac>). The program we inherit provided Writing Fellows to assist in 14 individual courses this

semester, as well as technology help for various faculty and over 200 hours



of writing and editing assistance to students in every discipline.

Terry and I have been working on a few projects of interest to Writing Fellows and faculty. I strongly believe that the

presence of Writing Fellows in a class contributes to better commentary and assignments by teachers, but we really need more than that "trickle up" model. So a new seminar, the faculty version of English 376, is now under way. Five faculty members are looking over each others' syllabi, crafting assignments, and learning about effective ways to use Fellows in the classroom.

A second initiative, a Saturday "retreat" for Writing Fellows, will begin next semester. As now envisioned, the retreat would

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Better than Austin Powers :A Professor s Confession

Scott Allison, Psychology

A dozen years ago, when I decided to become a psychology professor, I realized that I was committing myself to a lifetime of learning. One happy truth that I never anticipated, however, was the healthy extent to which my learning

would come from my students. Over the years, I have marveled at my students' ability to produce novel theoretical perspectives, design ingenious methodologies, and craft fresh statistical strategies. My students have both educated and humbled me

time and again with their creative insight into the human psyche.

The WAC program serves as yet another prime context for students teaching the teachers. As Dr. Essid reminds us, the vast majority of faculty lack training in the

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Better than Austin Powers

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art of giving effective commentary on written work. The only way we, as faculty, know how to treat a paper is to treat it the way ours were once treated: three cups of directive commentary with only a pinch of facilitative commentary (if that). But thanks to our exposure to students in the Writing Fellows program, faculty are slowly but surely embracing some much-needed shifts in metaphorical orientations (Fetterer, 1998). One can choose from many such metaphorical shifts - a change from harsh critic to gentle motivator, from drill sergeant to coach,

from adversary to friend, from short-term interest to long-term interest, from mindless compliance to mindful internalization, from mandate to collaborate, to name but a few.

The Writing Fellows have also deepened my sensitivity to other important issues relating to good writing. Thanks to my involvement in WAC, I employ (with rousing success) write-to-learn activities in the classroom. I'm happy to report that these assignments engage my students in learning to a far greater degree than any technological prop, Austin Powers joke, or fervent sermon on the wisdom of William James. Perhaps the most tangible benefits of the Writing Fellows derive from their intangi-

ble elements: their genuine passion for good writing, their relentless desire to help their



students, and their boundless drive to share in our University's academic and intellectual mission. My Writing Fellows' fresh enthusiasm is delightfully contagious. I look forward to absorbing knowledge from them about the canons of good writing and effective commentary for many years to come.

References

Fetterer, C. (1998). *Effective Commentary Strategies: Methods of Accessing the Writer Behind the Writing*. (www.richmond.edu/~eng376/fall97/cfett/final.html)

Coaching: The Tutoring Experience

Brandon Cox, WAC Fellow, Athletic Study Hall Tutor

I find that the biggest obstacle athletes face concerning their writing skills is confidence. The majority of students I work with believe that because they are athletically gifted, they must lack intelligence. They have succumbed to the “dumb

jock” syndrome.

In general, the papers I see consist of a basic structure. The majority of the needed components are there, but something is missing. That something is a forceful and confident argument. The first



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invite Fellows to attend in the teams that are assigned to classes. They would work together in groups on problematic papers from their classes, learn more about special topics, enjoy lunch and social time. Fellows attending the session would be paid an honorarium. Let either of us know if you have suggestions for useful topics or activities during the Fellows' retreat.

After some lobbying by Dr. Hickey and me, Student Financial Aid approved a long-awaited raise for Fellows. A similar raise is in the works for Writing Center Tutors, who have been pretty busy this Fall! Meanwhile, we are thankful for the work done by our new colleague, Beth Bradford, who works with our ESL students. We encourage you to tell students about Ms. Bradford's hours: Monday and Thursday afternoons, 4-7pm.

If you stop by the Center, you'll find faster computers in our tutoring rooms. These machines offer better Web access, MS Office

97, PageMill, and Photoshop LE.

Hopefully, more machines are on the horizon as well, and this will enable Fellows and tutors to provide (the newly reorganized) *Writer's Web* materials, work on Web sites, and conduct other activities.

The computers arrived just in time: Business School students will start bringing their Web-portfolios to the Center next semester. At least one Writing Fellow will be working with Pierce Young, coordinator of the portfolio project, to train other students in reading and commenting on the portfolios.

I'm proud to see this newsletter take shape. Thanks to Dona Hickey's guidance, and the outstanding coordination of your work in the last few years by Daniel Hocutt and Terry Dolson, WAC is ready to take its next steps in helping writers at UR. Stay in touch as we plan events and other changes for next semester and beyond. We want your input, as is typical in our collaborative venture. You folks make the program work from semester to semester, and we appreciate that. Good luck in your classes!

Coaching...

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sign of this is the peppering of phrases such as sort of, probably, or possibly. I approach this issue, by explaining that these words are obvious signs of uncertainty. I then demonstrate this by an example in which every sentence contains one of these doubtful words. The students quickly understand my

point.

Often, the students present a very vague argument with little or no support from the text. I then ask extremely specific questions that range from basic to almost ridiculous. This devil's advocate tactic often produces a rise in the students, causing them to explain the reasoning be-

hind their position. Once that occurs, I simply say, "That's what you need to write."

Athletes' lack in confidence can also be seen in their body language and attitude during a conference. As the conference begins, the students seem shy or even uninterested. They usually have their arms crossed and sit

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And from the WAC Fellows Coordinator

When I first heard about Writing Across the Curriculum, 10 years ago, I didn't foresee that it would become such a part of my life... My first experience was researching and writing a booklet for professors at VCU, describing "writing to learn" activities that professors in various disciplines could use to get students engaged in the content of their courses. Since then, when teaching

writing, I have used these techniques myself and found them to be almost revolutionary. I have moved, in WAC lingo, from "the sage on the stage" to "guide on the side"

I really enjoy working with others who have the same experience with writing in the classroom. As I was reminded at the Spillman Symposium that Joe and I recently attended, WAC people tend to be not just thoughtful writers, but also dedicated teachers. I would like to hear from oth-

ers in the University of Richmond community who have had experiences with writing that have affected their teaching and/or learning. The essays in this first newsletter by Scott Allison and Brandon Cox are excellent examples of the exciting things going on at University of Richmond that the WAC program facilitates. Call me at x6432 or e-mail me (tdolson@richmond.edu) with any thoughts you have about this newsletter, or suggestions for the ones to follow.

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far enough away from me that they cannot see the paper. I usually begin the session with an informal conversation to relieve the tension. I start critiquing the paper with questions. This causes the students to move closer and become part of the conference. It is also helpful to relate per-

sonal experiences with writing to emphasize that they are not inferior.

Stereotypically, athletes exude self-confidence. However, this confidence does not always carry over into their academic lives. These students have the ability to be good writers. They just need some assurance and encouragement.

WRITING across the Curriculum

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