

TIME TO WRITE

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LESS GRADING AND MORE LEARNING: MAKING GROUP WRITING PROJECTS SUCCESSFUL IN LARGE(R) CLASSES

Kathleen Daly
L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

Professor Ramzi Fawaz will admit that he hasn't always been a fan of group writing assignments: "For many years, I was extremely suspicious of group activity and group work because I've always felt that they were disorganized, that students didn't listen to each other, that some students took up the slack for others."

However, while completing his postdoc at George Washington University, Fawaz found himself with a lot of students and not a lot of time: "I wanted to reduce the amount of grading that I was doing while still maintaining my commitment to teaching with writing." Then, a colleague recommended that he try group writing assignments.



Professor Ramzi Fawaz
Department of English

Key to his approach is forming groups early on—and staying committed to them: "The beauty of getting students in groups at the very beginning is that they get to know each other and they make friends. They learn to trust each other and they break the habit of believing that they, as individuals, will be stuck doing all the work. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses, they build a rapport, and, once we get to the final assignment, they are ready to go."

One semester, Fawaz waited until he assigned the final project to put students into groups. Without having experience reading and discussing each other's work, these students had difficulty producing the same kind of high-quality, synthetic papers that Fawaz had come to expect from previous semesters.

“ I wanted to reduce the amount of grading that I was doing while still maintaining my commitment to teaching with writing. ”

Fawaz was curious, but still suspicious, so he did some research on the topic and found that "students learn exponentially more when working in groups than when working individually." For pedagogical and pragmatic reasons, Fawaz decided to give group writing a try. Not only did he re-design the final project in his 50-student course to be a group writing assignment, but he also revised the other writing assignments in the course so that they were "inflected by group work from the beginning."

Scaffolding Assignments to Build Trust

Now in his third year as an Assistant Professor in the English Department specializing in Queer Theory and American Studies, Fawaz is still committed to assigning group papers. From his English 177: American Fantasy class with 350 students, to his English 457: America in the 1900s class with 35 students, Fawaz makes group writing a priority.

When putting students into groups, Fawaz stresses that "groups should be made up of between three and five members (with four members being ideal) in order to encourage collaboration across multiple skill sets and levels."

During the first eight weeks of the semester, students complete multiple short, individual writing assignments and receive feedback on drafts from their group members. After completing the individual writing assignments, students begin working in groups on a final collaborative writing assignment. This group project is broken down into two "versions" of the same paper: a shorter draft of the paper and a full-length final version of the paper.

For an example of a collaborative writing assignment used in Fawaz's large introductory literature course, see Figure 1 on page 2.

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LESS GRADING AND MORE LEARNING: MAKING GROUP WRITING PROJECTS SUCCESSFUL IN LARGE(R) CLASSES

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Loosening Assignments to Thicken Learning

For all of his courses, Fawaz designs deliberately open-ended assignments so that students, both as individuals and as a group, have to think critically about their approach. Fawaz explains, "Less structured assignments thicken the level of activity involved in executing the assignment."

Because students must rely on their groups rather than their instructor to interpret the assignments, students have to become more actively engaged with their group members throughout the writing process.

The necessity of collaboration is not always evident when students first begin working on their group projects. By emphasizing early on that final papers are expected to be consistent and cohesive, Fawaz is able to guide students toward more

collaborative work: "Although responsibilities are delegated to individual members, the groups come to realize that they have to work collectively to create a synthetic paper."

Fawaz's approach to responding to and evaluating group writing assignments helps emphasize the necessity of collaboration among group members. Fawaz stresses the importance of meeting with groups after they have completed the initial five-page draft of the final project: "Providing groups with verbal feedback as they move forward allows students to see the value of working together throughout the writing process."

Although group writing assignments do reduce the amount of time spent grading, Fawaz explains, they require planning and integration to be successful: "It takes a lot of care, thought, and design to make group work work." •

“ Less structured assignments thicken the level of activity involved in executing the assignment. ”

Figure 1 | Collaborative Essay Assignment Description for English 177

For this final paper, you will write a ten-page collaborative essay with your group members analyzing a single cultural object (movie, book, or graphic fiction) that we have not discussed in class. I have included a list of possible texts to study below and only one group will be allowed to analyze each option. You may approach the text you choose from any scholarly angle and focus on any aspect of the text as long as it relates to the key themes of this course and has something to do with fantasy. The essay must also include the following three components:

1. A historical assessment of the text at hand (the historical context in which it was made and/or discussion of the historical moment the text is set in).
2. An extended analysis of the text itself that uses the historical context and outside scholarly sources to unpack its content.
3. At least two scholarly sources (one from our class and one that you find on your own) that you use to analyze the text.

You should not approach these three components as a list or an organizing structure for the paper. Rather, they should all be synthetically woven together. You will need to find scholarship that helps you situate the text in its historical moment as well as an outside scholarly source that is more theoretical or conceptual. You will develop this paper in parts. Your group will start by developing a short proposal describing your projected argument and plan for organizing and executing the paper; your group will then produce a five-page rough draft version of the longer paper; finally, you will complete and submit the final paper. The due dates of these various components will be decided by your TA. This is not a traditional research paper, which means you do not need to conduct extensive outside research on the text beyond what is being asked here.

All members of the group will receive the same grade, meaning that you must all equally contribute to the completion of the paper. You must decide amongst yourselves who will do what (or else equally engage in all activities simultaneously). Collaborative writing comes in many forms; you may all wish to write different portions of the paper on your own and then synthesize them. Alternately, you may wish to write it up together. There are many options and it is up to you to delegate responsibilities. When you turn in the final paper, you will also turn in a self- AND peer-assessment statement where you will discuss what you contributed to the paper, what you think you did best (and what you could continue to work on), and how you think your peers did in contributing to the project.

CPR IN THE CLASSROOM: IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING WITH CALIBRATED PEER REVIEW

Kathleen Daly

L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum



Professor Judith Burstyn
Department of Chemistry

For the past three years, Professor Judith Burstyn and Professor John Moore have been using CPR in Chemistry 311: Chemistry Across the Periodic Table, a mid-level, inorganic chemistry course.

Don't worry—it's not the kind of CPR you might be familiar with. In Burstyn and Moore's class, CPR refers to "Calibrated Peer Review." Created in 1997 by UCLA faculty Orville Chapman and Arlene Russell, CPR is an online program that helps instructors teach students how to be effective reviewers of their peers' papers. When used in

conjunction with carefully designed assignments and discussions about giving effective feedback, CPR can help increase student writing skills and reviewing abilities.

Performing CPR: How Calibrated Peer Review Works

With CPR, students begin by reading their instructor's assignment instructions, drafting their papers, and submitting their work through the program.

Students are then presented with three calibration papers and related calibration questions, which are entered into the program by the course instructor. Calibration papers consist of three different versions of the same paper, each of varying quality. The high-, average-, and low-quality (what Burstyn calls "the good, the bad, and the ugly") sample papers are responses to the assignment that have been evaluated by the instructor using the calibration questions. Calibration questions help students learn about the content, genre, structure, and style of the assigned paper.

For each of the three calibration papers, students answer the calibration questions and assign a rating. CPR then assigns a reviewer competency index based on a comparison of the student review to the instructor review of each paper.

After completing the calibration, students are given access to three of their classmates' papers (randomly assigned and anonymous), which they review and rate using the calibration questions. Students are then presented with their own papers, which they review and rate according to the same guidelines. Students are graded on how well their reviews and ratings align with those of their peers.

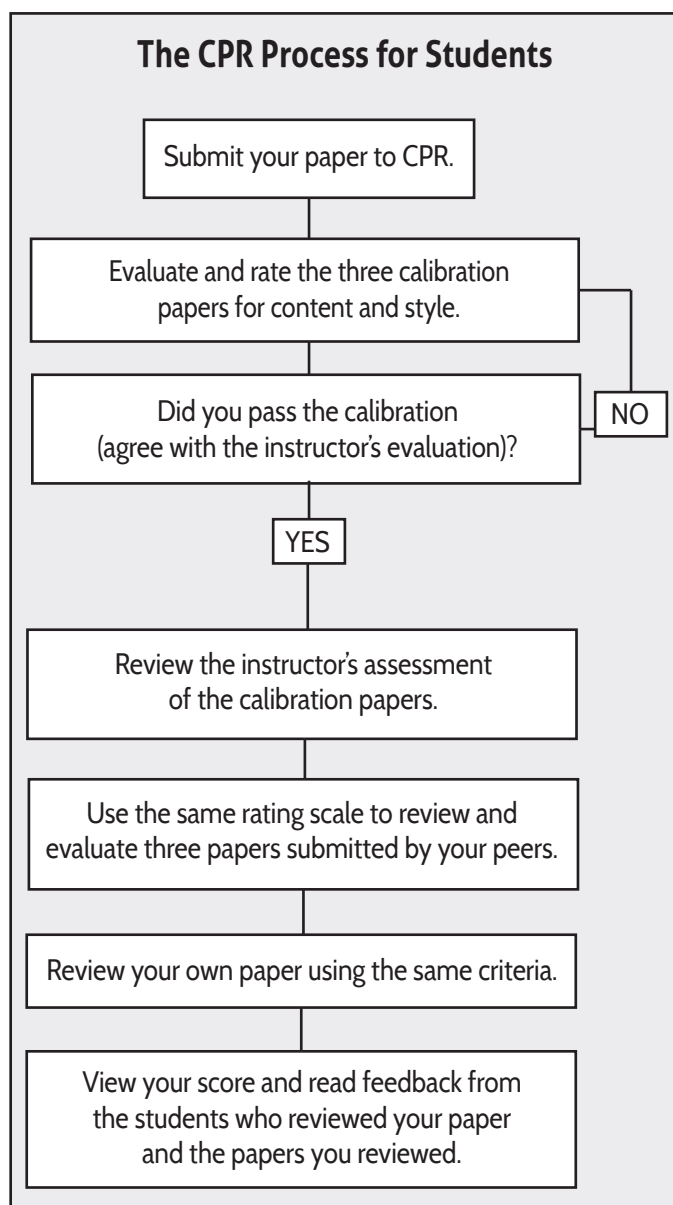
Instructors can use CPR to deepen student understanding of effective feedback strategies. Calibration questions and the instructor evaluation of the calibration papers help demonstrate what feedback should look like. With the newest version of CPR, instructors can also give feedback to students about their feedback.

Student Success with CPR in Chemistry 311

Chemistry 311, which Burstyn and Moore teach with a team of two to three graduate teaching assistants, draws 60-95 students each semester, ranging from sophomores to seniors. Burstyn and Moore had heard of successes with the CPR program, so in 2012 they decided to give it a shot. Burstyn explains, "We wanted to ease the grading burden for TAs, but we also wanted to assess whether CPR improved student writing."

And they weren't disappointed: "We were so impressed by what CPR did that we incorporated an additional CPR assignment to the course design."

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Adapted from Calibrated Peer Review. "CPR Flowchart." 2015.

TURNING FRUSTRATION INTO CONFIDENCE IN HISTORY 102

Kathleen Daly

L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum



Professor Will Jones
Department of History

I sat down with history professor Will Jones to talk about his course, History 102: The U.S. Since 1865, and the writing assignments he uses to help students learn to think and write effectively in what is often a new discipline for them.

In Jones' course, which draws around 350 undergraduates each semester, students write four to five short (two-page) papers before writing one larger (eight-page) final paper. While each of the shorter

assignments poses a different question, the genre and principal objectives for each paper are the same: "Write a historical essay in which you state a thesis and then provide evidence from course readings and lectures to support your argument." The stakes start out low with the first assignment, but they gradually become higher with each iteration of the assignment (see below for a visual representation of this assignment structure).

After completing all of the short papers, students are assigned a lengthier final paper that is heavily weighted and requires more complex research and analysis. However, the final paper is the same genre as the earlier, shorter papers. All assignments have the same rigorous evaluation criteria.

Over the course of the semester, Jones sees "significant improvement in both students' writing capabilities and confidence levels." During our discussion, he explained the reasoning behind his course design and offered some key principles for using a similar assignment structure.

Assignments and Grade Distribution in History 102

Short Papers				Final Paper	Participation
1	2	3	4		
5%	10%	15%	20%	30%	20%

Sample Short Paper Assignment

How useful as a historical document is the Camp Randall Memorial Arch? What does it tell you about the causes and effects of the Civil War, and what does it leave out? What does it reveal about the period in which it was erected? Your answer should refer to specific features on the monument, and draw on lectures and the assigned readings for context. (two pages)

Q: Would you tell me about the course in which you use this assignment structure?

A: History 102 is a large lecture course that I teach with a team of three TAs. One of the challenges of large lecture courses is that they draw a really large spectrum of students, ranging from first-year students to seniors.

Because this is an entry-level course for the history major, I have a lot of students who are or are considering majoring in history. Additionally, there are usually quite a few people coming from education who are interested in teaching history. For some students, however, this is the only history course they will take.

So I'm working with a large group of students with a range of different agendas and interests. They also have different experiences with and attitudes toward writing.

Q: What initially motivated you to use multiple iterations of the same assignment with increasing stakes?

A: For starters, many students in the course lacked familiarity with the disciplinary genres they were being asked to write in.

Because of this, students were frustrated when it came time to write. I could try to explain over and over how to write a historical essay, but I knew that students actually needed to do this type of writing in order to understand it. That being said, I didn't want to assign a paper that didn't count toward their grades, but I also didn't want students' grades to go down because they were unfamiliar with the genre.

Q: How did you implement this new assignment structure into the course?

A: These changes came in two different stages. Six years ago, I began assigning multiple papers that repeated the same format. Students were getting better at writing as the semester progressed, but they were still showing a lot of frustration initially with the earlier assignments.

Two years ago, I took the second step, which was to weight the assignments differently so that students had the ability to hone their skills without the pressure of heavily weighted assignments. The quality of writing increased dramatically, the level of frustration decreased, and students became more and more confident with their writing early on in the semester.

Q: What advice would you have for instructors looking to use a similar assignment structure in their course?

A: It's so important for instructors to recognize that students are working with disciplinary genres. Yes, these genres engage writing skills that translate into other forms of writing, but they are also discipline specific.

In my course, it's my responsibility to emphasize the structure of the essay, to explain what a thesis is, to discuss ways to introduce an argument, and to coach students in how to provide evidence. It's also important that I am explicit with students about how to transfer the key characteristics from earlier paper. •

INTRODUCING THE NEW ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF WAC



Kathleen Daly

Kathleen Daly was ecstatic when she was invited to become the Assistant Director of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum in May 2015. Kathleen values her work with teachers seeking to enhance how writing figures into their course designs, conferencing strategies, and daily teaching practices. She is grateful for the support she has received from the most recent Assistant Director of WAC, Elisabeth Miller.

Kathleen Daly is a PhD student in Composition and Rhetoric in the English department. She holds a BA in Technical Writing from the University of North Texas and an MA in English Studies with an emphasis in Rhetoric from Illinois State University, where she spent two years teaching introductory composition courses. At UW-Madison, she has taught introductory composition and Comm-B writing courses and, for the past three semesters, she has tutored in the Writing Center, where she has especially enjoyed working with students from disciplines outside her own.

This semester, Kathleen has had the pleasure of working with faculty and TAs in plant pathology, social work, political science, Biocore, journalism, gender and women's studies, and French and Italian, as well as in Chadbourne Residential College and with Undergraduate Research Scholars.

Kathleen would love to talk with you about designing effective writing assignments, responding to and evaluating student writing, planning class sessions on writing, developing peer review assignments, thinking through conferencing strategies, motivating students to engage in deep reading practices, and more! Please feel free to contact Kathleen at kadaly@wisc.edu.

Announcing our Spring 2016 Workshops for Faculty, Instructional Staff, and TAs!

- Five Secrets for Designing Effective Writing Assignments •
- Designing Writing Assignments That Motivate Deep Reading •
- Office Hours and One-on-One Student Conferences: Helping Students Take Ownership of Their Writing •
- Strategies for Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing •
- Writing Recommendation Letters •

For more information or to register, go to the Workshops page at writing.wisc.edu or email Kathleen Daly at kadaly@wisc.edu

CPR IN THE CLASSROOM: IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING WITH CALIBRATED PEER REVIEW

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In Chemistry 311, students use CPR for four of the nine writing assignments, including their second lab report: "We initially had delayed the introduction of CPR until later in the semester. However, because the improvement in student writing was so sharp when they did CPR, we thought we were doing the students a disservice by not implementing it early on."

Burstyn and Moore introduce CPR to their students in the context of peer review. Burstyn believes that seeing their peers' work is the most effective element of CPR: "I've seen really big improvements in student writing through this process. It is key that students get to see each other's work." CPR allows students to deepen their understanding of course content by seeing how others are engaging with the material.

Burstyn also sees the value of CPR for helping students develop academic and professional skills that extend beyond the scope of her course: "No matter what context students end up working in, there will always be an aspect of review." By going through

“I've seen really big improvements in student writing through this process. It is key that students get to see each other's work.”

the CPR process, students can become more attuned to questions of audience and rhetorical purpose.

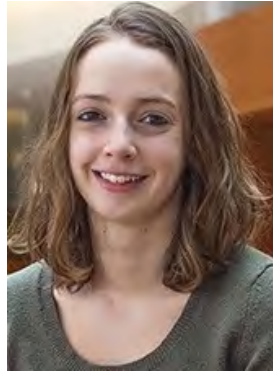
Of course, peer feedback on writing will never reflect the depth of knowledge that experienced TAs or instructors will bring when they evaluate student papers. In Burstyn and Moore's course, TAs still play an important role in evaluating student writing by giving feedback on five of the students' writing assignments.

For more information about CPR, see the *Calibrated Peer Review* at UCLA website at <http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/Home.aspx>.

THANKS TO OUR COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



Sarah Dimick
English



Taylor Hanley
Psychology



Scott Hartman
Biology



Rebecca Pettyjohn
Library and Information
Studies

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2015 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 70 new Communication-B TAs from across campus.
Thanks for your incredible work!

Our mailing labels reflect current personnel listings, and therefore we cannot make changes or deletions. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.



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