

TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LETTERS & SCIENCE PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM
THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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LEARNING ABOUT RADIOACTIVITY THROUGH STORIES

STEPHANIE WHITE

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

There's a lot of buzz on campus about *Radioactive*, the Go Big Read book this year. But using stories to teach about radioactive substances isn't new to Professor Catherine Middlecamp—she's been doing it for years. As she describes her favorite assignment, she links her fingers together to show how people and radioactivity are inseparable in the stories she asks her undergraduates to write. "I tell my students, 'Go look all over the planet to find me a story that involves people and radioactive substances.' And they do." Then they write a five-page narrative about what they've found and have an hour of class time to engage their classmates in learning about the story.

But before her students jump into the extensive research, writing, and revision this project requires, Middlecamp offers them examples of stories about people and radioactive substances. "I model the assignment with two books: *The Radium Girls* and *The Firecracker Boys*." She explains, "If you took out the people, you wouldn't have a story. If you took out the radioactive substances, you wouldn't have a story. You need both."

Yet the assignment isn't as simple as giving students two examples and describing the interconnectedness of people and radioactive substances. "We're taking a romp through the biological effects of radioactivity," Middlecamp says. "We're talking about decay, half-life, why this place on earth is radioactive and this one's not. Then, once they've learned the radioactivity content, they have to apply it to a new context." This is where



Professor Catherine Middlecamp

Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the Integrated Liberal Studies Program

the narrative comes in, which for Middlecamp is vital to students' learning. In order to write about course concepts at work in the situation they're researching, they must completely grasp the material from the class. Middlecamp describes one student's attempt to write about plutonium without fully understanding it: "I said to him, 'Until you know what plutonium is, you can't tell this story. So go find out.' And then he did."

Middlecamp has built in steps and support to help her students succeed, which she balances with encouragement towards autonomy. "The assignment works because there's scaffolding first, with a lot of false starts, and then I throw them out of the sandbox. But it's still supported every step of the way with feedback from me and from the Writing Fellows." She begins by having students write a two-page response to one of the course readings, to which she and a Writing Fellow give feedback. This low-stakes assignment offers students valuable guidance for writing in the course. From there, they move into the final project, for which the stakes are higher.

In the beginning stages of the narrative project, students talk one-on-one with Middlecamp, narrowing and refining their chosen topic. They then submit a draft of their story, and they receive feedback on this draft from Middlecamp and from a Writing Fellow (see "Writing Fellows at UW-Madison" in this issue). Next, they revise and submit a final draft of their story. Finally, they share their findings with their peers in the form of a major presentation. "It's high-stakes at the end, when students have to teach a class for an hour—

In this issue

Learning about Radioactivity through Stories
page 1

Post/Edit/Comment: Blogs in French
page 2

What Dinner Means: Ethnographic Writing in Folklore
page 3

Writing Fellows at UW-Madison
page 5

Thanks to Communication-B TA Fellows
page 6

Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Continued on page 5

POST/EDIT/COMMENT: BLOGS IN FRENCH

BENOÎT LECLERCQ

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH AND ITALIAN

I have often been frustrated by the amount of material that I must leave out in a foreign language curriculum. In French 227: Exploring French, for example, students must read and write extensively in French, and they must systematically review the intricacies of French grammar. But they also work with a variety of cultural texts, including poetry, short stories, articles, movies, commercials, and art. Indeed, throughout the course, the main focus is culture. In other words, students need to become not only proficient in the target language, but also attuned to French culture so they can understand and discuss what is at play in the francophone world. This represents a heavy responsibility for language students—and for their instructors. Formal papers, presentations, readings, quizzes, and other assignments keep students busy enough, and yet the lack of a more tailored cultural element left me unsatisfied. I wanted to do *more* in my French 227 class.

First of all, I wanted my students to be exposed to a little bit of everything when it comes to francophone culture. But how could I justify tackling Ousmane Sembene and Senegalese cinema while opting out of the study of Assia Djebar and Algerian literature, for example? In addition, my students come to this class with such different trajectories and experiences of French that I wanted to encourage students to teach each other and see their classmates as allies in collaborative learning. Finally, I wanted to engage students by tapping into their own interests. How could I get them excited about other cultures at 8:50 a.m.? These dilemmas were enough to frustrate the most motivated of instructors, and, worse, I worried that disgruntled students might feel their own academic interests were being ignored.

I hit on a solution when I decided to camouflage a new assignment as a light social activity. I wanted to let students discuss and connect their own interests with our in-class material, in the target language, when and wherever they wanted to. A blog proved to be the tool we needed.



TA Benoît Leclercq
Department of French
and Italian

Continued on page 4

POSTS BROWSE HELP MY ACCOUNT LEARN@UW LOG OUT

Posts

Un petit jeu

Mon, 12/05/2011 - 21:52 — Csizmadia-Katheri...

Je lisais Le Monde aujourd'hui et j'ai trouvé les jeux qui sont facile mais qui aident en apprendre le français. Je préfère ce jeu parce que c'est un peu comme roulette de fortune mais c'est aussi mystérieux parce que vous devez décoder les mots, mot par mot. Pour moi j'ai dû cliquer "facile" parce que c'est très avancée sur quelque chose d'autre. Mais les phrases sont très philosophique aussi. Si vous voulez passer le temps, je recommande ce jeux. (Pour moi, il marche seulement sur Firefox, donc utilisez Firefox!)

Amusez-vous

1 comment | 1 new comment | 5 reads

Les Phrases Drôles en Français

Mon, 12/05/2011 - 21:49 — Everson-Vanessa Lynn

Voici une liste de vingt phrases en français que les américains peuvent trouver un peu bizarre.

<http://www.france-travel-secrets.com/funny-french-phrases.html>

Ah, la vache! (lit: oh, the cow!): Oh my God!
À l'eau de rose (lit: with rose water): Sentimental/soppy
À toutes les sauces (lit: with all the sauces): In all sorts of ways
Au poil (lit: to a hair): Perfect; flawless

8 comments | 8 new comments | 12 reads



Students post on the French 227 course blog about a range of topics, such as an online game for learning French and a list of funny phrases in French.

WHAT DINNER MEANS: ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING IN FOLKLORE

STEPHANIE WHITE

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

It's not every day that an undergraduate invites herself to her instructor's house for dinner. But Ruth Olson wasn't surprised when a student did just that. Olson, who is the Associate Director of the UW-Madison Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures, had just been talking with her Introduction to Folklore class about the next writing assignment, for which students were required to take the role of participant-observer at someone's home while their host prepared and ate a meal. This was the first time a student had asked Olson to be the research subject, but she was happy to comply. The next week, Olson and her husband welcomed the student to their home for dinner. "Of course she got way more info than she ever needed, because we were having a blast," Olson says.



Dr. Ruth Olson
Center for the Study of
Upper Midwestern Cultures

Such unusual events become commonplace with this ethnographic research and writing assignment. "It's really playful," Olson laughs. "I've read essays that students have written about having their roommates cook for them. And they lord it over their roommates while they take notes about them." Of course, the assignment achieves much more than play—it allows students to learn about the methods of folklore research. In this Communication-B course, which enrolls undergraduates at all levels, the course goals include developing students' description skills, critical thinking abilities, and information-gathering strategies, both in the library and beyond. This project—one of ten short writing assignments that students complete over the course of the semester—helps achieve all of these goals.

As participant-observers, students take rigorous notes that include a schema of the kitchen and a map of the movements made during meal preparation, as well as a record of the ingredients used, the steps involved in preparation, the interactions of the food preparers, and the way the meal is served. As Olson puts it, "They see in action what their hosts believe about food." They must then analyze and synthesize those findings into a 300- to 500-word essay, explaining what their observations reveal about customs and beliefs connected to food.

According to Olson, writing is essential to this endeavor: "If you do folklore research, you've got to have field notes—videorecording and photos are not enough. And as you do that notetaking, you start to see patterns." In other words, writing about a subject while observing it is a necessary part of the research process. And writing about observations later on is, too. "Writing is extremely important to folklore because you don't often know what you're seeing or understanding until you write about it." Through the writing process, Olson argues, student researchers make meaning out of what they've observed. "It's about making concrete what you understand about something."

Throughout the semester, students submit their short writing assignments to Olson, and she provides them with feedback. Then students choose four of their ten short assignments to revise into a five-page essay; many choose to rework their ethnography of a meal. During this revision, Olson explains, students learn that rewriting uncovers deeper observations and findings. "In folklore, it's not just writing—it's rewriting, and then writing again." For students who have never done this kind of research, the amount of rewriting needed may be surprising. But as they revise, students recognize and tap into observations about many things: the positionality of researchers, lore of family recipes, use of certain ingredients, or family roles. For example, they might "begin to see what roles certain people take in meal preparation as compared to others," Olson says. Ultimately, "they see an expression of values at work."

“ Writing is extremely important to folklore because you don't often know what you're seeing or understanding until you write about it. ”

Multiple research and writing assignments over the semester help students practice and get feedback on their observation and description skills, their analysis skills, and their understandings of what it means to practice folklore research. "They become comfortable with fieldwork in the context of this manageable event, and they see how rich a very ordinary occurrence can be," Olson explains. As they write and rewrite about the everyday practices in their own lives and in the lives of people around them, they gain new insights into what it means to take part in cultures. "Students recognize that *they* have culture," Olson says. "And that's important." •

Announcing our spring 2013 workshops for faculty, instructional staff, and TAs!

- **Designing Effective Writing Assignments**
- **Conferencing with Students about Papers in Progress**
- **Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing**
- **Writing Letters of Recommendation**

For more information or to register, go to the Workshops page at writing.wisc.edu or email Stephanie White at smwhite2@wisc.edu.

POST/EDIT/COMMENT: BLOGGING IN FRENCH *continued*

Continued from page 2

JE SUIS ALLÉE À EAU CLAIRE
Everson-Vanessa Lynn - 11/30/2011 - 21:05
Je suis allée à Eau Claire une fois quand j'étais petite, mais je ne me souviens pas beaucoup. Mais il semble mignon dans la photo!

[delete](#) [edit](#) [reply](#)



EST-CE QUE TU SAIS QU'IL
Kissinger-Herschel - 12/10/2011 - 13:28
Sara, Est-ce que tu sais qu'il existe une réserve amérindienne à Lac du Flambeau ? Mon ami y habite !

[delete](#) [edit](#) [reply](#)



JE VISITAIS EAU CLAIRE TROIS
Andersen-William ... - 12/11/2011 - 15:02



Students can bring their own personalities to profile pictures and comments.

Using an L&S Learning Support Services Collaborative Site, I set up a blog for our class. After creating a personal profile, students were asked to create one post per week, including articles, links, pictures, or videos and a few descriptive sentences. They also were required to engage each other through commenting on their posts. If this sounds very much like a Facebook interface, that's no accident.

I described it to my students like this: Do politics get you excited? The Sécurité Sociale might be intriguing. You prefer architecture? Notre-Dame and the Viaduc de Millau could be worth your while. Lead a sybaritic lifestyle? Soufflé and Belgian chocolates await. In other words, while I might not be versed in the latest sociocultural trends, my students are, so I turned to them for this precious information and allowed them to take the lead on guiding written conversations in French.

My pedagogical objectives were the five Cs: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The

blog helped with all of these goals—and students had a lot of autonomy in achieving them. Digging into their own knowledge, skills, and interests, students used our class blog as a forum to share and discuss what *they* felt was worth their time. The ensuing back-and-forth comments allowed for additional explanations and discussions, both in and outside the classroom. The blog effectively turned my students into teachers who facilitated exchanges and connected a mass of outside information to our course. And the format allowed me to join the conversations in a virtual setting that was less rigid while still allowing me to actively teach proficiency.

Indeed, this assignment offered me a number of benefits as the instructor. The technology did not require constant oversight from me, which made it a simple addition to the course components. Also, features like a tag cloud, where keywords from the various posts appear at the bottom of the

screen, and a site statistics page were useful for tracking what students were posting about and for grading student participation. In addition, the most compelling posts helped me think about how to (re)design and update the curriculum.

Overall, the blog in French 227 contributed to a more relaxed learning environment, which in turn helped the students feel comfortable and more engaged. The occasional typos on-screen did bother the grader in me, but complete accuracy was not my goal. Besides, students learned from each other through observing how their peers used grammar correctly. Students displayed enthusiasm online, as well as in our classroom, where conversations were initiated and fueled. And, amazingly, not one student complained in course evaluations about the “extra work” the blog required. The degree of students’ involvement and the amount of meaningful writing in the target language proved this experiment in new media writing successful. ●

“Digging into their own knowledge, skills, and interests, students used our class blog as a forum to share and discuss what *they* felt was worth their time.”

[POSTS](#) [BROWSE](#) [HELP](#) [MY ACCOUNT](#) [LEARN@UW](#) [LOG OUT](#)

Posts
Le Petit Renne au Nez Rouge
Mon, 12/12/2011 - 10:18 — Lenz-Blair Elizabeth



C'est presque Noël, et je veux partager une chanson de Noël avec vous. Ce vidéo est une chorale qui chante la chanson populaire, "Le Petit Renne au Nez Rouge." Les petits enfants sont très mignons!

Quelle est votre chanson préféré de Noël?

[3 comments](#) [3 new comments](#) [5 reads](#)

Students can post visual, text, video, and linked content, such as this link to a video of a children's choir.

WRITING FELLOWS AT UW-MADISON

To learn more about Writing Fellows or apply to work with a Fellow in a course you are teaching in Spring 2013, please contact us.

Emily Hall, Director of the Writing Fellows Program

ebhall@wisc.edu
263-3754

or

Brad Hughes, Director of the Writing Center and the Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

bthughes@wisc.edu
263-3823

Writing Fellows are talented, carefully selected, and extensively trained undergraduates who serve as peer writing tutors in classes across the College of Letters & Science. The Fellows make thoughtful comments on drafts of assigned papers and hold conferences with students to help them make smart, significant revisions to their papers *before* the papers are turned in for a grade. Building on the special trust that peers can share, Fellows help students not only to write better papers but also to take themselves more seriously as writers and thinkers.

Fellows are equipped to tutor writing across the L&S curriculum. In the past, they have worked with students in astronomy, Afro-American studies, history, philosophy, political science, chemistry, classics, English, women's studies, sociology, zoology, mathematics, psychology, geography, and more.

Professor Katherine Cramer Walsh, who has worked with Writing Fellows multiple times in her political science courses, says:

"The Writing Fellows are outstanding in their ability to motivate students to adhere to the assignment. In particular, they make sure the students state and develop arguments in their papers and push them to address the readings and important themes from the course."

You are eligible to apply to work with a Writing Fellow if you:

- are a faculty or academic staff member teaching a course with at least two writing assignments, with between 12 and 40 students enrolled in the course
- are willing to adjust your syllabus to allow time for revision and to require that all enrolled students work with the assigned Fellow(s)
- are willing to meet regularly with the assigned Fellow(s) to discuss assignments

The number of Writing Fellows is limited, so the sooner you let us know of your interest, the better!

LEARNING ABOUT RADIOACTIVITY THROUGH STORIES *continued*

Continued from page 1

and they can't lecture, because I've modeled otherwise." Instead, students include interactive and discussion-based activities to get their classmates involved in the story.

The stories students uncover are fascinating. As Middlecamp puts it, "The assignment has a lot of choice, so it lets students make it worth their time, and they come up with all sorts of things." Students have dealt with social justice, nuclear testing, the arts, and more. One student wrote about indigenous Sami herders in Norway whose caribou meat became radioactive after the Chernobyl disaster. Others have written about the effects of nuclear testing on people living in the Marshall Islands and in Alaska, and still others have focused on films, like *Dr. Strangelove* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. "Another introduced her classmates to Tony Price—he was an artist, a metal sculptor who did sculptures for the peace movement," Middlecamp adds, "I knew nothing about him before this class."

It's clear why Middlecamp never gets bored with this assignment and why she teaches with it in so many different classes. She has included it in an introductory-level course in Integrated Liberal Studies, a capstone course in the Nelson Institute, an intermediate Chemistry course that fulfilled an Ethnic Studies requirement, and a FIG (First-Year Interest Group) course. The versatile assignment provides students a way to learn about the implications of nuclear science in everyday situations. And it helps them take hold of what they're learn-

ing. The narrative approach "takes the anxiety out of really nuclear stuff," says Middlecamp, and shows her students that they, too, can make claims about the effects of radioactive substances on people.

That learning makes an impact beyond the semester. "It helps students become lifelong learners, meaning that when they leave the course they want to learn more." This lifelong learning isn't merely a wish. Middlecamp explains, "I see evidence of that in my inbox. I still get emails from students that say, 'Did you see this?' They've read a news story or heard about a new development. And it's all connected to what we did in class."

"I still get emails from students that say, 'Did you see this?'"

But Middlecamp suggests another reason, beyond the assignment itself, for her students' deep engagement. She makes clear to students that she demands high levels of research, writing, and communicating in her class. "It's fairly intrusive teaching," she explains. "You're just in here to get a C? No, not in here. Go somewhere else." By giving extensive feedback on a draft of her students' written assignments, using her course readings and teaching to model what she expects from students, and making her expectations clear, Middlecamp raises the bar for her students. As she shows me a pair of earrings that were a gift from a student because they're radioactive, she turns out the lights and hunts for an ultraviolet light to make sure I get the full effect. Her energy and devotion to her subject—and to her students—are clear. ●

THANKS TO COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



KEVIN MULLEN
ENGLISH



ZACHARY DEQUATTRO
FOREST AND WILDLIFE
ECOLOGY



ROBIN FORBES-LORMAN
PSYCHOLOGY



ZACH BAUMGART
SOCIOLOGY

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Comm-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2012 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 65 new Comm-B TAs from across campus.

Thanks for your incredible work!

**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM
IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM
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