

TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Supporting faculty, staff, and teaching assistants as they teach with writing

150 ASSISTANT PROFESSORS, 67 DEPARTMENTS: WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN MTLE

By Dr. Christian Castro

Christian Castro is the Director of Madison Teaching and Learning Excellence (MTLE) Program, which supports early-career faculty to become fast and effective starters in teaching.

Every educator I have ever met agrees that writing is an essential skill students need to develop and refine during their time in college. But agreeing with this idea on a philosophical level is one thing; integrating writing into one's course is entirely another, especially if there is a misperception that the subject matter may not lend itself to writing activities. I have heard this struggle from seasoned educators.

Imagine how much more overwhelming it is for new assistant professors who are just getting started at a research-intensive institution like ours. These early-career faculty members are well prepared to hit the ground running on their research; yet they are also expected to teach well, and this includes understanding that writing is not just a skill that students need to develop, but a powerful – indeed high impact – formative practice that can deepen students' understanding of the discipline.



Dr. Christian Castro
Director, MTLE Program

ing, over 150 assistant professors from 67 departments, across eight schools/colleges, have graduated from MTLE. Throughout the two-semester program, fellows meet weekly with a cohort of eight to ten assistant professors and expert facilitators and learn to apply cutting-edge, evidence-based practices to enhance student learning in their classes. MTLE has partnered with the University's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program for this program to share best practices for designing writing activities that promote student learning.

The Role of WAC in MTLE

The MTLE curriculum is divided into eight four-week modules, with topics in the first semester spanning course design, assessment, and deep learning, and with writing across the curriculum and inclusive teaching in the second semester. The first semester focuses on teaching foundations; the second semester is highly practical and strategy driven.

The WAC module on writing and research assignments serves as a perfect, natural platform to integrate all concepts learned in the first semester—after all, well-designed research and writing assignments tap astutely into student motivation, engage them thoughtfully, and provide invaluable information on learning to the instructor and to the students.

Over the four weeks of the WAC module, fellows engage with scholarship for designing effective writing and research activities, outline a draft for an assignment in their courses, develop evaluation criteria, and work together with facilitators and other fellows to produce a close-to-final assignment they can pilot in their courses.

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Many, many thanks to Elise Gold and Jen Fandel for their careful proofreading and editing of this issue.

WRITING IN PSYCHOLOGY: A TOOL FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

By Professor Diane Gooding

Diane Gooding is a professor in the Department of Psychology. She directs The PATHS Lab, which focuses on schizophrenia and schizophrenia-spectrum disorders. Her research program encompasses early identification of psychotic disorders and the application of behavioral measures to identify at-risk populations. Professor Gooding was awarded a Phi Beta Kappa Teaching Award in 2015 and a Van Hise Distinguished Teaching Award in 2008.



Professor Diane Gooding
Department of Psychology

I try to use writing assignments in all of my courses in order to make abstract concepts and objective course work seem more personally relevant to my students. I do this in my large-enrollment classes, such as Introduction to Abnormal Psychology (Psychology 405), which ranges from approximately 250 to 300 students, and my capstone courses that have no more than 25 students.

I believe that when people have to sit down and write about something, it provides them with an opportunity to think more deeply about the topic. As Nelson Mandela once said "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Writing is one of the tools in the educator's toolkit.

An Extra-Credit Assignment in a Large Lecture Course

In Psychology 405, Introduction to Abnormal Psychology, I describe and discuss various forms of mental illness and reinforce the idea that mental health and mental illness lie on a continuum. Most importantly, while teaching students about etiology, epidemiology, symptoms, research, and treatment, I also provide students with a humanistic perspective on psychopathology. All the exams are multiple-choice, though I provide an extra-credit writing assignment (which, to date, 95% of the class opts to do). Students read an empirically based review regarding the social treatment of people with serious mental illness in the United States.

They are then asked, first, to summarize the three main points of the chapter in 300 words, and second, reflect upon aspects of the reading and share their reactions in no more than 500 words. This assignment seems to work especially well, given that the course consists of a large group of (about 300) students, with varying levels of experience writing, and at different stages of their undergraduate experience. It provides all students with an opportunity to practice their written communication skills. The assignment provides sufficient latitude for them to demonstrate their critical thinking and their personal values as they assert their positions in the second part of the assignment.

Perhaps most importantly, this writing assignment provides me with another way by which to inculcate the belief that people with mental illness are people first and defined by more than their disorder. The nice thing about this particular assignment is that students are told in advance that, for the second part, there are no right or wrong answers.

Rather, they are being graded on the thoughtfulness and persuasiveness of their argument. I noticed that adding that statement to the assignment resulted in a better quality of answers! An added bonus is that I co-wrote the chapter, so it is especially gratifying when students appear to respond to some of the issues raised and reflect it in their précis.

“Perhaps most importantly, this writing assignment provides me with another way by which to inculcate the belief that people with mental illness are... defined by more than their disorder.”

Critical Thinking and Group Writing in Small Courses

My small enrollment courses, such as Media and Mental Illness (MMI), are purposefully writing intensive. In my MMI course, students are asked to critically assess portrayals of mental illness in short stories, television programs, newspaper and magazine articles, and movies. These portrayals are viewed in light of the current scientific knowledge about these mental illnesses, as well as empirical research regarding stigma, social behavior, treatment, and statistical trends.

Some of the assignments are initially group based because one of the essential learning outcomes is to develop collaborative working skills. These group projects, called "Critical Thinking Exercises," are essentially shortened forms of their final project, which will be completed individually. There are a total of 8 Critical Thinking Exercises (CTEs). Rather than simply assigning the students papers and asking them to learn isolated facts, I ask them to learn the facts and then apply them to a particular form of media.

In the CTEs, students may be asked, first, to summarize major themes in an empirical article describing different attitudes towards people with mental illness, such

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as authoritarianism and benevolence. Throughout the course, I provide my students with a guided experience by which they learn how to perform discourse analysis. For example, we started out by reading one of my favorite short stories by J.D. Salinger, namely, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and we discussed it in the context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. That was the first day I taught the class about discourse analysis, foreshadowing, and the association between mental illness and violence. In a subsequent assignment, I then provided the class with newspaper and magazine articles and asked them to perform discourse analysis in a series of steps.

In another CTE, the students are asked to compare and contrast magazine coverage of similar issues (e.g., eating disorders, dissociative identity disorder), and, using discourse analysis, they are then asked to consider which attitudes are expressed in media portrayals. In this way, I "scaffold" these assignments into incremental steps. At each step, students are developing the necessary skills to produce their final projects.

Adding Complexity with Scaffolded Assignments

In my written feedback, I encourage students as they increasingly grow more adept in their use of evidence to support their assertions, and I remind them to cite their sources. These critical thinking exercises grow in complexity so that CTE#2 is more challenging than the first, and CTE #4 is more challenging than the previous three. For example, in the fifth CTE, the students must summarize the attitudes expressed in the media portrayal of homelessness among mentally ill people and then identify resources for homeless people, such as transitional housing. In this way, the group project involves research as well as writing.

This project is particularly meaningful for this class, because the students are all seniors, and this assignment is related to civic engagement. I am helping them to learn how to use evidence in order to build persuasive arguments. Students are aware that their final projects for the class entail viewing a film with a mentally ill character and critically evaluating it in terms of its portrayal of mental illness, according to a rubric that is available to them. Providing the rubric in advance assists the students in knowing what to include; hopefully they regard the final project as a continuation of the critical thinking exercises. In fact, it's simply a longer version of the final CTE!

Prompting Reflection in a Capstone Course

Students in my senior capstone class are also assigned a "reaction journal." In some ways, it may seem like poor planning on an instructor's part to assign 25 students an unlimited amount of pages to make frequent entries (as often as they'd like) in reaction to what they are learning, experiencing, and feeling in the class. However, my motivation for assigning a "reaction journal" was twofold: first, I thought that it would be helpful for those students who might be reticent to speak up in class but wished to connect with me and the material, because experience has taught me that talking and reading about mental illness is emotionally evocative; and, second, writing can be used to help students make connections with what they've learned in prior courses and the material in the current class.

Although students are encouraged to write whenever they wish in reaction to any class or whenever they think of something that reminds them of the class and its content, I typically send out reaction probes to stimulate thinking and writing. What I've learned from past semesters is that there is clear evidence of developmental change over 15 or 16 weeks of time.

“...writing can be used to help students make connections with what they've learned in prior courses and the material in the current class.”

Although initially many of the entries may express outrage or dismay at the stigmatizing portrayals of people with mental illness (and/or the people who work with them), there is typically a slowly growing awareness of agency — that is, students can speak out within their social network.

It is especially powerful when a student discloses a personal or family history of mental illness and finds a different meaning in that history going forward. Those are the times when the craft of teaching through writing seems most powerful.

Through the use of the reaction journals as well as the applied critical thinking exercises, I am also guiding them to see that what they learn in one context can be applied in different contexts, which, of course, is the crux of integrative learning. •

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN MTLE, CONT.

(continued from page 1)

A key success of this WAC module is that fellows learn to appreciate the power and value of writing activities regardless of their discipline. Careful exposure to the research literature, coupled with expert guidance from facilitators, yields amazing results: I am continually impressed by the creativity and authenticity of the writing assignments developed throughout this module, from industry research reports in engineering, to lab protocol revisions in physics, to art-viewing reflections in literature, to evidence-based practice briefs in teacher education, to letters in a foreign language addressed to friends abroad—the list could go on! I also find it inspiring to witness a rapid evolution in the fellows' ability to talk about the role of writing in teaching and learning: they move from "writing is a skill my students need to work on" to "writing is a practice I need to integrate in my teaching to deepen my students' understanding of the discipline." The WAC module is one of the highest-rated in the MTLE Program.

Testimonials from Faculty Participants: The WAC Module in MTLE

"I had never thought about using writing activities in my courses before, but I decided to try and asked my students to write about their process for solving a very complicated mathematical problem in engineering physics—it was amazing to read their responses. I had a window into their thinking that I had never had before, and I was able to tackle gaps in knowledge that I did not know existed. Frankly, I don't think I would have found out about their misunderstanding without this short writing activity."

"I have given so many writing projects in the past and had not thought about making them meaningful and authentic. I have really great ideas about topics that really matter, and I'm excited to assign those to students in future courses."

"I now realize the importance of transparency in my assignments and will present more clearly and explicitly to my students what I hope they will learn through the activities I ask them to do."

The Benefits of Individual Consultations in MTLE

Still, this success would not be possible without a critical component in the module: the individual consultations that fellows have with our facilitators, Brad Hughes (Director, WAC) and Sheila Stoeckel (Director, Library Teaching and Learning Programs). It is through these individual consultations that MTLE faculty dive deeper into their own individual needs and visions for their writing activities and eventually create impressive, smart, imaginative assignments. Fellows really treasure the opportunity to meet one on one with experts.

Testimonials from Faculty Participants: Individual WAC Consultations in MTLE

"Having the opportunity to meet individually with the instructor helped me break through and adapt a short writing exercise that was very useful in my statistics class."

"I was so obsessed with the grading process that I had completely missed the learning goals of my assignment. Meeting with the module facilitator was like a reboot to get me back on track about what is really important to me and my students in the semester project. I have a plan of action now that I am excited to implement."

"Talking through my assignment with an expert who is not in my discipline was invaluable in identifying 'blind spots' in the design of my assignment—small things students really needed to have clear to do well in the project. I hadn't thought of those things before."

MTLE is able to help early-career faculty at UW-Madison become fast, efficient, effective, and satisfied starters in teaching thanks, in part, to our partnership with WAC. As program director, I find it professionally invigorating to work with our WAC colleagues, not just during the writing assignments module every semester, but also in planning and developing MTLE as we work together to improve student learning across campus •

READING, WRITING, AND SPEAKING IN A CLASSICS COURSE: WHAT CAN STUDENTS LEARN FROM THE ROMANS?

By Mike Haen

Writing Across the Curriculum



Professor Nandini Pandey
Department of Classical and
Ancient Near Eastern Studies

In “The Romans” (Classics 322), students from a range of majors learn about Roman history and culture by reading classical Latin authors, like Caesar and Cicero, and by attending lectures providing important historical context. The course begins with a focus on Rome’s foundation and identity, moving next to its expansion as a republic and its eventual collapse. Professor Nandini Pandey, who first taught “The Romans” in spring 2017, hopes students gain deeper understand-

ing of ancient Rome and grapple with larger questions about classical texts (or any texts) as sources of knowledge.

“Classics and the general study of antiquity bring up some really interesting questions about how we know what we know based on our sources and their biases,” Pandey explains. She adds that, although ancient Rome encompassed a diverse population, “the texts and sources we have are not representative of the full socio-economic spectrum that was ancient Rome.” In response to this problem of representation and source bias, Pandey designed writing and speaking assignments that help students strengthen their ability to evaluate sources and evidence as they develop understandings of ancient Rome.

The course satisfies the Communication-B requirement, so it foregrounds scaffolded writing and speaking activities to help students build advanced skills in critical reading and use of evidence. Pandey notes, “These are skills that are fundamental to democracy and citizenship, especially in a time with fragmented and biased sources of news and information.”

Mock Trials and More: Speaking and Writing Activities

To help students begin thinking about historical sources and whose perspective is represented, Pandey requires them to draft and deliver a self-introduction to their classmates. For this activity, they need to describe their favorite writer or type of writing and their favorite person or period from history. They also explain why they signed up for the class and what they already know and hope to learn.

After several lectures and readings, and after receiving written feedback from their TA on their introductions, students complete a revision of the self-introduction in which they write in the third-person and from the perspective of the Roman writer Livy.

In their revision, students consider questions such as “How would Livy turn your life into a story? What details might he play up, what might he leave out, and how might his perspec-

tive differ from your own?” This assignment is meant to illustrate how we often learn about ancient people from a limited set of perspectives, and Pandey thinks it helps get students “in the spirit of the class” and its focus on how we know what we know.

“These are fundamental skills for democracy and citizenship, especially in a time with fragmented and biased sources of information.”

Another speaking activity in the course is a mock trial of characters in the *Aeneid*. Students take the roles of prosecution, defense, and jury members. Pandey notes, “Students seem to invest more when they are given an argument or side that they need to support with evidence from sources.” These trials in the middle of the semester prepare students for the kinds of thinking they will do for later writing assignments.

Writing Assignments: Essays and a Funeral Oration

In each of the more formal writing assignments in the course, students continue to grapple with the problem of representation and perspective in source texts. For example, Pandey assigns a viewpoint essay, in which students reimagine one of the course texts from a marginalized perspective. This three-page essay helps students practice evaluating source bias and omissions. “In several of the ancient texts, there are slaves or women who are present but don’t get to articulate their own viewpoint, so students try to imagine that perspective based on the sources from the course,” Pandey explained.

To provide students with clear expectations about how she will evaluate their papers, she uses detailed rubrics for the viewpoint assignment and other assignments, like the interpretive essay and the final writing project. For the five-page interpretive essay, students practice a close reading the *Aeneid* and build an argument based on literary evidence in the text.

The final writing project (eight total pages) entails extensive revision or expansion of the viewpoint essay or interpretive essay. Pandey and her TAs want to see students seek out and use primary sources and secondary scholarship to build on or revise their initial ideas and understandings in the earlier essays. Ideally, students also become more familiar with specific scholarly perspectives in the study of antiquity as well as literary interpretations of ancient works. Through completing this assignment sequence, students move toward a more scholarly understanding of Roman history and culture.

As the semester ends, Pandey and her TAs ask students to reflect on their learning in a “Funeral Oration for Ancient Rome,” which combines writing and speaking.

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READING, WRITING, AND SPEAKING IN A CLASSICS COURSE: WHAT CAN STUDENTS LEARN FROM THE ROMANS?, CONT.

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Students speak for two minutes, offering praise, judgment, and commentary on Rome and their learning during the semester. They explain “why ancient Rome matters to them, how ancient Rome gives them a wider perspective on the modern world, and what surprised them about the Romans.”

Pandey expects students to outline their speech and practice it beforehand. These orations for Rome at the final class meeting help students reflect on their learning in a creative way.

The Future of “The Romans”

As she updates the course in the future, Pandey always hopes to “make classics relevant to conversations that are happen-

ing and are of great importance in this country and around the world, especially to conversations about who belongs in a state or nation.”

In course evaluations, Pandey and her TAs often see students reporting how much they enjoyed the class and how they developed a deeper understanding of source bias and representation. Pandey is excited about future iterations of the course and welcomes students interested in exploring Roman history as well “our ways of understanding and narrating the past and the present.” •

Dr. Nandini Pandey is an Associate Professor of Classics at UW-Madison. She was recently awarded the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship (ALCS).

“CHEMISTRY IS MY KRYPTONITE”: WRITING TO LEARN IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING COURSE

By Mike Haen

Writing Across the Curriculum



Matthew Scarborough
Environmental Engineering

During fall 2018, graduate student Matthew Scarborough introduced a new writing assignment—a case study of the Flint Water Crisis—into “Environmental Engineering” (CIV ENG 320). This course, taught by Professor Trina McMahon and other faculty in the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department, enrolls approximately 90 juniors and seniors typically majoring in that discipline as well as Biological Systems Engineering. These students learn about aspects of environmental engineering like material balances, reactor models, ecosystems, and water quality along with foundational principles in chemistry.

Unfortunately, many students come to the course lacking enthusiasm for chemistry and questioning its usefulness in engineering, despite how critical chemistry is to their future careers as construction, structural, transportation, and environmental engineers. One student from fall 2017, for example, wrote in a post-class survey: “Chemistry is my kryptonite and will always remain voodoo black magic to me...” This new writing assignment became one way of motivating students not only to learn and apply their understanding of concepts like Henry’s Law and acid-base chemistry. It also helped strengthen students’ writing and peer-reviewing skills and their critical thinking about engineering problems and issues of environmental justice.

Applying Chemistry in a Writing Assignment

Replacing the previous fall’s shorter weekly essay assignments is the single, more comprehensive assignment Scarborough, McMahon, and teaching assistant Emma Leverich developed through the Delta Program’s teaching-as-research intern project. According to Scarborough, “the main driver for the assignment was to make sure that students could explain the Flint Crisis and understand why chemistry is important to comprehend similar environmental problems.”

Early on, the course provides a foundation for this task by focusing on acid-base chemistry, redox chemistry, and disinfection chemistry. Then to build the analytical skills necessary for the “Engineering in the News” assignment, students attend three lectures on the Flint Water Crisis and complete a problem set in groups. For example, one problem asks them to diagram the interactions between lead and orthophosphate, a key interaction in the water crisis.

“The main driver for the assignment was to make sure students could explain the Flint Crisis and understand why chemistry is important to comprehend similar environmental problems.”

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“CHEMISTRY IS MY KRYPTONITE”: WRITING TO LEARN IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING COURSE, CONT.

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Students apply this learning, from the problem set, to the writing assignment by comprehensively analyzing the chemistry that led to high lead levels and pathogen outbreaks after Flint switched its water source to the Flint River. In their 3-page individual reports, they explain the origins of the Flint Water Crisis and chemical interactions that resulted in unsafe drinking water. And they make a recommendation about how to avoid another Flint Crisis, based on their understanding of the chemistry. An excerpt of the assignment is below.

Writing Assignment: “Engineering in the News: The Flint Water Crisis”

On April 25, 2014, the city of Flint in Michigan officially switched its drinking water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. This switch in water supply resulted in a public health crisis. The Town of Streeeter-Phelps has hired you as an environmental engineer to address concerns resulting from the Flint Water Crisis. Like Flint, Streeeter-Phelps’ water distribution system contains several stretches of lead pipes. Concerned citizens have asked the Town Council to replace the pipes immediately. At your first meeting to discuss the project with the Council, citizens voiced several questions and comments:

- “Why would Flint change from a pristine water source to a river containing a bunch of lead?”
- “If they would have just added phosphate, then the lead would have been transformed to a ‘non-toxic form.’”
- “Lead pipes aren’t the culprit; it was the acidity of the new water source that caused the problem.”
- “It was the Legionella in the Flint River that made everyone sick.”

You left the meeting concerned that the town’s leaders did not really understand what occurred in Flint. You now must prepare a report to explain the Crisis to the town’s leaders and make suggestions on preventing a Flint from occurring.

Your essay should include five paragraphs and be up to three single-spaced pages long total, with 12pt Times New Roman font and 1 inch margins.

Preparing and Guiding Students in Peer Review

Peer reviewing, important for engineering students’ long-term growth, is another critical component of the assignment. After submitting a rough draft later in the semester, students respond to a classmate’s draft using a feedback form and rubric. But in addition to scoring their peer’s draft against the rubric’s criteria, students have to describe a strong feature in the draft and provide suggestions to improve a section that needs work.

Scarborough provides students with examples of strong and weak feedback to encourage meaningful review because, as he observes, “When these students go out into their engineering careers, one of the first things they’ll be doing is reviewing work by their colleagues, so they need to know how to provide useful feedback.” Overall, Scarborough thinks his guidance in the peer review led students to approach the activity with more confidence and more focused feedback.

Challenges and Successes

Reflecting on the semester, Scarborough remembers hearing “gasps and groans” from students when he first introduced the assignment. And he admits that students did face some challenges. For example, they occasionally misrepresented or under-specified the roles of chloride and chlorine in the crisis. He also notes that, “While many students correctly recognized that chlorine being added to the distribution system would react with the lead and consume the chlorine, which ultimately resulted in pathogen outbreaks, some forgot that many of the pipes were iron, which would also consume the chlorine.” However, Scarborough sees these challenges as opportunities to improve the course’s instruction about chemistry even further with better integration of writing, lectures, discussions, online lessons, and problem sets.

Both Scarborough and McMahon have been satisfied with this new writing activity, with McMahon explaining that Matt’s “assignment and Delta project successfully tackled a persistent obstacle to student learning in this class.” A post-course student assessment survey revealed 91% of students thought the assignment helped their learning, about the crisis and the chemistry, a fair amount or a great deal. In fact, several students wrote course evaluation survey responses like this: “Learning about the Flint Water Crisis gave me a greater appreciation for the importance of understanding chemistry because it literally can save lives of people.” Clearly, students were motivated to care about chemistry and writing because of the assignment on this real-world case. Scarborough reports, “People came to my office hours frequently and we’d talk at length about issues of environmental injustice. My favorite part of this whole process was seeing students’ passion come through in their conversations and in their writing.” Writing about the Flint Water Crisis fostered student engagement and a better understanding of course material. •

THANKS TO OUR SPRING 2019 COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



Tory Ash
Psychology



Pete Guiden
Biocore



Xerxes Minocher
Journalism

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these three TAs helped plan and lead the January 2019 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for more than 40 new Communication-B TAs from across campus.

Thanks for your commitment to this important work!

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



**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S
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