Time to Write

Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum
University of Wisconsin - Madison
Volume 2, Number 2 **April 1997**

How *Do* You Make Peer Review Work?

Kirsten Jamsen, English

When I first started teaching, I thought of student peer review as a nice way to break up the routine of lecture and discussion. I was convinced by the success stories I'd heard from other teachers that all I needed to do was to put my students in small groups and wonderful things would happen.

I should have known that anything that sounded too good to be true probably was. A handful of students benefitted from giving and receiving advice on their papers, but more were confused or didn't take their peers' comments seriously enough to do significant revision.

Rather than discard peer review entirely, I reconsidered my pedagogical reasons for using it. I realized that I could not expect my students to respond to each others' papers as well as a trained instructor could. Rather than see peer review as a substitute for my comments, I now value peer review as a way to get students actively involved in their own learning. By having my students read their peers' writing and talk together about the processes of drafting and revising, I want to encourage them to become more self-conscious about their own writing process and to begin to take control over that process.

After many semesters using peer review in my composition classes and helping colleagues in Geography, Women's Studies, Political Science, Slavic, and Art use peer review successfully in their classes, I have several specific suggestions for instructors trying peer review for the first time or refining their own method of using peer review.

The primary reason that students struggle with peer review is that they don't understand what they are supposed to do and why they are doing it. If students don't understand the purposes of peer review, they will see it as busy work. *Before*, *during*, and *after* peer review sessions, take time to explain the goals of peer review.

> Being able to read and respond effectively to papers takes practice. If you plan to use peer review, do it more than once.

My main goal for peer review is to emphasize to students that writing is fundamentally a form of communication between real people. Talking face-to-face about papers can help writers articulate what they are trying to say on their papers. It is also a chance for real readers to tell writers what they're hearing and what isn't coming across clearly.

Just as important, I stress to students that peer review teaches them to be critical readers. As they learn to read their peers' work with a "critical eye," they can begin to apply that "eye" to their own drafts. In addition, reviewers can give one another encouragement and share new ideas and new strategies for writing.

Being able to read and respond effectively to papers takes practice. If you plan to use peer review, it's essential that you do it more than once. With practice, students will learn how to give each other constructive feedback, and additional peer reviews will reward the initial investment you put into preparing your students for the first one.

To help our students learn how to do peer review, we need to set realistic expectations and explain them. Often peer review doesn't work because we give our students too many things to concern themselves with. Feeling unconfident in their ability to "teach" their peers anything about writing, peer reviewers will give up before they even begin.

Giving students a few central

(continued on page 2)

In This Issue

Proposed Criteria for Writing-Intensive Courses........................ 3

John Bean on the Microtheme..... 4

...Peer Review?

(continued from page 1)

questions or a brief set of guidelines will help them focus their responses to one another. I often ask reviewers to consider two central questions: "What is the writer trying to say/argue for in this piece?" and "How can s/he make this argument more effective and persuasive?"

I emphasize these "big picture" questions because I see peer review as an important part of *revision*— not just *editing*. To prepare students for peer review, I lead a discussion of the differences between revision and editing, describing the large-scale changes they should suggest to one another: tightening up or shifting focus, clarifying purpose, cutting, adding, reorganizing, taking the conclusion as a new introduction and starting over, etc.

In many courses, you won't have time for students to read drafts in class. Instead, set a firm due date to have groups exchange copies of drafts. Students then read the drafts and write reviews outside of class. To encourage students to take the reviewing process seriously, consider grading the reviews as a separate writing assignment. The following class period, have students discuss their reviews in small groups, making sure to give them clear guidelines on what you want them to discuss.

I recommend "hovering" over the groups to keep them on task. By observing how they work in their groups and intervening to encourage careful listening and questioning, you can coach them to be better reviewers and writers. Talking afterwards about what the groups did well, sharing good written reviews, and using a skilled group as a model can also help students improve as peer reviewers.

Proposed Criteria for

What follows is a draft of the Letters & Science Curriculum Committee's proposed criteria for Writing-Intensive Courses. The Curriculum Committee presents this draft to the faculty for discussion. Please send comments or questions to Associate Dean Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, chair of the L&S Curriculum Committee (263-7221, fitzpatrick@ls.admin.wisc.edu).

Description

Writing-intensive (WI) courses incorporate frequent writing assignments in ways that help students learn both the subject matter of the courses *and* discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing. These courses build on writing skills developed in required Communications-A and -B courses. Following legislation passed by the L&S Faculty Senate in April 1994, all candidates for the BA and BS degrees within the College of Letters and Science who matriculate in the fall of 1998 or later will be required to complete two writing-intensive courses. At least one of the two WI courses must be in the student's major department or on a department-approved list of alternative courses. If a student completes more than the one required Communications-B course, it may count as a writing-intensive course. Generally, WI courses are at the intermediate or advanced level and are designed specifically for majors; in contrast, Communications-B courses are at the introductory level and are open to all students.

WI courses take many different forms, but they all share the assumption that **writing facilitates learning**. They use a wide variety of frequent writing activities, closely integrated with the course material, to help students acquire the knowledge and the skills relevant to that course. Ideally, students in these courses will write in a variety of forms, including formal papers, which require polished prose, and informal, ungraded papers, which allow students to explore ideas and to experiment with writing strategies.

WI courses further assume that **writing is a process**, providing opportunities for students to prepare for, reflect on, and improve their writing. Revision of formal writing is an essential part of the process, since it helps students clarify their ideas, recognize their strengths, and learn from their experience. Feedback—from course instructors and sometimes from peers—is essential to guide and encourage revision and improvement.

Time to Write

Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Correspondence should be addressed to *Time to Write*, L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum, UW-Madison, 6185 Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706. We can also be reached by phone at 608-263-3823 or by the following e-mail addresses:

Director, Brad Hughes.. bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu

Assistant Director and Editor, Kirsten Jamsen...................... kajamsen@students.wisc.edu

Writing-Intensive Courses in L&S

Minimum Requirements

To be designated as *writing-intensive*, a course must fulfill the following minimum requirements. Exceptions to some of these requirements may be made for faculty who have compelling pedagogical reasons to adjust these requirements.

1. Writing assignments must be an integral, ongoing part of the course, and the writing assignments must constitute a substantial and clearly understood component of the final course grade. Assignments must be structured and sequenced in such a way as to help students improve their writing. Instructors in writing-intensive courses should not just assign writing; they should help students succeed with and learn from that writing.

2. There must be at least four discrete writing assignments spread throughout the semester, *not* including in-class essay exams.

3. At least one assignment must involve revision; the draft and revision may count as two discrete writing assignments. Exceptions will be allowed for instructors who instead choose to use a sequence of repeated assignments.

4. Students must produce a total of at least 14 double-spaced pages (c. 4000 words) of finished prose; this total does *not* include pages in drafts. When the writing is in a foreign language, a lower number of total pages may be appropriate.

5. Instructors must provide feedback on student's writing assignments.

6. Some class time must be devoted to preparing students to complete writing assignments. Some options include: discussion of assignments and of evaluation criteria, analysis and discussion of sample student papers, discussion of writing in progress using examples of successful work from students, peer group activities that prepare students to write a particular paper, discussion or presentations of students' research in progress, instruction about how to write a particular type of paper or about solving a common writing problem.

Strong Recommendations

1. Departments may wish to limit enrollment to 30 or fewer students per instructor.

2. The course syllabus should explain the writing-intensive nature of the course and should contain a schedule for writing assignments and revisions.

3. Assignments should follow a logical sequence and should match the learning goals for the course. Among the many options: assignments can move from more basic to more sophisticated kinds of thinking about course material; assignments can give students repeated practice that builds particular thinking and writing skills; complex assignments can be sequenced with proposal, draft, and revision due dates.

4. Assignments should include time for students to prepare to write and time for them to reflect on their writing.

5. Courses should include some informal, ungraded writing in order to encourage regular practice with writing, to help students reflect on and synthesize course material, and to provide opportunities for students to discover promising ideas for formal papers.

6. Students should receive detailed written instructions for each writing assignment, including an explanation of the goals and specific evaluation criteria for that assignment.

7. Instructors are encouraged to require students to keep all of their writing in portfolios and to submit their past writing with new papers, so that instructors can gauge and guide students' improvement as writers.

8. Instructors are encouraged to hold at least one individual conference with each student.

9. Instructors are encouraged to have students complete midterm and final evaluations of the writing component of the course.

10. Instructors are encouraged to consult with the staff of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum about the design of the writing component of their courses.

John Bean on the Microtheme, a Low-Risk Teaching Strategy

As we mentioned in our last newsletter, **John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996)** offers specific, creative, and concrete strategies to get students more actively engaged with course material in any academic discipline. One such low-risk teaching strategy is the microtheme, or minute paper. Bean discusses a variety of microtheme assignments, including this one for a psychology course.

Consider the following problem: In the morning, when Prof. Catlove opens a new can of cat food, his cats run into the kitchen purring and meowing and rubbing their backs against his legs. What examples, if any, of classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and social learning are at work in this brief scene? Note that both the cats and professor might be exhibiting conditional behavior here. *You and your fellow classmates have been discussing this problem over coffee, and you are convinced that the other members of your group are confused about the concepts. Write a 1-2 page essay that sets them straight.*

These assignments require students to apply the target concepts to new situations and to articulate their thinking processes clearly to a new learner. Assignments like these can prompt intense, purposeful rereading of textbooks and class notes while stimulating out-of-class discussions among students. Furthermore, students report that the act of writing often alerts them to gaps in their understanding. In the operant conditioning problem, for example, students reported in interviews with me that it was easier to explain how the professor conditioned the cats than how the cats conditioned the professor, yet it was in their contemplation of the latter case that the concept of a learned behavior became the most clear.

From a teacher's perspective, these assignments—because they are short—have the additional benefit of being easy to grade. They use what we might call the principle of leverage: a small amount of writing preceded by a great amount of thinking. Such short assignments, or microthemes, can be very effective at maximizing learning while minimizing a teacher's grading time. (Bean 80)

See pages 73-118 in *Engaging Ideas* for more ideas about microthemes and other writing assignments that encourage critical thinking.

Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum
University of Wisconsin - Madison
6185 Helen C. White Hall
600 N. Park Street
Madison, WI 53706

If you would like us to add a colleague's name to our mailing list or to remove yours, just complete this sheet and send it to Kirsten Jamsen in the English Dept., Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St. or send an email to kajamsen@students.wisc.edu.

*Name*________________________ *Campus Address*________________________ *ADD/DELETE*