Bernhardt's Bedford Bits

Stephen A Bernhardt
University of Delaware, Emeritus, Kirkpatrick Chair in Writing

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A Consolidated Presentation of Short Pieces on Teaching Writing

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A teaching resource for the WAC Clearinghouse

Author's note: Bedford sponsored a team of writing instructors to develop content to populate their English Community website. As a Bedford author of Writer's Help, I contributed over several years. The early postings were lost on a server upgrade, but then recovered and posted at the WAC Clearinghouse. A server upgrade there lost the resource again.

I decided to consolidate my posts just in case they have value for anyone. I hope I am not the only person who enjoys rereading what they have written at earlier stages of their careers. I will say with only slight embarrassment that I really like these pieces. I hope this textual recovery act will find a few readers who might appreciate my thoughts on how we best teach writing.

Note: I removed hyperlinks as so many were no longer functioning. Sorry!

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Bits 1: wired to devices

1/14/2011

I was at a meeting 7 or 8 years ago with people from instructional technology (IT). Conversations were just beginning on my campus about making whole buildings wireless, and IT was looking for suggestions. I proposed Memorial Hall, the English department's building that contained classrooms, offices, and the writing center. To me, wireless seemed like a gift. Imagine, I could teach writing and students could just bring their laptops. I would not have to worry about labs and sign-up sheets and reserving times. I could not believe that everyone was not clamoring for it.

Others had to explain to me that many faculty were resisting the move to wireless, and that, in fact, IT was having to respond to faculty complaints about students using various devices in class. I learned that many of our faculty were requesting that they not be assigned to our beautifully appointed classrooms in Gore Hall because wireless had been installed. These kinds of complaints are familiar by now, but back then they took me by surprise. I had not thought much about students using various devices during class to network, cheat on tests, or simply relieve boredom. Our IT folks were worried there would be such a backlash that their plans for a wireless campus would be subverted.

Fast forward to today and our campus is indeed fully wireless. However, there's still some faculty grousing, and syllabi sometimes contain stern warnings about turning off cell phones (not just silencing!), not using Facebook, and leaving laptops at home.

I take another tack. I figure it is impossible to fight connectivity, so why not embrace it? I don't think noodling around on Facebook during class is the best use of my students' time and attention, and I let them know it, but I also let students know, both in my syllabi and during class, that I value connectivity and that it will be useful to have a laptop or device during class. Part of the reason I developed an online handbook is that I see a huge benefit to students having immediate access to tools they need to write well. With Writer's Help, I can be sure that at least some of the noodling is productive and pedagogically desirable.

Whenever possible in class, I ask *real* questions (questions to which I do not know the answer), requesting that one or a few students see if they can dig up the answer online while the rest of us speculate or rely on what we actually know. When unfamiliar terms arise, I say "Can someone look that up? Anyone know what it means?" When someone volunteers information from the Web, and they always do so eagerly, I ask "Where did you find that?" Their answers are often good—they have instincts for finding reliable information, and it is quite natural for them to question their sources. Modeling good online behavior fits with my learning goals.

There are lots of reasons I want students connected during class, and I'll have more to say in future posts. Primarily, I believe that writers need access to their materials, and most materials are online. They need a social network to collaborate, and the tools that afford that network are online. And they need to build a relationship to me, since I am establishing the classroom context and performance requirements. Relationships are built through frequent communication, and the channels are online. If students have technologies at hand, their learning is richer.

Are some students texting to their buddies? Sure. Are some distracting themselves from my all-important lesson plans by goofing around on Facebook? Most assuredly. But when have we ever had 100% attention from 100% of our students? When have we, ourselves, ever been able to sit at attention during a lecture or performance, never mind a department meeting, with no distraction and no multitasking? I'll accept distraction as normal, and I'll take the benefits of connectivity in my classroom.

Bits 2: your inner tech writer

2/15/2011

In the mid-eighties, I took a position at New Mexico State University, where their English department had a strong technical writing program. I had a chance to teach a course on developing computer documentation—reference manuals, user guides, and tutorials. I felt slightly underprepared, but over time, I grew to like the course and eventually developed a second course on online documentation, including help systems.

I learned a lot by teaching these courses, learning that has been quite useful as we've developed *Writer's Help* at Bedford. *Writer's Help* is part reference handbook, part help system. It requires students to work online, viewing linked information on screen. Creating *Writer's Help* required that we think about usability, screen design, navigation, search, and information presentation. The challenge was to take a really well-designed handbook (*Writer's Reference)* and re-imagine it as an online help system.

Those who write user documentation think in very particular ways about audiences. Tech writers have long emphasized observing users, understanding their situations, involving them in development, and doing careful user testing to see what works and what ought to be revised. As a result, we know certain things about technical audiences: they would rather learn from a person than from a manual, they skip over long passages, they would prefer to look at a drawing than a paragraph, they tend to enter a text in many places other than page one, and they are often frustrated with documentation. We also know a scary fact: only experts are good at using technical manuals. Only they have the language, the ability to define problems, and the ability to work between the manual and the system itself to solve problems.

When we get to know an audience, we can adapt a text to the ways that people behave. In the case of *Writer's Help*, we worked on these assumptions:

- Students are more oriented toward examples than explanations, so we should make examples prominent and plentiful.
- Students and teachers have their own language, and it is not the traditional language of a writing handbook, so we should use their language and leverage the technology (search, glossing) to bridge differing vocabularies.
- We never know where someone will enter the text, so we need multiple paths through the text and orientation on every screen as to where one is, where one can go, and how one can retrace a path.
- The routes to learning and problem solving are rarely direct, so we should provide links, suggest related materials, and encourage exploration.
- Students are accustomed to browsing and searching the Web, so we should model our tools to support what they already do well.
- Nobody wants long, unrelieved passages of text, so we should break up long passages, provide visual relief, and make information as visually accessible as possible.

We're getting good feedback—the best, really—when students consistently say during classroom testing that *Writer's Help* is easy—easy to find what they want, easy to understand, easy to use. That's all a tech writer ever wanted to hear.

Bits 3: have a seat

SAB, 2/28/2011

I invite students to bring their laptops to class so we can stay connected and do certain kinds of work during class. One problem I have had is in classrooms that pack students tightly together, providing only small, fixed arms that are designed to support a notebook (of the paper variety) or a textbook, though hardly both. Add a laptop to the mix, poised precariously, and I get nervous trying to navigate the closely spaced rows. It’s also difficult for students to regroup so they can work together when instruction is not front and center. We need flexible space to teach.

Currently, I try to schedule my sections into our very popular problem-based learning (PBL) classrooms, which seat students in small groups at tables, and where the room is equipped with wireless laptops and media projection. UD is well known for leadership in PBL, and we continue to add to our inventory of classrooms that support team-based learning. The other day I had a web meeting with one of our helpful instructional technology staffers at UD. Paul Hyde had asked a couple of months back about whether I would be interested in pilot testing a newly designed, technology-intensive classroom.

Paul showed me the Steelcase® chair that he was thinking of buying for two new experimental classrooms. You will notice in the picture the features I liked immediately: the work surface is large and rectangular, providing a lot more work space, and it works for righties or lefties. The swiveling chairs are on casters, so students can scootch around and quickly get into pairs or groups. There is a shelf below the seat for book bags or coats, which would normally be on the floor, where they impede movement. And the seats have armrests to hang stuff, like purses or bags. The seats take more room than typical ones, so we will lose some capacity on the room conversion, not a small issue on our campus, where seats are at a premium.

The plan at this point is to provide five or six projectors around the room’s perimeter, in addition to the head station, using either drop-down screens or specially painted wall surfaces for projection. (We have had success with multiple projectors in our statistics course in psychology, which is taught through team-based problem solving.) In the new classrooms, students will be able to quickly assemble in small teams, sharing their work in projected spaces. Paul tells me students will be able to work with light pens on the projected texts or drawings, and that they will be able to capture and save their work.

I am jazzed about getting my first-year writing students into one of these new classrooms this fall. Students will be able to plan compositions using the projected spaces, where they can see their thinking developing. Individuals or teams will be able to access the information sources they need to support their writing. They will be able to review drafts, mark up texts for revision, and spot and fix problems using their shared intelligence. And we will be able to call up reference tools quickly. I am keenly interested in seeing how Writer’s Help works in this new space.

I am lucky to be on a campus where our instructional technology staff think in innovative ways about how to support active, team-based, technology-supported learning. Even seats are taken seriously.

I'd love to hear from others who are finding new ways to design classrooms to make writing and learning more collaborative, more accommodative.

Bits 4: make a list

3/14/2011

I am reading Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (Picador, 2009) and thinking about whether and how it might apply to writing classrooms. Even if you haven't read the book, you are probably familiar with some of its precepts. Gawande is a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and a professor at Harvard Medical School. He also leads the World Health Organization's Safe Surgery Saves Lives program. What he is known for is promoting the use of lists to improve surgical outcomes and reduce the alarmingly high rates of complications such as post-surgical infections. He has made a habit of learning from success in other industries, including commercial airlines, where lists have been used for some time as pre-flight checkoff lists and in-flight lists of what to do in unexpected circumstances. Gawande has looked at lists in other situations of complex team behaviors, in particular in large-scale construction projects.

The basic thesis is that some work environments have grown so technical and specialized, so dependent on teams of multiple experts, that the old idea of a "master builder" no longer works. The surgeon who is master of the operating room cannot effectively lead a team of specialists without some supporting tools. The tools, as Gawande frequently reminds the reader, are disarmingly simple—simple, short, focused lists of what to check before beginning a complex task such as surgery. The results are astounding reductions in complications.

Could lists improve performance in writing classrooms? I think so, though I certainly concede that student composing is not exactly like performing open-heart surgery or piloting a Boeing 787 Dreamliner. But writing is complex. Some well designed lists can help students get off to a good start—they can be a kind of pre-flight checklist and clearance for take-off:

- Have you read the assignment carefully and do you have a clear sense of the task?
- What kind of text are you being asked to produce? What are the expectations?
- Do you have a clear sense of what your purpose is and who your audience is?
- What do you already know and what do you need to know? Do you need to do background research before writing?
- How will you gather your initial ideas and begin to form a draft?
- Are you expected to collaborate as you develop your text? How?
- Are you expected to take this text through review and revision?
- How will the text be evaluated? What does it count for?

A list such as this has certain virtues, according to Gawande. It is short, focused on certain critical, core understandings. It's more strategic than formal; it doesn't misdirect students toward an excessive concern with form, a fault that Doug Downs highlights in his recent *Bits* post on assignment wording. This kind of list prompts thinking about the task at hand, getting straight on what we are about to do. It would come after an assignment is made but before students start writing. We've incorporated a number of lists into Writer's Help; they pop open in their own windows and can be moved about the desktop and printed if desired. They have to do with preparing to write, with reviewing texts, with getting started or finishing a piece. We hope they will be useful both in class instructions and as individual students go about their writing.

Taking time for that kind of thinking is where the value resides, according to Gawande. It's not so much the specific items, though they are important, as deliberately taking time out to confirm everyone's shared understanding.

Lists don't work by themselves, and teams don't automatically coalesce into smoothly functioning units by reading through a list. There's more to it, and I've got more to say about what is involved. Stay tuned.

Bits 5: following a list

3/27/2011

In my previous post, I discussed Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (Picador, 2009), specifically noting the ways that lists can improve team performance on complex tasks, including writing. These lists must be stripped to essentials and tested repeatedly under performance conditions, refined to fit the way people behave at work. I ended by suggesting, as Gawande does, that lists don't work by themselves. A list has to be reviewed at the right time, with the right people, in the right way if it is really going to improve performance.

In Gawande's operating rooms, the surgical team calls a time-out at opportune moments, what he calls *pause points*, to make sure everything is right and ready. One pause point is just before the patient is given anesthesia; the second is after anesthesia but before making an incision; the third is after the patient is closed up and ready to be wheeled away. Timing is critical to decrease errors and improve outcomes. We might ask: What are the pause points in our writing classrooms? When is just the right time to review a simple list that calls to mind the most important points of consideration or action? Too often, I find myself closing out a class session, reminding students what to do when they eventually get around to working on an assignment. I know too well the feeling of the end of class closing in, with students shuffling laptops and backpacks, ready to move on while I am trying to review key points for their consideration. My timing is bad.

In addition to careful timing of pause points, Gawande stresses the importance of the team's reviewing the checklist aloud. Gawande refers to an *activation phenomenon:* "Giving people a chance to say something at the start seemed to activate their sense of participation and responsibility and willingness to speak up." In the operating room, each person speaks up, identifying his or her role and confirming each item on the checklist, all out loud in response to a leader. Gawande notes that it all seems corny at first, but the speaking experience proves critical. These points make me wonder how we activate our students' sense of participation and responsibility. When does each individual speak to identify roles and confirm that each element is in place for undertaking an assignment?

Perceptive readers will already have formulated a qualification to all this talk of lists. Gawande is improving *team* performance, where various experts must perform complex tasks in collaboration, whereas we teach writing to *individuals* who typically perform on their own, outside of class. Well, maybe. But most of us use groups for peer review, and many of us use groups during planning phases. Increasingly, some portion of the writing we assign requires collaborative composing, and when we assign multimodal compositions, these are often well suited to bringing together teams of students with individual and complementary areas of expertise. To the extent that our assignments require collaboration, we might profitably use carefully designed and tested checklists at just the right times in just the right ways to help improve performance.

Bits 6: what's up at CCCC?

4/11/2011

I was reminded at the Atlanta Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) that I have been attending the yearly conferences for 30 years, since taking my PhD from Michigan. It's Bedford's 30th anniversary, too, a nice coincidence. I spent some time being videotaped by Bedford in connection with *Bits*, which gave me a chance to reminisce about that spring 30 years ago, when I was writing my dissertation, applying for jobs, being a new father, and preparing to move from Ann Arbor to Carbondale, Illinois, to take my first job at SIU. Being interviewed ahead of me was Andrea Lunsford, and that triggered another memory—being interviewed by Andrea for a position at the University of British Columbia that same year. I didn't get the job, but I recall my first encounter with Andrea well, especially the noise of the interviewing cattle pens at MLA, a huge room with tables where anxious applicants sat across from interviewers, each shouting at the other.

I spent most of my time working with Bedford, as this conference was the real debut of Writer's Help, the online writer's reference and handbook that went on sale in January. We are getting an excellent reception, with adoptions, pilot testing, and a high level of interest from many schools, including quite a few community colleges. What I really enjoy is hearing about the situations on various campuses. My sense is that people are contending with the challenges of running programs on tight budgets. Hybrid and online courses are seen as a way to save costs on campuses where enrollments are increasing, space is tight, and state support is a declining portion of revenues. Potential adopters like the idea of an online resource, but some still worry about student access. Others say they like the idea of a writing handbook that is always available and follows students throughout their careers. They also like the pricing, which is at a substantial discount to a hard copy textbook.

I heard some good presentations, including an excellent duo—Chris Anson and Nancy Sommers—who spoke to a packed house about responding to student writing. Nancy had great insight into how closely students pay attention to instructor comments, complemented by a touching and sensitive Bedford video of Bunker Hill Community College students. Nancy dismantled the prevalent lore about students only caring about a grade and pitching their papers into the wastebasket along with all the teacher commentary. She reminds us of how serious our work is and how damaging careless comments can be.

Doug Hesse and his team from University of Denver tantalized an early Friday morning audience with initial and very tentative findings from a longitudinal study of students across their undergraduate careers. I admired the ambition of this group, who are working to find out what students write, what kinds of assignments are perceived as valuable, and what students tend to dislike. I was also able to follow my interests in the charged contexts of healthcare communication, with Liz Angeli of Purdue discussing her study of communication networks amongst EMTs and Catherine Schryer of Ryerson (Toronto) presenting her investigations into liver transplant teams.

What I really enjoy about CCC is the chance to learn about everything from our first year writing classes to the complex situations of composing at work. We get to see friends and typically accomplish a lot of work, too. I'd be interested in hearing from others—what was the highlight? Why do you value your attendance at CCCC?

Bits 7: engaging writing

4/25/2011

I am enjoying a research sabbatical this term, but returned to campus last week as host for a campus visit to UD of Robert Gonyea of Indiana University, where he is Associate Director, Center for Postsecondary Research, and where he works closely with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Bob has been working with leaders in the composition field (especially Paul Anderson, Chuck Paine, and Chris Anson) to develop and implement an add-on survey of writing practices to the standard NSSE questions. The data, which is on first year students and seniors, show how important writing is to the kinds of learning we all value: higher-order, integrative, and reflective learning.

In a nutshell, when teachers use writing in their classrooms, and when writing activities are well designed, students say they are significantly more engaged in their own learning, that they learn more deeply, that they connect various things they know, and that they are more aware of how they know what they know. The NSSE writing survey groups items under three broad constructs that influence student engagement: the extent to which writing instruction encourages interaction with peers and the instructor, whether the writing instruction requires meaning construction (as opposed to simple recall), and whether the writing instruction is characterized by clear expectations in advance of the actual writing.

We are fortunate on our campus to have faculty who care deeply about student learning and who want to know more about writing to learn. At the well-attended session, one of the most important messages Bob delivered was that it is not the <u>amount</u> of writing that students are assigned, but the <u>kind</u> of writing assignments that is important. More is not necessarily better (and NSSE administrators know their survey questions are oriented toward quantity, which is one reason they have pursued a separate writing survey). For a writing assignment to be engaging, students need opportunities to interact with each other, they need to receive feedback, and they need to have a sense of audience and rhetorical context. Writing faculty understand these aspects of process writing and rhetoric, but the message was still valuable for faculty from across the disciplines.

One other theme that emerged from the NSSE writing survey data is that students need clear expectations for writing assignments. They need a clear sense of purpose for the assignment, and they need to know in advance the criteria upon which they will be evaluated. Importantly, they need to know not only <u>what</u> they are being asked to write, but <u>why</u>. That means instructors need to explain to students why they are being asked to write something—what is the learning goal for the assignment and why is the instructor asking students to write something particular? Thinking this way makes purpose complex, since there is both a purpose for doing a writing assignment (an understanding between instructor and student, expressed, ideally, within the assignment) and the sense of purpose that the writer must feel as he or she writes (an understanding between writer and audience, expressed through the text).

If you are not familiar with NSSE and the Writing Survey, you can learn more at http://www.nsse.iub.edu/ and at http://comppile.org/wpa+nsse/. We are collecting data now at UD, using both the standard NSSE survey plus the add-on Writing Survey. I'll be anxious to see what we learn. If you have experience with NSSE on your campus, I'd like to hear about what you learned and how you have used the data in your writing program or across the disciplines.

Bits 8: whither e-books

5/10/2011

Our campus instructional technology people included a link in their recent newsletter to a whitepaper on digital textbooks; it shows that they are gaining momentum and may be reaching a tipping point. The report suggests the following: “Over the next 5 years, digital textbook sales in the United States will surpass 25% of combined new textbook sales for the Higher Education and Career Education markets. Moreover, we expect digital to be the dominant form factor in Higher Education textbooks inside of 7 years.” Note that the market share for February 2011 is 1.5%, so this is a heady forecast. The company, xplana, is in the market of digital education content delivery, so they have reasons to be enthusiastic and optimistic.

Of course, we all know that e-books have failed to realize sharp projected growth curves for quite a few years. It’s always next year that will be the “year of the e-book.” It’s hard enough to get students to buy hard copy textbooks, since they frequently discover they can share them or get along without them. Students weigh the cost vs. the value, and in spite of how much some books weigh, decide to forego purchase. According to the report, about a third of students in Fall 2010 deferred purchasing their books. They may have eventually realized they needed the textbook, but a substantial number found that they could find the textbook online, or they learned what they needed to learn to pass in class, or they could borrow someone else’s book and make it through the course. They will also be suspicious of the value of an e-book.

What’s changing the picture now? A big factor is the huge sales of e-readers, tablets and pad devices, and smartphones. Students are comfortable getting their content on smaller and smaller screens. Increasingly these text tools do what readers want—provide quick access, support navigation, allow bookmarking or tagging or notetaking in the text, and support various kinds of individual customization of the resource. But other forces are at work, too—open source digital content, emerging digital standards, increasing costs of hard copy books, and growth of for-profit education, where having all learning material online (and preferably privately owned) for a highly distributed operation is a business goal.

This market will be driven by customers, by students, however, and not by for-profit educators or content sellers. And the students keep amazing me in the inventive ways they seek and manage information on their devices. We did not design *Writer’s Help* to be used on small devices and it has some important limitations. The interface design and the use of non-scalable pictures limits what someone can expect—our full expectation was that *Writer’s Help* would be used on a laptop or desktop computer. And yet we’ve been told by students that they are pulling the content down to their handheld devices, expecting that all content ought to be delivered to whatever device is at hand. This is a challenge, one that was not easy to foresee when we worked our way though development.

One thing we did imagine was that we were creating a textbook unlike other textbooks. We never expected students to sit and read chapters, turning pages, doing assigned reading. We envisioned a cross or hybrid between a grammar/style/documentation reference manual and an online help system. The vision that shaped the design of Writer’s Help makes it stand out as an unusual product in the digital textbook market, since it is really meant to be *used* rather than *read*. From the reception we have seen since going on the market this spring, I think we are in the right spot to contribute to making xplana's projections a reality. And my own projection is that students will surprise us in the ways they choose to make use of *Writer's Help*.

Bits 9: summer reading

6/10/2011

I've often thought we should endorse reading across the curriculum in addition to writing, communication, and computers. What if each class across the university required students to read at least one non-textbook title each term? Our science or education or anthropology colleagues could each choose an appealing and important title. The goal would be to create in students a strong appetite for extended reading of a wide variety of books. That would be an outcome I could endorse enthusiastically: all students who take a degree will have well developed tastes and habits for reading a wide range of non-fiction and fiction.

At UD, as at many schools, we ask all incoming students to have read a book during the summer prior to arrival. We use this shared reading as part of our first year experience seminars. We hold a big event, bringing the author to campus and filling the auditorium for the talk. Students submit questions in advance and then those chosen stand and ask their questions. Most recently, we had Tracy Kidder discuss *Strength in What Remains* (about the genocide in Burundi) and before that Greg Mortensen discuss *Three Cups of Tea* (which we thought was a non-fictional account of his building schools in Afghanistan). This summer, the required book is Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. I like this choice because it moves toward science, but with important racial themes.

I'm currently wondering whether I should plan on using this text as a writing subject in my fall first-year composition class. I believe I will. Writing assignments could go in any number of directions, toward research ethics, race in America, cancer and its cures, or information and property rights.

I am a bit nervous about whether I can actually get students to read the book, which is long (about 380 pages in paperback) and in my judgment, a bit redundant. I know the original manuscript was cut in half, but it probably should have been cut by another third. At least it is well written (unlike Mortensen's, which I found poorly organized and written). The narrative is probably not as compelling as Kidder's *Strength*. I had students write from Kidder's book in my first-year experience seminar last year, but I ended up suspecting that many had not read or perhaps ever purchased Kidder's book. Their writing was superficial at best. In my composition class, I will have more leverage, as I assign letter grades in a standard three-hour course, as opposed to the FYE one-credit, pass/fail system. And I will be able to encourage students to find some angle on the book that interests them, whether science, health, sociology, or history.

I don't think it is a distraction from our goals in an introductory composition class (which at UD is titled *Critical Reading and Writing*) to use a real, full-length book. First-year composition is probably a good place to set the expectation that in at least some classes, reading will be substantial, requiring extended time and concentration.

I'd be interested in hearing from others who have used substantial works of quality non-fiction in their first-year writing classrooms. How can assignments best be structured to ensure that students actually read the text? As I figure out my fall plans, I'll blog here on the approach I will take and its results.

Bits 10: exercising

7/6/2011

I am not very good about exercising. I like to be active, but the idea of doing some repetitive physical action is not appealing. I lack whatever discipline it takes. I am not even very good about practicing.

So I have to think hard about whether I believe in exercises in the context of a writing classroom. If I don't care to do something, or lack the motivation, should I expect my students to exercise? Should I base a pedagogy on activities I myself avoid?

I suppose at some level most of what we do is practice, since we typically invent writing tasks for our students. It's much less often that we encounter situations that call for writing to get something done. When we discover such exigencies, we surely ought to take advantage of these natural contexts for writing and improving as writers. But that still leaves the question of whether we ought to expect our students to do practice exercises, especially those focused on discrete skills.

Working as an author on *Writer's Help* has led me to keep thinking about such issues. I have learned that some instructors see great value in having students do exercises on comma usage, forming thesis statements, or distinguishing confusing pairs of words. These instructors note what students have trouble with, either individually or as a group. They appreciate the sets of exercises on a wide variety of topics, and they assign and track student performance, expecting to see improvement through practice and feedback.

I am starting to think that my own attitudes and behaviors with regard to exercises and practice should not determine my instructional approach, at least not totally. I may not choose to exercise, but plenty of other people do. Exercise is motivating for many, and many know they improve through practice. People break down complex processes into component skills, and they gain control and expertise through focused attention and repetition. Maybe doing an exercise on parallel structure is not the same thing as writing a real text to a real audience, but that should not lead to the conclusion that doing an exercise won't lead to useful learning or that all we ought to ask of learners is to perform the full, complex activity, foregoing any componential analysis and practice.

A more apt conclusion might be that we ought to be alert to the differences among our students. Some need and would benefit from certain exercises, while others already have control and would profit most from other sorts of work. Some will learn from focused attention to particular areas of learning, and some will appreciate the feedback—knowing that some things in writing are matters of correctness and that there really are wrong answers to some questions of grammar, punctuation, or usage. There are sources of motivation for some students—probably not all—in knowing they got 9 out of 10 correct or that they have no trouble choosing *principle* over *principal*, but the distinction between *less* and *fewer* mystifies them.

The opportunity to focus on correct choices or careful distinctions offers writers a good chance to learn something new. There is still the vexing matter of getting from the exercise to the applied learning, and I would not minimize the difficulty, but the exercise with its focused attention sets the potential for learning and transfer.

Bits 11: would you mind reading this and telling me what you think?

7/24/2011

With my co-author and consulting partner Greg Cuppan, I am now on the third round of revision on a research article to be published (pending revisions) in the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*. We've had two rounds of review from two anonymous reviewers, plus some feedback from editor David Russell. What's remarkable is the deep, probing nature of the reviewer comments. They are testing our arguments, asking for additional evidence, and challenging our conclusions. They are asking for more context, offering open-ended questions and comments that encourage us to think about what we have written and see our way to substantial revisions. They are often focused on outcomes: What difference will this research make? What behaviors will it change? How can the findings be applied? Many of their queries were made with explicit connections to the audience of *JBTC*—what the audience would expect, understand, challenge, or need to know.

The review process has been especially interesting for me given the subject of our research. We investigated document review practices inside pharmaceutical companies, as research reports are taken through successive drafts, which are circulated to development teams for peer review. What we found was that the overwhelming preponderance of comments, both on circulated drafts and in long, face-to-face roundtable review sessions, focused on tiny bits—little corrections, word substitutions, rephrasings. Another, less frequent class of comments focused on correctness—were the conditions correctly stated, were the populations correctly described, were the data sets accurate in all details? But what was missing almost totally were comments that challenged the arguments, that tested the conclusions, that asked for more context, or that probed the weaknesses of the links between data and claims. Our drug company reviewers rarely asked about how reports would fare with the intended readers—those regulatory officers who would need to issue approvals for the proposed new drugs.

It is instructive that our peers—writing teachers and researchers—are able to zero in on argument quality and provide immensely helpful and substantial feedback. But well-educated and experienced scientists in an industry setting, if you accept our findings, tend to get side-tracked to editorial details when asked to review a manuscript. Our findings suggest that this behavior is widespread, in spite of written corporate guidelines that tell reviewers to avoid focusing on grammar and style. The expectation in the guidelines is that reviewers should offer corrections outside the review meetings and reserve time during the roundtables for more substantial issues. But our observations suggest that the small details take up almost all of the time. In contrast, our *JBTC* reviewers wrote pages of comments, but not one suggestion for an editorial change of grammar or style.

Some of the behavior of the scientists can be explained by our observation that many drug-company reviewers had not read the draft in advance of the roundtable, so they were essentially skimming from page-to-page, offering comments on what they noticed during the meeting. And it probably did not help that those leading the roundtable tended to page through the long reports page-by-page, asking if there were any comments. No wonder the reviewers focused on low-level details.

All of this redoubles my own commitment to working with students so they become adept at offering substantial, rhetorically grounded advice though peer review processes. They need a deep sense of the importance of feedback, and they need a sense of responsibility to other writers. They also need to appreciate just how difficult it is to size up a text, evaluate its effectiveness in terms of argument and audience, and help the author make real improvements.

As for me, I've got to reread and rethink those reviewer comments on our article. I've got a lot of work ahead of me because of the hard work and challenging comments of my reviewers.

Bits 12: revising inside a classroom management system

8/15/2011

It's typical for writing teachers to use peer review to help students learn to revise. And as I pointed out in a recent *Bits* post, we can't assume that even practicing scientists in companies that rely on documentation are able to offer effective review commentary. Doing so is a refined and complex art.

One reason I like classroom management software is that it provides an environment for structuring and facilitating peer review of draft papers. I use *Sakai* now, an open-source program, to which we migrated following not-so-good experiences with *WebCT* (now *Blackboard*). Neither application is designed for working with classes of writers, and each is clumsy in its own way. But both make it possible to exchange drafts, collect commentary, and create the conditions for learning.

The Forum tool in Sakai, a bulletin board for threaded discussions, offers a pretty good setup for peer review. The instructor can create a topic thread for a given assignment, and students can post their drafts for peer review, along with a message describing the state of the draft and identifying places that need help, under that thread. Posting to the forum makes review a public activity—everyone can see who has posted when. Students can tell whose draft is advanced and whose is sketchy. They can get a sense for how other writers are handling the assignment. They will likely feel a bit of pressure from putting their draft out in front of classmates, where saving face is more critical than in any interaction with an instructor.

I often use an informal yet effective mechanism for exchange: everyone has to give two reviews and receive two. I let the students work out whose work they review. They will typically read several drafts before deciding which to review, again exposing them to the writing of their peers. They have some control over selection, at least initially, if they are prompt. The number of drafts requiring a first or second review narrows quickly.

We all work in Word with Track Changes and Comments. This is the best review toolset there is, and learning to use it well is great preparation for working with electronic texts in professional work settings. When students finish reviewing a draft, they post it to the correct point in the thread, under the original draft. We can see at a glance whose drafts have been reviewed by whom. I can look at the review work students are doing and really know what kind of work is taking place.

When we finish a round of review, I will typically ask "Who received a particularly helpful review?" Students are quick to volunteer, and then we can talk about what a good reviewer does. I'll ask that good reviewer if she minds if I put her work up before displaying it on the screen at the front of the room. We can look at her comments, examine how she inserted changes into the draft, read what she said at the end of the text. We can talk about what the writer does next. I'll sometimes offer an extra point to a reviewer if a writer sends me a memo describing the expert assistance he received.

Why does classroom management software work well for peer review? Because it makes revision public, opening a complex process up for view. It teaches collateral skills, like working online with revision tools, naming and attaching files, and keeping track of file versions. It helps create community and mutual inter-dependence in the writing classroom. It keeps things organized and in one place, inside the classroom. And the activity is well suited to the technology.

Bits 13: audience anyone?

9/20/2011

We are deep into our first major assignment in my introcomp, which involves a summary/critique of a text, with special attention to the author's argumentative strategies. We are trying to establish terms of analysis—a common vocabulary we can use throughout the term. I also want to see how well students can read and respond to a source text. Students had the choice of responding to one or more texts: a Michael Pollan piece on why and how individuals should respond to climate change ("Why Bother?" *New York Times Magazine*, 2008, reprinted in *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*), a recent essay in *The New Yorker* by science journalist Michael Specter ("Test-Tube Burgers, May 21, 2011) about attempts to culture protein cells in the lab as a potential meat replacement, and a TED talk by Josette Sheeran, head of the UN's World Food Program, titled "Ending Hunger Now" (July 2011). All three are engaging arguments by powerful communicators—just the fodder we need for rhetorical analysis.

I started worrying about audience, as I tend to do. Is there any real audience for such assignments, ones that call for close reading and analysis, followed by summary and critique? Sure, we can say "Your peers are your audience," or "You are writing to a college-educated audience," or even "I am the real audience, your professor." However, none of these constructions is particularly useful in offering novice writers the sense of a real audience, or even a seriously imagined one.

Then two pieces came my way that encouraged me to keep thinking about audience. Cathy Davidson, writing in the *Chronicle* (of Higher Education) *Review* (Sept. 2, 2011) observes that her Duke students' online writing in class blogs was "incomparably better" than the writing they did on her traditional assignments (term papers and structured academic writing). Oh no, I panicked, I am teaching traditional writing! I should be doing blogs instead with my first-year students and they would not demonstrate the "jargon, stilted diction, poor word choice, rambling thoughts, and even pretentious grammatical errors" that Davidson found in the "traditional writing" of her students. They'd discover a real audience in the blog community and immediately write well.

But then this morning, I was reading a piece by Carol Severino and Mary Trachsel, both University of Iowa rhetoric faculty ("Theories of Specialized Discourses and Writing Fellows Programs," *Across the Disciplines.* Spring, 2008.**).** They nicely tease out two schools of thinking—that we are either preparing students for general academic writing tasks, or we are preparing students to become specialists within disciplinary contexts. Lo and behold, their evidence suggests, contrary to everything I believe, that the tasks students frequently face, confirmed by the experience of embedded writing fellows and feedback from disciplinary professors, are actually quite limited and general. Students most frequently encounter a generalized kind of academic writing that requires a response to a text. Whew, I am safe. I am doing just what students need to learn. Panic allayed, without drugs. Just take two articles and call me in the morning.

Bits 14: working with a book

9/20/2011

I mentioned in a post last summer that I was going to require my first-year comp students to write a paper based on their experience reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, an immensely popular non-fiction book that was selected on our campus as a shared summer reading for all incoming students. We are in the middle of the assignment--so far so good.

I am convinced that everyone in my class has read the book, and most have intelligent things to say. The book works well in part because of the range of issues it raises. As part of thinking through ideas for their papers, we listed themes from the book that might be the focus of discussion: racial bias in healthcare settings, research ethics, tissue culture and cloning, the complex research process that the author pursued, healthcare and scientific literacy, and issues of class and education. I haven't seen the drafts yet—they are due Wednesday—but my sense is that the students are working hard and developing strong drafts. We worked to articulate thesis statements that would represent a real position or stance on some thematic issue in the book. We also spent time workshopping one proposed thesis to see what episodes in the book might be discussed as part of the paper. We do all this work in public space, via Sakai, using the Forum tool.

I decided to give a couple of reading quizzes just to make sure the students were all getting through the book. On the first quiz, I asked a set of factual questions about memorable events—anyone reading with any level of attention would do well with these questions. (What kind of cancer did Henrietta have? Cervical. What stands in the lobby of Johns Hopkins. A statue of Jesus.) Everyone did so well that I switched up on the second quiz, asking meaningful questions that had no fixed answer. (Who was the most ethical person in the book? For whom did you feel the most sympathy? With whom did you identify?) These questions led naturally to a good discussion about how we use our reading experience to inform our writing about texts. It matters where our points of personal engagement arise, since these points of connection often lead to interpretive arguments and strongly felt positions.

I know, because I asked, that few students (3-4 out of 22) had read the book over summer, as we had instructed them to do. No surprise there. But there was no resistance to reading it as part of our course, and some were also writing about the book in their First Year Experience meetings. Now that they have read it, I am surprised at the perceptive comments they offer. For me, this assignment confirms a belief I have held for many years—that students deserve to read quality books, books that readers would actually choose to read. I still recall what one student at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale wrote on a college-wide survey of reading and writing practices I administered in 1983: “I wish we could read some REAL books, not just textbooks.” Just suppose if, in every class at the university across the whole curriculum, we required at least one REAL book. The outcomes, I am convinced, would be remarkable.

Bits 15: attention to detail

11/1/2011

My introcomp students are working on annotated bibliographies this week, working in styles appropriate to their disciplines (MLA, APA, Chicago, CSE). Writer's Help is turning out to be a great resource, as students can go to the different models and figure out how to apply the information to their particular source information. I know some instructors prefer that everyone work with MLA and hope that whatever students learn will transfer to disciplinary standards sometime in the future, but I find that students are motivated to learn the expectations of their disciplines. A few questions in class the other day established that some of the students had paper assignments in other classes, and that those classes expected Chicago style in one case, CSE in a second, and APA in a third. I suggested we might as well concentrate on learning what we are likely to need.

This kind of work, which calls for attention to detail, is really quite technical. Students need to figure out exactly what kind of source they have, find their way to a matching model, and then apply it to the source at hand. Even if all the source information is at hand, getting citations correctly formatted is a challenge: name formats, colons, spacing, italics, capitalization, parentheses, periods, commas. Can we focus on details, notice tiny differences, work toward utter consistency?

Getting the layout correct is a challenge, too. Most students have not learned how to create a hanging indent or how to adjust the indents on the ruler bar. As soon as we project someone's bibliography and turn on the Show/Hide Paragraph in Word, we see the mess behind the method: tabs, paragraph breaks, forced line breaks, and a reliance on the space bar to line up information. When I show students how to do this formatting cleanly, they say "Gee, I thought I was pretty good with Word but I never knew how to do this stuff." A quick lesson on format styles and the quick styles bar gets a few interested in how to start controlling a text with style tags.

Is all this useful learning? My suspicion is that most professors are happy if students use sources and provide reasonably consistent citations. Only a few of these students would ever actually submit a paper to a journal or write a thesis that called for the kind of precision we are practicing this week. Yet I think that slowing learning down at certain points and focusing attention on the tiniest details must have value for a wide range of pursuits. So the meaningful question I would pose for my students is "Can you, when called upon to do so, get something perfectly correct in detail?" The answer is relevant to measuring laboratory values, constructing data tables, writing a resume, filling out a tax form, reporting the results of an audit, setting up a machine, or any number of work activities. And I hope some of what we are doing transfers.

Bits 16: the research paper

11/15/2011

During an informal discussion in our department the other day, some of us writing teachers were talking about the genres we assign in first-year writing. Of course, the genre of “The Research Paper” loomed large, and I wondered out loud if the definite article signaled some special generic status—some sort of reification or calcification. I think it does.

There are other ways to talk about assignments, including the simple change to “a research paper,” or better yet, “a researched paper” or “papers that use research findings to make their arguments.” The rephrasings move us toward the indefinite or newly known, and they move us from nouns and noun substantives toward more reliance on descriptive, adjectival phrases. That last rephrasing really tips the scale, as it invites reflection on what “research findings” are, where we find them, and how we use them. But any of these alternative locutions would free up some of the generic presuppositions behind the genre, offering a bit of breathing room for determining exactly what is expected.

And students do arrive with expectations. A surprising number of my first-year students had written The Research Paper in high school, typically in their senior English but sometimes, too, in history or social studies. They know the genre is mainly about compiling a lot of source material and somehow organizing it into a long paper bracketed between a title page and a list of references. They are pretty sure it is double spaced. They also know it is not The Five-Paragraph Essay, a much less intimidating and more practiced genre.

Scholars in composition studies have critiqued the research paper genre and suggested productive alternatives, centered on personally meaningful and motivated searches, on entering into dialogue with sources, or on exploratory ventures into new realms of knowledge. All attempt to soften the genre, to make it something more pliable or elastic, which I take to be a good thing. Writers need to know they are creating something, as opposed to replicating something.

My own approach is to suggest early in the term that most of the writing we do for classes, mine included, is researched. Writers deliberately seek to inform themselves before launching exposition or argument. So we start by responding to a single text or placing two texts in dialogue. We move toward more exploratory writing, where several sources, textual or human, are in play. We then move to the much more difficult task of bringing multiple sources into play with the goal of gaining some real sense of the complexity of most important questions.

In the process, students get a glimpse of scholarly discourse and some inkling of what it might mean to know a literature. They gain a limited sense of what a discipline is, how expert communities work, how theories get supported, and what research—the verb, not the noun--means.

Bits 17: undone

11/30/2011

As we move quickly through the final week of fall term, I think about what we were able to accomplish in my introcomp, but also about what we were not. At UD, we have only single semester required of first-year students, so activities are compressed and course goals need to be well focused.

I typically have at least one collaborative writing assignment, one that requires students to compose with another student or as part of a team, but I was trying not to overload students with the number of major assignments, and I decided not to include such an assignment this term. I like collaborative assignments, because students must talk together as they plan, research, and draft, in the process learning from each other. I tend to favor assignments that move writing from an individual toward some more social activity. It's important to learn how to work toward a shared outcome, where the reward of a well-constructed text is also shared. I suspect that more often than not, when we talk about collaboration in introcomp, we have in mind peer review, but not full-fledged collaborative authoring. On the single assignment where I suggested collaboration as an option, only one pair of students took me up on the offer, and they produced an excellent text. Next time, I'd like to find a way to require more collaboration.

I tried using learning lists: having students self-identify problems, errors, confusing points of usage, things they know they need to learn. This assignment was to stretch across the semester, with students keeping a table of their targeted learning and documenting what they were working on and what the outcome was. My goal was to encourage students to take some control over their own learning, and in the process to figure out how they learn best —through using the handbook or rhetoric, doing exercises, working with a tutor, or taking some other approach. My reminders to the students that they ought to be working on their lists felt more like nagging than teaching. And I was never sure if my marginal comments ("You need to figure out how to use a semicolon. Put it on your learning list.") hit the mark. I am not done with learning lists; I just need to figure out how to help students develop them incrementally and to really take ownership.

I always end up feeling as though I failed to make sufficient use of our textbooks. We frequently used *Writer's Help* in class, and when students asked questions, I tended to deflect them with a question of my own: "Where would you look that up?" Students would laugh and say "*Writer's Help*." And we'd pursue the answers in class, using my projected laptop to search or to find an answer in the table of contents. I also assigned chapters in our rhetoric textbook, and I pointed students to various chapters that would offer them useful advice for particular assignments. Yet it did not seem that we got to the point where students would naturally turn to these resources without prompting. I don't mean to sound too glum, because I could see some students applying advice or models to their writing, and others took it upon themselves to work on exercises to improve their control. But not everyone. I'd like to figure out how to help students realize the value in their textbook purchases by becoming expert users.

Semesters always close like this, at least for me. I think about potential, and I think about what actually happened, and I start imagining what to do next time around.

Bits 18: final assignment

12/13/2011

Maybe it has occurred to you that we don't get our best work from students in the rush at the end of term? When I work with writing in the disciplines, I always suggest making important projects due well before the last week. In my own introcomp class, I regularly use a final assignment that focuses attention on writing in other classes and brings our class to a close in a manageable fashion.

I ask students to write 3 questions for a final essay exam for one of their other courses. Whether or not they actually have a final essay exam scheduled, I figure it is good practice to predict what will be on the final, review material, make some notes in preparation, and be ready to do well. We discuss how to write well formed questions that call for synthesis or analysis of complicated learning.

We look at the sections of *Writer's Help* that discuss how to analyze writing assignments, what the important verbs are, and what kinds of questions are asked by various disciplines. Students submit their draft questions under Sakai Forum (our class management software), and we work in groups to analyze and improve the draft questions. Outside of class, I also go through their questions and give them feedback. Students rewrite and repost to Sakai.

We discuss how to manage a timed writing assignment—how to begin by restating the question and indicating purpose and scope, and then how to front load an essay with important information. Even with good planning, many students run out of time, so we talk about how to be sure the instructor knows where the answer is heading, even if the student does not get there. I suggest it is useful to indicate where information is coming from—the text, other outside readings, lectures, films, or other sources. We talk about these tasks as having a primary purpose of displaying learning.

Before the in-class exam session, I go through their questions again and choose one for each student. On the chosen day, students bring their laptops (as they generally do), and they have the class session to write and submit their essay response. I ask for two pages, single spaced, with space breaks between paragraphs. That's a lot of writing for one period—but with their level of preparation, most students get close. I help them keep track of time, and I suggest during the last 5 minutes that they stop, reread, and make edits.

I actually enjoy reading these final essays. They tend to be loaded with content on a variety of disciplines—nutrition, economics, marine studies, psychology, history, chemistry—so I am learning something and getting a glimpse into other classrooms. I don't edit closely. I provide broad feedback on content and remark on the quality of writing. To be honest, I don't spend a lot of time marking these papers, as our course is essentially over and the primary learning was done as preparation rather than performance.

When I meet my colleagues in the hallways, they are carrying big bags with major assignments they have spent all weekend grading. I smile and nod sympathetically when they tell me how harried their final week has been. I tell them I tend to have my big assignments due well before the end of term, and that I've enjoyed reading a final sample of writing from my students, one that won't be revised.

Bits 19: buying the textbook

1/11/2012

It's common knowledge that many college students choose not to buy certain of their required textbooks, finding ways to obtain, share, or get along without. A widely cited study by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group published in April 2011 found that 7 in 10 students report having chosen not to purchase a textbook at some time. That's only one way to ask the question, of course. Another way to ask the question is reflected in the discussion during summer 2010 in the *New York Times*, which suggests that on average, 78% of students buy their textbooks. That leaves 22% who don't, still a disturbing statistic.

Cost is the main reason students offer for not buying books. With *Writer's Help*, we've tried to keep the cost reasonable—about $35 for a two-year subscription, which can be extended to 4 years for an additional $5. But I don't think cost is the primary driver. It's perception of value and likelihood of use. Students learn that they can get by in many courses on lecture notes or PowerPoint slides, course Website materials, and class discussion. Students are also adept at finding e-versions of textbooks, quite a few of which float freely on the internet and can be downloaded to personal devices.

I find it hard to imagine reading an accounting or criminology textbook on my smartphone, but that is just what one student described in a panel discussion we hosted at last spring's CCCC. His approach was to download what could be found online for free, and he noted he was successful with remarkable frequency. He admitted that reading on a small screen was not optimal, but he also noted that he lived his life in a balance between what was optimal and what he felt he could afford. This student was non-traditional, a tradesman and head of household, someone seeking a change to a more meaningful career. One had to be sympathetic.

This student had purchased *Writer's Help* and felt good about it. He had used it as the textbook for two courses, and he turned to it frequently for support in his disciplinary courses. He knew he had certain problems of grammar and punctuation and was working with Writer's Help to improve. He also was quite familiar with the citation sections and turned there when he had papers for both his English and other classes. His instructors had assigned exercises and chapters in *Writer's Help*, and they made frequent and purposeful use of the resource in class. Outside the class, when he needed a personal statement for a scholarship application, he searched *Writer's Help*. He didn't find specific advice or a good model, but his search did lead him to other useful information. As we talked, he figured out he was not aware of the many annotated models, and he immediately saw another value in the resource.

We've been working with the reporting tools in *Writer's Help* to make sure instructors can see individual performance in Gradebook and Scorecard. And new Student Activity reports are being created. These tools should help instructors give instructors insight into patterns of usage and alert them to students who have not purchased the book or making no use of it. Knowing what students are doing with the book should also help us change our approaches in productive ways, increasing the value of the book to our students.

Bits 20: colleagues, not adjuncts

1/11/2012

We lost a colleague this week. Professor Patrick White, AKA Whitey, received his MA and PhD in literature from UD, and he continued to teach for us, essentially being a member of our department since the mid-80s. Most English departments have such faculty, typically teaching writing or general education courses, working part time or on some temporary contract arrangement. They are our adjuncts, our part-timers, our lecturers, our contingent faculty.

Whitey's experience in the past few years was anything but typical. In 2008, Whitey went in for open-heart surgery and came out a triple amputee. He suffered an allergic reaction to the Heparin that was administered as part of his surgery, a rare but not unknown adverse event. With the help of our administration, we were able to move Whitey to a fulltime, continuing, non-tenure-track appointment, one with job security, good pay, department voting rights, and most importantly, health insurance.

Whitey rehabbed quickly, intent on resuming his teaching, and he was soon seen first in a wheel chair and then walking with the aid of prosthetics. When asked how he could continue to even think about teaching with his disabilities, his reply was quick: "I'm not a dancer, for goodness sake; I am a teacher." He continued to garner the stellar evaluations his students had showered on him throughout his career.

I last saw Whitey in December at a meeting of our writing faculty. He was late. He had fallen and was obviously hurting, but not so much that he didn't want to talk about developing a new course in the history of technical communication. Not long after, he fell again, this time breaking his shoulder. It didn't want to heal and led to complications that eventually took his life.

Whitey wasn't formally trained in professional writing or rhetoric. He came to know how to teach through experience in secondary classrooms, the Job Corps, the local technical college, our community college, and the university. Because his teaching was so outstanding in so many different assignments, it wasn't difficult for the department and university to get behind the hire.

Some good has come from Whitey's situation. The State of Delaware passed legislation to make sure that those who need limb prosthetics are able to get them, no matter what their insurance protection. We are all more attuned to the critical importance of health insurance. We are more appreciative of the teaching done for our university under contract. And we have wider recognition of the importance of creating good, full-time teaching positions for our writing programs.

We've made progress in the past 10 years at UD in terms of converting part-time, temporary contracts into full-time continuing positions, hoping to employ excellent teachers in good jobs, where we can benefit from their commitment to our department and university. We've made progress in decreasing our reliance on contingent faculty and increasing our reliance on continuing full-time faculty. We've got more to do on this score, as do many schools. Nationally, as we all know, the trends are in the opposite direction, toward fewer tenure lines, more reliance on contingent faculty, and more teaching by MA holders as opposed to PhD. We need to keep working to create good positions for those who teach in our colleges.

Bits 21: acknowledgements and collaboration

1/11/2012

It's a good idea to encourage student writers to include acknowledgements in their papers. Doing so highlights the social nature of writing—most of our ideas and arguments come from interaction with others. Acknowledgements reinforce good habits, such as making sure some friendly but critical eyes pass over a paper before it is turned in. Acknowledgements testify to important interactions leading up to finished work, for example, the development work accomplished with a writing center tutor or the time spent in the instructor's office going over ideas and arguments. And acknowledging assistance is a gratifying professional act of generosity, a mature reflection of the coaching in good manners that shaped our toddler days. What's the magic word?

Acknowledgements legitimate the typical sources of help that all writers get with their writing. When our ethical postures in the classroom tip too strongly toward the negative poles of plagiarism and cheating, encouraging acknowledgements offers a positive counter-valence. Students need to know that we want them to collaborate, that we expect them to seek help, and that they should value those who can provide substantial and helpful review commentary. We can reinforce this positive thinking by sharing our own experiences—what happens during informal review from a colleague or formal peer review from a journal's editors.

Students often are surprised or uncertain how they ought to handle acknowledgements. But it is not so difficult. I ask them to think about the sources of help or influence on a paper and then to include a brief note, either at the bottom of the opening page or after the concluding. Suggesting acknowledgements brings out humorous exchanges between instructor and students—"Should I thank my mom for proofreading?" Yes, of course. Acknowledging human sources of help is a nice counterpart to acknowledging source information from readings or Web sites.

Encouraging students to include acknowledgements is also a way to focus on the virtues of collaborative work and learning. Many of us use peer review of drafts to improve student writing. We can ask our students to identify the excellent peer reviewers in the room, and we can ask those reviewers how they respond to the writing of their peers—how do they approach the text? We can look at the texts that are marked up and commented upon, bringing into public view what is typically a private exchange over a draft. We have the opportunity to identify and model good approaches to peer review, and the chance to publically identify someone's expert help on a draft can be an important and rewarding part of class.

I am not above sometimes offering a bit of extra credit for a particularly helpful review. I ask students to send me a memo if they get a really great review, telling me what they learned, what they revised, and why the advice or approach was so helpful. I tend to structure my courses around point systems, with a total of 100 potential points for the term. From time to time, as with good reviews, I'll offer an extra credit point. Being an expert reviewer is such a useful academic and workplace skill that we should all find ways to recognize and reward those who are best at it. Acknowledgements are a good way to start.

Bits 22: a timeline assignment

3/22/2012

My fellow Bits blogger, Traci Gardner, recently posted *Timeline Tools for the Writing Classroom*, wherein she points us toward useful design tools for creating timelines. She also points to a Bits blog from Jay Dolmage, which highlights his *Favorite Week One Activity: Revisiting the Timeline*. In his assignment, Jay has students construct a personal timeline, from birth to now, as a way of constructing life narratives.

These posts were helpful to me, as I had already planned a timeline activity for my class in professional rhetoric. Where Jay's assignment was personal, mine was more academic. We had spent some time discussing and drawing concept maps relating various key terms in rhetoric with roots in the classical Greek and Roman traditions. I asked students to choose a single term or concept of enduring utility and map it over its history. Students chose such terms as oratory, argument, logic, rhetorical education, genre, epistemology, and Aristotelian rhetoric.

We talked some about major periods in Western history that might offer timeline divisions (Greek, Roman, medieval, renaissance, enlightenment, modern, contemporary). We searched out and shared resources for working across rhetorical history, both online and print. Working on three-person teams, the teams then proceeded to map their terms across history, identifying key figures, activities, events, and developments. Each team appointed a team leader, a lead researcher, and a graphic designer. I gave them a link to the Bits posts, so they could think about timelines and tools.

There was a lot I liked about the assignment. It gave students a chance to think broadly about the arc of history, and it allowed them to focus on a single concept and its associated practices. It helped them develop a sense for the span of time—what was going on when in Western civilization, something I would consider an important outcome of an undergraduate education. They could begin to sense what we inherit from the classical tradition and how certain ideas have continuity and usefulness even to the present day. They had to sort through information, and they had to work to shape the short but informative pieces of text that a timeline can accommodate. They had to think a lot about form and content—how a graphic depiction based on chronology can be informative about the history of an idea. I gave them a strict limit of 8½" x 22", so they needed to select and arrange information with efficiency. Those who chose an online tool had no space restriction and could layer information within expanding nodes.

On the due date, we posted our timelines, displayed a few in class, and did cross-team reviews, where they got to comment on the work of each other team. We talked about the tools they had chosen, and we talked a little about design challenges. I then extended the due date a week to give the teams a chance to use what they had learned from reviewing the timelines of the other teams. A week later, we looked at the much revised and redesigned timelines, with a lot of friendly commentary about clever ways to use Word, the limits of free online design tools, and the ways that visuals and text can be integrated into a whole, balanced composition.

Students are glad to have a writing sample for their ePortfolios that does not look like a school essay, and they are glad to have something that demonstrates some background in rhetorical theory. The teams worked well and the opportunity to compare work increased quality dramatically. I can imagine, as you can, dozens of other kinds of timelines in various subject. The technology threshold is low, but the opportunity to develop clever designs is wide open.

Bits 23: problem-based learning

4/22/2012

My school, the University of Delaware, is a recognized leader in problem-based learning (PBL). As soon as I arrived 11 years ago, I signed up for a workshop to learn more about the teaching method. What I quickly realized was that PBL made sense for both writing classrooms and writing in the disciplines. I now lead our Institute for Transforming Undergraduate Education, working with faculty from many disciplines who are interested in promoting problem-based learning and other forms of active, engaged teaching. We provide workshops on our campus and on campuses in various parts of the U.S. and the rest of the world.

“Learning begins with a problem” is our mantra. Instead of lectures, readings, presentations, or discussion, in a PBL classroom, teams of students are first given a problem to solve. They figure out what the problem is, what they already know, and what they need to learn. They divide up their learning issues—what they need to learn—and do the necessary research, then share it amongst the team members on their way to presenting a solution. The method has its roots in medical education, having originated (to some accounts) at the University of New Mexico.

The method fosters those outcomes we wish to see across disciplines: mastery of content, certainly, but also teamwork, research, and communication skills. Students can be coached to use writing to manage their teams, by setting out rules for team behaviors, constructing tables of known and needed information, mapping progress, planning and delivering presentations, and writing recommendation or solution reports. Problems arise out of and are situated within complex situations, typically within narrative or dramatic scenarios. Problems provide a real or realistic context for communication.

PBL has affinities with other forms of engaged learning, especially POGIL (Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning), team-based learning, and case-based learning. They differ in the particular means of structuring problem or lessons, in the open or closed nature of problems, and in extent of teacher control and predetermination of outcomes. All such methods are on the rise, both in public schools and colleges. The methods tend to most immediate acceptance in science or STEM education (science, technology, engineering, math), but many fields have picked up on one method or another. They share a rejection of lecture or other attempts to tell students directly what they need to know, and they tend to rely on team performance as the natural vehicle of learning.

All such methods have some strong reliance on writing as a means of learning and demonstration of learning. Each moves writing out of the role it enjoys in a writing classroom, as the end of all activity. Active learning restores writing to a more normal role, as a way of learning, of supporting team performance, and of documenting the outcomes of larger work activities.

If you would like to know more about PBL, check out PBL@UD, which tells about our efforts and hosts the PBL Clearinghouse, a repository of tested, peer-reviewed problems from all disciplines.

Bits 24: training initiatives in problem-based learning

6/11/2012

I wrote in my last Bits post that my school, the University of Delaware, is a recognized leader in problem-based learning (PBL). As a consequence, our faculty leaders are frequently asked to consult with other campuses who are developing instruction around PBL.

In April, I keynoted the Nineteenth Annual Mary E. Benjamin Conference on Educational Access at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, a historically black university. The conference pulls a large audience from around the state, including all levels of education. What was striking to me was the commitment and progress made in the lower grades to adopting active, problem-based, team-based approaches to learning. Representatives from the State Department of Education spoke of the broad, state-wide commitment to PBL and the links to improved outcomes in terms of communication skills, teamwork, and critical thinking.

During May I spent two days with Mike Palmquist and his faculty at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins, keynoting their instructional development conference and conducting a half-day workshop on PBL. Mike directs TILT at CSU, The Institute for Teaching and Learning. Mike and his team have developed a range of programs to foster improved teaching and learning: short courses for students, study groups, skills workshops, all set within a beautifully restored historic building that previously served as the campus library. The faculty at CSU are pursuing a range of initiatives centered on integrated, active, engaged learning. It was clear that the interest in problem-based or project-based learning was already strong at CSU, and it was great to be able to share ideas and approaches with this motivated team of faculty from across the university.

During June, I spent three days with faculty at Palo Alto Community College in San Antonio, Texas, conducting an introduction to PBL with my colleague Mark Serva from our College of Business and Economics. Mark and I found a very receptive audience on a campus with a strong commitment to a five-year Quality Enhancement Plan focused on PBL. Our hosts, Joseph Coppola (Speech professor and Director of Instructional and Professional Development) and Mary-Ellen Jacobs (English professor and C0-Chair of the QEP program) are doing great work supporting an initial cohort of faculty who will be the first wave of transformation toward PBL.

Over the three days, the Palo Alto faculty developed clever and resourceful problems on topics including the following: determining the equity of various property tax formulations, creating placards for museum drawings (art/drawing), determining the best ways of organizing and regulating teams (speech communication), developing a model for cost/benefit analysis of prostate cancer screening (statistics), and determining an effective response plan for a chemical spill from a rail accident (chemistry). Faculty will continue to develop their instructional problems and take them into classrooms this summer and fall. They will have continuing support for instructional transformation as a part of the QEP. We hope to see many of these problems published at the Clearinghouse at UD.

Bits 25: improving *Writer's Help*

7/24/2012

We had a team meeting at Bedford today in Boston to talk about *Writer's Help:* adoptions, training, feedback, new ideas. Writer's Help is doing well, with adoptions at a wide range of institutions, including community colleges, small colleges, and big state schools. We are getting good feedback from instructors and students. They like the ease of use, the deep and diverse content, the exercises and model annotated texts.

A big change underway will migrate *Writer's Help* from its existing platform to a new Microsoft-based server. This move will be behind-the-scenes for students and teachers, but very important for the growth and improvement of the product. The new platform will allow for speedy performance for the growing community of users, with room for the expansion we anticipate in the numbers of users. It will support an up-to-date interface that allows full Windows flexibility. Most importantly, the move will allow us to add content and keep examples and models fresh.

New for fall will be a totally new module on multimodal composing created by Danielle DeVoss, of Michigan State University. Also new, but not noticeable to all, is the reworking of *Writer's Help* to improve meet accessibility criteria for users who are challenged by some form of disability. There has also been continual improvement in the search engine to improve its speed, accuracy, and helpfulness.

We continue to learn from class tests, as well as student and teacher surveys. When teachers ask for changes, we work to accommodate. So new tools allow for more efficient use of tags to group related pages and assign content to students. The extensive set of exercises now feature links to content pages, so anytime a student responds to an exercise item, a link is presented that takes the student directly to relevant pages. In the works are new features that will increase the social interactivity of the site. Enhancements will also afford more individual customization.

Bedford has a great team in place on this project, and it's been a wonderful experience for me to work on the development of an innovative new e-handbook. It takes a team-- editors, media specialists, programmers, designers, marketers, and sales people—working with authors (Nancy Sommers and me) to develop a new model for writing handbooks.

Bits 26: baby steps: tip-toeing toward multimodal texts

9/11/2012

I like to push my first-year comp students in small ways toward multimodal composing. Our program has tended to focus on traditional genres of researched academic writing, especially argument. We have only a single term first-year requirement, and our thinking has been, and continues to be, that we need to prepare students for what is to come in their undergraduate majors. But we are opening up, step by step, to new sorts of texts. *Writer's Help* is like this—newer content on multimodal composition, visual rhetoric, and text design now complement the more traditional materials of earlier Bedford handbooks. To be honest, I don't know if our changes will lead the way on our campus or simply follow what professors in other disciplines are already doing.

The digital evolution of our writing program was signaled during our instructors' workshop just before classes began. Our Writing Director (Melissa Ianetta) and Assistant Director (Michael McCamley) had spent part of their summer "vacation" at the Ohio State University Digital Media and Composition Institute, returning with great assignment ideas and new skills. They did some show and tell, along with other faculty. Our Professional Writing professor Candice Welhausen did a workshop on visual rhetoric, and our Journalism professor, Dawn Fallik, did a workshop on digital video story telling, using a series she had created during the summer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, all focused on the beach—or the New Jersey *shore*, if you prefer.

I have always stressed some level of document design in my classes. In first-year comp, I encourage students from day one to think about text design. It's baby steps: figure out how to use the tool bars to insert a footer with short title and pagination, figure out how to make the first page different from following pages, think about dividing your text with headings. I encourage students to develop a template to their liking, typically with single-spaced paragraphs, wide margins, nice space breaks between paragraphs, well-formatted headings, and perhaps a rule separating the footer from the body text. In my first assignment this fall, a letter introducing themselves as writers to me, I asked them to insert a picture of themselves so I could start associating faces and names, but also to see if they could work with text and image.

Their first major assignment focused on campus diversity, and I asked them to consider inserting a picture of someone they interviewed about campus diversity or to insert an image from the university Web site that represents diversity. I also suggested they insert a recording (sound or video) of their interviewee. I'll know by Friday if anyone takes me up on this. Subsequent assignments will have them create tables (for their learning lists, for example) or insert diagrams or charts (for an argument on student finance, credit, and debt). We'll keep working with text design, increasing their skills on each assignment, figuring out how to work with text and objects. I'll give them latitude, encourage them to try things, and when I see something inventive, ask if I can share it with the class.

Students are naturally conservative, bringing expectations with them about writing for English classes—all double-spaced paragraphs and all words, as if we were all still working on a typewriter. It takes awhile for them to believe me that I want them to be creative and inventive in how they shape their texts. But each term, I get quite a few surprises and move students at least a little ways toward thinking about texts as opportunities for multimodal composition.

Bits 27: writing about financial literacy

10/3/2012

Q: What's the most important test score you will ever receive?

A: Your credit score.

That was the opening gambit of a guest speaker in my introcomp class a couple weeks ago. As part of a writing assignment on student debt, credit cards, and loans, Barbara Emery of our UD Center for Economic Education and Entrepreneurship engaged the students in a broad discussion of financial literacy. Her point was that students were now building a credit history, and their credit scores would determine the kinds and terms of financing available to them in the future. That score would determine what they could afford and how much they would end up paying. She used several compelling charts and examples of the true cost of buying on credit. She introduced terms such as *opportunity cost* and *APR*, while outlining what good debt looks like and why education might sometimes be good debt.

I suspect it is not typical in our comp classes to write about personal finance, or broad issues of student debt and the credit crisis. But I thought that these are issues that are best addressed early. Very few of the students in my class—pretty much all fresh out of high school—had had any instruction in issues of credit and debt. Most probably don't catch the series on student debt in the *New York Times*, and some may be insulated from concerns if they come from families who are able to manage the cost of a pricey school. Debt issues are interesting in part because they are both technical in finance terms and personally rich in the stories that are told by people who get in over their heads. College students are a prime target of lenders, so the topic had some immediacy.

I have very particular reasons for assignments like this. It's fairly easy to form an argumentative stance, and I gave them a half dozen position statements, just in case they were not clear how a claim ought to be stated. Here are a couple that I offered, with the option of using one or creating an alternative:

- Many for-profit colleges have predatory lending practices that encourage students to pile up levels of debt that will cripple them later in life. The colleges benefit, the loan companies benefit, and the students lose.
- Many people with debt from college loans handle the situation badly, make stupid mistakes, and end up with debts much larger than they began with. For the most part, those people who end up with crushing debt bring the situation on themselves.

I like to challenge students to work from numbers, and so they were required to construct a data-driven argument. At a very basic level, students need to become comfortable writing sentences that are formed around numbers and comparisons. They also need the kind of visual or quantitative literacies that allow them to interpret a chart or table, and so the assignment required they include at least two visuals. That gave us a chance to talk about how to cite data, how to label tables, and how to connect text and visual in support of an argument. I put students in pairs and required they collaborate on a single paper, because I wanted them in dialogue with someone else about these issues of financial literacy. It helps an argument to have multiple perspectives, and I was hoping they might discover that different students are in different places with regard to financing college. They were able to take notes from the class presentation and figure out how to quote and cite a guest speaker.

Results? Not bad. Over two weeks, we took the papers through a round of peer review and revision, and to be honest, another round could have helped. Students are so accustomed to being rewarded for simply writing about a topic and using some sources that they have a hard time shaping an argument with an edge and focus. But we are making progress. In their cover memos, they expressed appreciation for writing about something that concerned their own lives, and several noted having made friends with their writing partners. Many rethought issues of majors and job opportunities, and most are at least a little smarter in terms of their finances.

Bits 28: cover memos

10/23/2012

Sometimes small parts of assignments have larger-than-intended effects. This term, I require that all assignments in my introcomp be submitted with a cover memo. We work in Sakai, an open-source class management application, and so we don't use paper or actually print anything, so "cover memo" is a bit anachronistic. But inside the assignment window in Sakai, students have a dialog box and an attachment button. They write a cover memo to me in the box and attach their draft or final version of the assignment when they "turn in" their work.

At first, students didn't know what I was talking about. What's a memo? What's a cover memo? "What do I say, just 'Here's my paper'?" We talked about the cover memo as their opportunity to communicate with me as I was about to review and evaluate their work. I stressed taking advantage of the opportunity to put me in the right frame of mind to engage positively with their work. I suggested a list of items that might be included:

- What have you done well? Where do you need help?
- If you had more time, what would you work on?
- Was this a valuable assignment, a good use of your time? What did you learn?
- Did anyone help you? Was peer review useful? Did you take advantage of the Writing Center? Should you acknowledge sources of help?

I've had to keep stressing these cover memos to get full or fuller compliance. Communicating in a reflective way with a professor is not something that students have practiced. I recall how I felt as an undergrad in a philosophy class at Illinois when Prof. Robinson (Modern Religious Thought) required a note attached to papers identifying the weakest points in the argument. It was like revealing our own shortcomings. Such challenges are, I am convinced, a strong link in learning. Taking a reflective pause after completing a project is the best way to start to internalize one's own learning.

As we've gone along, and we are now past mid-term, the cover memos have become fuller. Students really are communicating about their difficulties and accomplishments. They are starting to praise the feedback they are getting from their peer reviewers. They are becoming more self-critical, and they have more to say about areas of weakness in their work. I encourage them to use cover memos when they post draft for peer review, so they orient the reviewer get the targeted help they need. We will keep working on that.

I tend to think a lot about work-related writing skills. It's important to be able to write a concise memo or email, one with a clear communicative purpose. So there is value in the rehearsal of writing quick and effective memos, a very different genre from the drafted and revised papers we are working on. In my studies of revision in work settings, I know how common it is for authors to simply circulate a text to a work group, asking for "comments by Friday." How much better to contextualize the review, offer some guidance on where effort is most welcomed and what kind of help will most benefit the draft. Everyone can use time better with a fuller review context and some guidance.

I don't know how unusual this practice of cover memos is, and I'd be happy to hear that others are doing something similar, or something better and more highly evolved. I know it is something I will continue to use to encourage learning in my class.

Bits 29: model researched papers

SAB, 11/12/2012

One feature of *Writer's Help* that both students and teachers appreciate are thirty annotated model researched papers. These papers represent a variety of genres, from business proposals, to research reviews, to reflection papers. They represent different styles, including APA, MLA, Chicago, and CSE (Council of Science Editors). Each has marginal annotations identifying its characteristic features. These models reflect our belief that many writers go to models when called upon to produce texts, especially in genres where the writers have limited experience. Because *Writer's Help* is Web served, we don't have page limitations, and so our collection of models is particularly rich and varied. And we continue to add to the store of models of both formal reports, as well as many sorts of everyday documents.

In my introcomp this term, I used another sort of model as the basis for two linked assignments. Our writing program has a yearly contest for the best writing in our introcomp course, and we print the winning papers for use in our classes the following year. That gives instructors a useful collection of 6 to 8 papers, printed in a high quality booklet, with introductory notes from and pictures of the student writers, illustrations from graphic artists, and spiffy typesetting on quality paper. The winning papers tend to be longer, researched papers, representing a range of disciplines. These papers, coming from our own students, have increased appeal over the *Writer's Help* models and represent a meaningful standard of excellence for our students in our program.

I asked students to choose one of the anthologized papers, and to do a kind of reverse outline, showing how the author organized the paper and developed the argument. They could use a traditional outline, some kind of drawing, a concept map, flowchart, or some other way of visually mapping the paper's organization and argument. They were then to write an accompanying description and critique of how the author managed the paper—how claims were introduced, or evidence used, or lines of argument developed.

In the second assignment, students again chose a paper, the same one or a different one, and analyzed specifically how the author used sources. They described the author's use of the source as part of the paper's exposition or argument, and then they tracked down the citation and investigated whether the source was accurately cited, used appropriately in the paper, paraphrased or quoted effectively, and formatted according to the appropriate style guide.

These might seem like somewhat mechanical assignments, perhaps viewed as derivative since based on someone else's writing. But my students really took to the assignment, with inventive argument maps and careful analysis. They tracked down the sources, and in a surprising number of instances, found problems with the uses of sources: misleading quotations (where words were twisted a bit to fit the author's point) or missing or inaccurate information in citations, which made it difficult to track down the source. Some students who had not excelled on previous assignments found they were well suited to this kind of investigative and analytical writing.

I was a little nervous going in that the students might think I was asking for busywork, but many students said in their cover memos that these assignments were valuable--that looking closely at another student's strong work gave them good grounding for doing comparable work themselves. They liked analyzing the arguments and then looking closely at how sources were used to support those arguments. They liked the fact checking, and they liked assessing whether an author was being fair to the source material. They learned something about close editing, including the important lesson that even work that looks polished and careful might have problems with the use and documentation of sources. This kind of learning parallels the findings of The Citation Project, which is closely documenting student practices, and mispractices, in working with source material. All of this was good preparatory work for their own researched papers, which I anticipate will be better and more carefully delivered because of these two preparatory assignments.

Bits 30: mentoring new TAs

12/9/2012

Strong leadership of our writing program at UD, under the direction of Melissa Ianetta, has created and preserved good teacher training and support for our graduate assistants. New TAs do not teach the first term. Instead, they attend a pre-semester workshop over several days, then enroll in our graduate seminar in teaching composition. They work in the Writing Center learning to tutor, and they observe a class where they can work with a mentor, an experienced writing teacher.

During the second term of graduate work, TAs teach one course on their own and continue to tutor in the Writing Center. During the second year of grad study, they teach two sections one semester and only one section the other. To us, this is a reasonable load, one that allows students to make good progress on their studies while learning to teach well.

I continue to request a section of introcomp each fall term, in large part because the program is so well managed. We have only a one-course requirement for first year, and we focus on the kinds of skills and genres we expect students will need as they move across the curriculum. We have preserved a limit of 22 on introcomp classes, which in these times seems quite reasonable. And each fall, I have the pleasure of mentoring a new TA as she teaches for the first time in a writing classroom. (I have mentored women grad students the last two years, so I will use the feminine singular.)

We plan together and talk over the course frequently. After each class, we talk as we walk back to our offices, thinking through the class sessions, the progress of assignments, and the performance of various students. During early assignments, I invite my TA to look over the student writing and my own comments, commenting herself if she chooses. Our class management system, Sakai, allows my TA to look at what the students turn in and my responses and grading. Later in the term, and assuming it fits her schedule, my TA becomes first reviewer and commenter for some of the students, and I review, add comments, and score the work. Still later, I ask her to comment and score a few of the papers, while I review her comments, add my own, and post the scores.

Throughout the term, we encourage students to take advantage of our office hours, and we encourage students to sign up for scheduled conferences with one or the other of us. This term, about six students signed up to conference with my TA on their major papers, while about 16 signed up with me, which was a good ratio.

Our program rightly establishes certain rules for mentoring. At some point in the term, I encourage the TA to take over some part of our lesson plans and to work from the front of the room. But I don’t absent myself from the classroom, and I don’t use the TA as a convenient substitute for me when I need to be away from campus. Our writing program is pretty clear on what is appropriate mentoring vs. what would be inappropriate in terms of taking advantage of the new grad student. Toward the end of the term, my TA is creating her own syllabus for spring term, and we discuss the shape it will take. Along the way, we talk about what is going on in the composition seminar and how it compares to what I am doing in my class. Because I am teaching and mentoring, I build my own class to follow guidelines for new TAs in terms of assignments and required texts.

Teaching can be an isolating profession—we go into our classrooms and most of the time, we are fully and solely in control. Our TA mentoring program creates a different dynamic—we enjoy a semester long process of observation, reflection, interaction, and discussion. I teach differently because of the observer and her feedback, and I hope she teaches differently because of witnessing my approach. It's a good system.

Bits 31: reading and thinking: *Quiet*

1/15/2013

From time to time in my *Bits* posts, I reflect on something I am reading that affects my thinking about teaching writing. This week it is Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (Crown, 2012). I was alerted to this text by a review in *Time* a few months ago, and the winter break gave me the chance to relax and enjoy the book.

Cain writes from a deep experiential pool and thorough familiarity with the psychological research on personality to make a good case for recognizing the valuable traits of introversion. While not necessarily shy, introverts tend to find socializing, especially with rooms full of strangers, to be tiring and will seek solitude and quiet reflective time. They prefer deep conversation to small talk, and they tend to react more intensely to stimulation than extroverts. They are likely to prefer uninterrupted, concentrated work in isolation over teamwork or a mix of socializing and working. Introverts can be bookish and withdrawn, but they can also exert strong leadership in various settings. Cain is careful about not essentializing introvert behaviors; she recognizes that individuals to some extent are determined by a personality type but also have the flexibility to act in other roles. Introverts can behave like extroverts if they choose—though they will find such behavior taxing.

Introverts are likely to be at some disadvantage in our classrooms, at least to the extent that we expect frequent class participation and collaborative learning. Somewhere between a third and half our students would place somewhere on the introvert side of the personality scale. They would naturally be averse to speaking up in class, and they might panic if expected to speak in front of the class. They might well prefer to write in solitude, and they might find the environment of the classroom over-stimulating. They would likely have the need to retreat from the continual socializing that is expected as part of campus life. As instructors, we tend to want full participation, often measured by having something to say during discussion. It seems appropriate to be careful about how we structure such expectations and how we pressure students to have something to say. We should let students know we value quiet reflection and deep thinking.

Cain considers at some length the differences between the behavior of Asian students and other, more gregarious students in our classrooms. She discusses how strongly ingrained are the tendencies to be quiet, to listen and think, as opposed to speaking out. Strong cultural, and probably genetic, influences shape expectations and values for classroom behavior. A student of Asian background is likely to want to hear and trust what the teacher says, while considering the verbal behavior of outspoken classmates as mere prattle. That same student is likely to have strong encouragement at home to study hard, to be serious, and to be quiet as a way of being respectful toward both parents and teachers. A strong motivation for studying hard is likely to be the commitment to being a serious son or daughter and earning the pride of parents. We should not underestimate such powerful influences over learning, and we ought to think carefully about why Asian students tend to do so well in so many aspects of school learning.

In short, Cain offers a portrait of introverts that ought to influence what behaviors we value and expect. In the process, she introduces a range of experimental data and some genetic evidence that challenges our thinking about preferred personality types. As someone with extrovert tendencies, coupled with the typical extrovert's over-valuing of my own patterns of behavior, her book is a useful brake on my own thinking and behavior. I recommend it to both extroverts and introverts.

Bits 32: commitment to undergraduate education

2/5/2013

We are entering a period of discussion and likely change in the ways large colleges and universities educate their undergraduates. The signs are everywhere. We read daily criticisms of the rising costs of higher ed, with the knife twist that we have offered the same product at increasing rates for the past 50 years. We have disruptive technologies—MOOCs, open source textbooks, Web tutorials like Khan Academy—all working on different models than we are accustomed to. When we look to the data, we see a dismal portrait of student retention and persistence toward degrees within a reasonable timeframe. The picture is particularly bleak in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, math), where attrition rates are very high, disproportionately so for minority students.

Critics are increasingly vocal about lectures as the core delivery mechanism for learning. This is not a new observation, but neither do we have good reasons to justify pulling large numbers of students into big lecture halls for passive listening exercises. At some level, the justification is financial—it is cheap and efficient, in terms of professors' time, to pile large numbers of students into big sections. It's our retreat strategy when the budget gets tight, and the budget is always tight. Increasingly, we don't even put professors in those lecture halls, but adjuncts, part timers, lecturers, or non-tenure-track faculty. The best that can be said is that at least it frees time for research. Never mind the data that shows how little students learn under such circumstances, even when the lecturers are known for their inventive delivery or entertaining style. With so many new technologies delivering content, we have to ask why we put students into lecture halls and how long they will tolerate such an approach.

It will take some will and some redistribution of budget to address the long, slow decline in the quality of education we offer. We have good ideas and very good data that support other methods. We know students need to be active and engaged if they are to learn and remember. We know students need to write, speak with each other, and work collaboratively to achieve deep and lasting learning. We know we need to increase the levels of self-direction and reflective conceptual understanding to improve outcomes. We know we need to get students engaged with projects, clients, studio work, field work, internships, performance-based learning, co-ops, laboratory research, and independent study. We know we have much to figure out if we are to leverage the pervasive, attention-demanding technologies in the service of learning, but we also see huge potential.

I am an optimistic person, and I know that on every campus, many innovative approaches to teaching and learning are underway. But I also recognize the huge, dead weight of a large bureaucratic system. For every innovative classroom, there are many more that persist on the inertia of tradition. Schools are by nature slow to adapt, not particularly agile or fleet footed. Faculty and students in many situations for a very long time have reached accommodative positions—don't work me too hard, don't expect too much, let's get along well enough, and we will all have time to do what we really want to do.

A few schools will likely read the signs and find the will and the resources to reinvent undergraduate education. It will be interesting to follow these schools, so we understand what kind of leadership and what sort of culture supports more effective approaches. We need to look beyond our classrooms or departments to build responsive universities, ones that understand and address current challenges.

Bits 33: writing wikis

3/4/2013

This spring, I am teaching "Introduction to Professional Writing" to a group of 35 undergraduates who are choosing to concentrate in professional writing within our English major. We are exploring career options, developing ePortfolios, gaining familiarity with some central research and theory, developing tools, and imagining what the future holds for writers in workplaces. We are in the middle of a wiki assignment this week, and it is proving to be a challenging rhetorical task.

I have the class divided into teams of five, and each team must make two contributions to TCBOK—the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge wiki. This project is sponsored by the Society for Technical Communication with the purpose of gathering career-related information into a central resource for the profession. Students can choose to contribute new content to one of the many nodes that are at this time content placeholders, or they can choose to further develop and improve existing material. I tend to like the latter option, since so much workplace writing involves reworking existing texts for new purposes and audiences. Students don't yet appreciate that, so most choose to develop new content.

What I like best about writing for TCBOK is that students can start to form a sense of audience beyond me and our class. They have to think about what professional or technical communication is, who belongs to this community, and what might be the expected backgrounds and prior knowledge. They must start to form their own identities as professional writers with something to contribute. My students are newbies, so this is not an easy task. It's also just a little bit intimidating.

TCBOK also requires a contributor to work within certain guidelines, and includes instructions for authors, templates, documentation guidelines, and style sheets. These are new constraints for many of my students, and they struggle as they post and edit their work online. Most are accustomed to composing on their own, as opposed to posting within an existing publishing system. I advised them that on any new project, they would need to take some time to explore the resource they are contributing to and figure out just what it is. We used to talk about "Grokking the system" or really getting to know the technology before trying to document it.

All the teams are now working to figure out how their information can be fit into existing hierarchies, linked appropriately, and edited to a consistent style (a goal, not an attainment). Some students took time to form a model of the system; others did not. Those who did not created informative texts that were redundant or did not fit the existing wiki, so they are having to rework information. Others sized up the wiki and worked productively to a defined target. They are starting to get a sense of the complexities of maintaining order and consistency in a widely co-authored text.

If your students have not contributed to wikis, you might consider doing so. It's a good way to think about new texts, new tools, and the social processes underlying wiki construction.

Bits 34: the writing of international (and specifically Chinese) students

3/26/2013

Campuses are all atwitter over the writing skills and habits of international students, and our campus is no exception. (I had to check to see if "atwitter" is still a word and the right one, and bingo, it is. *Merriam-Webster Online* suggests "nervously concerned, excited." I suppose atwitter is the antecedent of Twitter?) We are nervously concerned and excited at UD.

Of course, these days, when we say "international students," we mean primarily Chinese students, who form much of the newly aspiring and tuition-paying class at U.S. universities. The *National Journal* reports that some 200,000 Chinese students joined American universities in the 2011-12 academic year, up 23% over the prior year. While it is proving to be fairly easy for universities to ramp up admissions, integrating Chinese students into the campus is more difficult. International students need support services, they require advising, and they need help with cultural adjustment if they are to be successful.

International students pose specific challenges to writing programs. Some faculty are quick to note that many international students have difficulty with written academic English, being deficient in skills and lacking in experience with American academic genres and research practices. Training in working with English as a second language is not widespread amongst compositionists, and we are hard pressed to create multiple sections of introcomp for second language writers. It is an area where training should be expanded in our graduate programs. ESL students tax the resources of writing centers, and if mainstreamed, it is hard for instructors to know just how to integrate these students into the typical routines of the composition classroom.

Cultural differences can be as challenging as language differences in a writing course. Our English Language Institute director, Scott Stevens, suggests that faculty be aware that Chinese students experience intense pressure to please their families by making high grades. That ethical pressure, to be the (often only) high performing son or daughter, Scott says, will sometimes take precedence over our ethical rules about cheating or plagiarizing. From the student's perspective, which is the higher good: to please one's parents, to whom one owes everything and who are putting their resources on the line to send a child to school in America, or to follow some arbitrary rules about copying text?

Cultural assumptions about proper behavior in classrooms can be similarly challenging. Many Chinese students believe that it is best to be quiet in a classroom and always to show respect for the revered teacher. Such values tend to cut against the Western expectation that everyone should talk and engage in classroom discussion or the expectation that argument and the free expression of opinions have a central role inside classrooms.

In *Writer's Help*, we provide extensive grammatical and skills-based advice, examples, and exercises, much of which is well-targeted to international students. Beyond that content, importantly, additional resources for ESL and multilingual writers stress cultural standards for behavior in classrooms and for interaction with other students and the instructor. We are in the process of assessing the adequacy of these materials, because we know that international students and the demands of second language learning and performance will be a central concern of higher education in the U.S.

At a recent faculty development workshop at UD, our panelists focused on seeing international students as a resource in the classroom. They offered strategies to create social and intellectual interactions between native and international students. I'll return to these good ideas in my next Bits post. In the meantime, I wonder if my readers have experience working with international students? Any good resources or strategies you can recommend?

Bits 35: reading for class

5/14/2013

We are at the end of term and I am thinking about reading; specifically, whether or how often students in my Introduction to Professional Writing were reading the assigned chapters in our shared text. There's plenty of other reading going on, as students tracked down source articles for various writing assignments. But what about the chapters I assigned for specific weeks?

I chose a really good new text. Stuart Selber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola have a new anthology: *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* (U Chicago P, 2013). It is written to a student audience, and while a little on the technical side, the chapters can be applied to those pursuing writing and editing careers in various professional fields. Chapters have a similar organization, beginning with an episode of a fictional writer on the job, a discussion of theory and research, and a closing reconsideration of the opening scenario. Each chapter is titled "How Can Technical Communicators Do X" or "What Technical Communicators Need to Know about Y." Engaging chapters are offered by Jim Porter on rhetoric theory, Karen Schriver on document design, Stan Dicks on project management, Anne Wysocki on new media, Jason Swarts on work tools, and quite a few other topics by leading scholars. The great thing about the text is that it is written in direct language that students can easily comprehend.

Before starting class discussion of any part of the book, I would ask who had done the reading. I was repeatedly surprised by how few responded affirmatively. I tried announcing a quiz in advance, and the results were dismal. I tried previewing the assigned chapters in advance of the reading assignment. I tried announcing a team activity that would require familiarity with the reading. I tried building a requirement into an assignment that asked students to use content from our shared text in a summary/response to an article on the same subject they were able to track down in a database. That worked a little better, but not universally.

I also talked to students about why they would read, or more frequently not read. My students are pretty honest with me, and some of my best performers freely admitted they were making choices about how to allocate time in their busy schedules. Some pointed to a very heavy reading load. (These are English majors and most were also enrolled in one or more literature courses.) Some acknowledged they generally went to class, not just my class, to see if they needed to read the text, but didn't feel it made sense to read in advance. A couple noted they just didn't like to read this kind of stuff—even though the whole point was to help them understand the field they were preparing to enter.

I suspect we have bombarded students for so long with textbook readings that it is now very difficult to get them to attend to texts that require extended reading and concentration. I suspect, too, that the browsing patterns of internet reading influence how students respond when confronted with extended exposition. And I know that most have figured out that reading the text is typically not necessary to do for most classes, at least not in advance and not when the instructor covers the material in a lecture or provides other means of gaining content knowledge. In fact, success in my course depended not on reading the assigned chapters, but in completing a variety of individual and collaborative writing projects. When those projects, which had due dates and points attached, required reading the text, most did so. Otherwise, reading was viewed as not required.

I’ve got to keep thinking this through. I don’t really like starting each day with a quiz, as classroom flippers and team-based learning pedagogues recommend. I’d prefer natural, encouraging, respectful ways to get students to engage with the assigned readings.

Bits 36: Classroom Design

6/11/2013

I continue to think about classroom design that supports the kinds of teaching we are interested in doing. I have written about my experience here in *Bits*, when I discussed innovative design in a highly mediated classroom I used for first-year writing at Delaware.

I rely a lot on team-based learning, and I always seek classrooms that are set up for teamwork. I am not alone. Our team-based or problem-based learning classrooms are the most requested designs on our campus. Our colleagues in information technology who support classroom instruction have been developing new ideas for classroom design, including highly modular furnishings, lots of writing space on all the walls, multiple wall-mounted displays, and software to manage the distribution of teamwork and allow for sharing among teams or with the full class.

As we have remodeled older buildings and classrooms, we've progressively enhanced and expanded our team-based learning settings. An interesting argument has come up recently: Should we build classrooms that force instructors to accommodate their instruction to a team-based setting, or should we design classrooms that are flexible and that can be arranged for either front-and-center teaching or for team-based arrangements? I am tending toward the position of my Business College colleague, Mark Serva: If we want to encourage new models of engaged teaching, Mark argues, we should design spaces that do <u>not</u> accommodate front-and-center teaching. We should force the changes we desire in instructional delivery by changing the setting. If we create flexible spaces that allow instructors to rearrange the space for front-and-center teaching, they will default to their comfort zone. Since we already have plenty of classrooms that support lecture or lecture/discussion, Mark says, we ought to now take the plunge and design classrooms that unambiguously support team-based learning. These arguments are playing out right now in discussions with scheduling and academic technologies about furnishings and technologies for remodeled classrooms.

In two months, we are set to open a new Interdisciplinary Science & Engineering Lab on campus, with four floors of integrated team spaces and wet labs. The team spaces will fit a maximum of 48 students, who will use the central space for team-based learning and the flanking labs (each with 24 stations) to solve problems in a lab environment. In a somewhat audacious move, we designed these spaces to force science teaching away from lecture. We also set the expectation that any teaching in this new building would be interdisciplinary. We imagined that we could integrate instruction in introductory biology and chemistry courses around problem-based learning, do away with massive lecture hall experiences, and create real, exploratory lab experiences that would not be the familiar cookbook style of lab. Making all of this a reality is proving to be quite difficult. Over the years, we have become very dependent on traditional approaches to instruction as content delivery, and changing to more active forms of teaching and learning is a challenge. It is very much an open question as to what sort of teaching will take place in these new learning environments. Change is proving to be difficult and divisive.

I'd like to encourage you to get engaged with classroom design on your campus as a route to encouraging more active and collaborative learning, the kind of instruction we have valued and practiced for years in our comp classrooms. I think what happens in classrooms depends to some significant extent on the physical and technological configuration of those classrooms.

Bits 37: collaborative writing

7/9/2013

I wonder how many of my readers use collaborative writing assignments in first-year comp? I don't mean peer review, which I expect almost all of us use to good effect. I mean having two or more students write a paper together for a shared grade.

I always try to work in at least one collaborative assignment. I suppose my commitment to co-authorship stems partly from my being engaged with technical, business, and scientific writing for so long. It's a given in these fields that writers collaborate, often by taking authority for different sections of a document. But I suspect co-authoring is much less common in first-year writing than in professional writing classrooms.

What might be some reasons for assigning a collaborative task? It's a good way to get students working together seriously, since all the work--and the grade--depends on a good working relationship. More importantly, writing together means talking seriously with each other about the assignment: what the purpose is, who the audience is, what the instructor expects, how to manage the work between two individuals. Co-authoring a paper provides a real context for talking about writing, about process, about revision, about editing. Co-authoring allows two people to compare their ideas about good writing and how to achieve it. Co-authoring also allows students to see how their writing skills stack up against those of a peer. In the best situations, classmates become colleagues.

The last couple of times around, I've made the collaborative assignment early in the term, after a warm-up assignment that has individuals introduce themselves to me as writers and readers. The collaboration begins with a serious, graded, argumentative paper concerning college debt, loans, and finance. The student teams of two have to decide on an argument, shape a thesis, gather evidence, provide some data, and reach a conclusion about good credit, bad debt, Federal loan programs, lenders, and the job market. The teams have to arrive at some clear purpose, with focused attention to some issue within the larger topic of student debt.

None of this can be done without extensive discussion between the collaborators. The assignment triggers the kind of talk that leads writers to a clear argument, consideration of objections or counter-arguments, careful presentation of evidence, and reasonable position-taking on an important issue of high relevance to beginning college students. Instead of sending students off to wrestle with a complex assignment on their own, working inside their heads and struggling with their own thoughts, the assignment sends them into dialogue with another smart first-year student. And all students are smarter in collaboration.

I require that this early assignment be done in pairs, or with a threesome if I have an odd number of students. Thereafter, the work for the class is typically done individually, though whenever it makes sense, I suggest they might choose to work with someone else. We form up larger, persistent teams for the duration of the class, so that they have a team they can go to with questions, for reviews of drafts, and for close editing. These larger teams are formed by combining two of the pairs from the early assignment. That gives the teams an advantage, in that pairs of students on each team already have the experience of working closely.

Bits 38: summer reading: *An Anatomy of Addiction*

8/2/2013

Markel, Howard. *An Anatomy of Addiction: Sigmund Freud, William Halsted, and the Miracle Drug, Cocaine*. New York: Pantheon: 2011. eISBN: 978-0-37971-8.

Reading a history of medicine reminds one of just how recently modern medical practices developed. In this remarkably well-written book, Howard Markel sheds light on late 19th c. medical practices by profiling two key figures: Sigmund Freud, who eventually became known for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, and William Halsted, who did much to introduce modern surgical techniques into hospital settings, making his mark primarily at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. These contemporaries were both cocaine addicts for much of their professional lives. The book is full of such surprises about both medical practice and the nature of addiction.

The author, medical historian Howard Markel, M.D., Ph.D., is the George E. Wantz Distinguished Professor of the History of Medicine and director of the Center for the History of Medicine at the University of Michigan. Markel creates compelling biographical profiles while raising important questions. Can a brilliant and ambitious scientist mount a successful career while addicted to cocaine and while using other drugs, such as morphine? His careful documentation suggests that both of his subjects, Freud and Halsted, fed addictions for many years during their ascendancy to medical prominence, consuming large amounts of cocaine on an almost daily basis. While Freud eventually appears to have forsaken the drug, Halsted appears to have continued through much of his life, in spite of signing himself into residential rehab for more than one extended period. Reading this book broadened my understanding of Freud in particular, as I had not considered that his psychoanalytic theory and practice, focused on the mind, grew out of clinical practice, focused on the body. It was also a complete surprise to me to know that Freud was a coke head.

Cocaine was welcomed as a wonder drug in the mid-nineteenth century, after German chemists succeeded in isolating and purifying the alkaloid. Many claims were advanced for its ability to treat everything from flatulence, to furry morning tongue, to broken bones, to fatigue, to wounds. Of particular interest was the belief that cocaine could be useful in weaning morphine addicts from their reliance on what was perceived to be that more harmful drug. Though local effects were quickly observed—numbing of lips and tongue, for instance—the real usefulness of cocaine as an anesthetic was slow to be realized, and missed entirely by Freud, who knew from much personal experience that it had a strong numbing effect. He missed the main medical application, though it was right under his nose, or in. This failure never ceased to rankle him.

A constant theme in Markel's account is that those who rely on a drug like cocaine, even if they are brilliant medical scientists, will persist in patterns of self-denial, believing in the salubrious effects of the drug, maintaining confidence in their individual ability to use it in a wise manner, and denying the slow and accumulating harmful effects. Certainly, both men realized that cocaine quickly disperses feelings of depression, but both were slow to acknowledge that the energetic highs were followed by crashing lows, a manic trade-off. Halsted knew enough to secret himself each afternoon within his own home, where he was never to be disturbed, confining his productive surgical work to the mornings. Freud used the drug to give himself courage in the face of his social phobia, to the point where he would rattle on in rapid-fire and self-absorbed conversations, presumably appearing witty and self-confident only to himself. His writings while under the influence show just how tangled and confused his reasoning was while under the influence.

A book like this could prove an excellent shared reading in a writing classroom. It fuses medical and scientific history with biographical accounts of brilliant minds. It documents a period of rapid rise in medical understanding and practice, but it also shows how persistent are the human patterns of faulty reasoning, rationalization, and self-deception. The book would quickly generate any number of provocative arguments, and it would enlarge students' perceptions of how famous figures in the history of science lived their complex lives.

Bits 39: discovering diversity

9/10/2013

I've made it a habit to teach introcomp each fall, in part to learn more about how to use *Writer's Help*, but mostly because I enjoy working with new students. After a letter in which they introduce themselves to me as readers and writers, we get off to a fast start with a paper on campus diversity. In our last Middle States Accreditation Report, UD was dinged for not being sufficiently diverse in its faculty, its student body, or its administration (too white, too regional). So a campus-wide goal has been to create a more diverse campus, and we have a number of programmatic and research initiatives underway, in addition to more strategic recruitment.

New students are learning the institutional context, so the assignment works well. They can use the Web to look at the Middle States report, or the President's diversity initiative, or the feature articles on new hires. I provide some links to a thoughtful series in the *New York Times*, and it is a simple task to Google "campus diversity" and find numerous links to campus activities, as well as court cases, such as the University of Texas U.S. Supreme Court case on race-conscious admissions.

The central challenge of the assignment, however, is for students to meet, interview, and profile someone who is quite different from themselves, and to use that person's perspective and reported experiences, combined with their own, to develop a discussion of diversity on campus. I was at first a little nervous about asking students to go out and meet someone different, but they engage readily with the task. I urge them to take advantage of the assignment to meet someone new, to strike up a conversation, and perhaps to start a relationship with someone whose company they might not otherwise enjoy.

Students like the assignment, and we get to think through some tricky issues of gender, politics, race, nationality, and community. We get to consider the individual vs. the group, while considering the limits of stereotypes or cultural presuppositions. We discuss what to do in classes where TAs or professors speak a strongly-inflected English as a second language, or where the single Black student sits off to the side, or where the Chinese student is never approached conversationally. We talk about affinity groups, support groups, campus social life, and religion on campus. As part of the assignment, students have to introduce some object, typically a picture of their interviewee, but sometimes a voice clip or video. They are expected to record the language of the interviewee and show they know how to thread quoted language into expository text. One way or another, they are expected to develop an engaging portrait of another individual and to start comparing perspectives on difference. Most do, and most say they are better off for doing so.

Bits 40: majors

10/15/2013

A funny thing happened in class this week. We are moving into our longer, researched papers, which involve a series of related assignments: exploratory paper, annotated bib, argument nutshell, draft. We did a little exploratory posting on our class Forum, so that I could get an idea about what they were thinking of in terms of topics, and so they could get ideas from each other. We wrote in class in the Forum, producing a lot of text quickly, and then each read and responded to a couple of posts from other students. We are still a couple weeks away from topic lockdown, when they have to commit and stay with the commitment. But putting something in writing in a public place begins a commitment.

The question that took me by surprise was a simple one: "Do we <u>have</u> to writing about something in our major?" Well, I said, you don't have to, but I assumed you would <u>want</u> to. I thought I was giving you freedom to work on something important to you. I see this assignment as involving a lot of work, and I figured you would want to use it to develop expertise in your discipline. "But X [fill in finance, or exercise science, or fashion, or computer science] is so boring!"

Not everyone had this response, and the work in the Forum helped open productive ways of thinking about choosing topics for research. I had asked them the previous week to go visit with their advisors or a professor in their discipline to talk through their ideas and find out what was timely in their chosen field. One of my goals here was to be sure they knew their advisors and to offer students a pretext for a meeting. I think a lot about how successful students make connections with faculty members and develop relationships that help them enter into disciplinary patterns of thought and behavior. Some students were able to report very productive conversations, and they came away with some nicely specific ideas. A few were genuinely excited.

But for at least a few, if their self-reporting is reliable, their advisors did not have much to offer. Perhaps my students did not frame the conversation well to engage the advisor and stimulate productive thinking about hot topics, current trends, emerging issues. Or perhaps our faculty advisors (and I think they all talked with faculty, not professional staff advisors) were not ready to think on the spot and offer helpful advice. So I was surprised on two counts: that students might think working in their major was boring and that faculty might have trouble suggesting multiple fruitful lines of inquiry. One faculty member suggested an appointment at the Writing Center, which I would generally welcome but which in this case seems an evasion of responsibility.

I am going to come back to this issue of boring majors as we get into our topics. I am not insisting they work inside their majors, though they will continue to have my encouragement to do so. I am going to take it as a goal to help them see ways they can connect to their majors—ways they can write themselves into their disciplines. I hope I won't be the last faculty member to do so.

Bits 41: correctness and style

11/19/2013

We are moving *Writer's Help* to a new and vastly improved software platform, one that provides greater flexibility for adding and arranging content. That means I get to think about reorganizing some categories in the table of contents. That wasn't possible under the old platform. One distinction I am focused on is that between correctness and style.

Handbooks typically have a lot to say about correctness, often with a focus on error. That's fine, because we want students to have subjects agree with verbs, pronouns agree with antecedents, semicolons correctly placed between two independent clauses, and proper nouns capitalized. English provides lots of opportunities to slip up, and clear errors should be fixed. Many readers notice errors and find them distracting.

Other aspects of language relate not to error, but to control. We can choose just the right word or construct nicely coordinated phrases. We wouldn't be wrong if we chose other words or if our phrasing were not quite as elegant. In either case, we would be making stylistic choices, and we would judge some to be more effective or more to our purpose.

How important is this categorical distinction between error and stylistic choice? When I look at our current table of contents, I see subheadings such as those under *style* that characterize errors: awkward and dangling modifiers, shifts in tense or person, mixed constructions. But I also see subheadings that relate to control of style: sentence emphasis and sentence variety. I like things in neat categories, particularly in places that organize our thinking or direct our navigation, such as tables of contents. It doesn't feel right to mix the negatives with the positives. So I would like to see some separation of correctness and style.

Of course, when I try to regroup, I have immediate problems. Is parallel structure a matter of correctness or style? It's both. When phrases ought to be parallel and are not, that's something that should be fixed. But a writer in full control of parallelism can create wonderfully balanced, delightfully turned constructions. Similarly, there are plenty of errors that arise from using wrong verb forms, but there are also qualities of power and concentration that flow from a well-chosen verb as the nexus of a well-formed clause.

What I hope to achieve with *Writer's Help* are categories that reflect the obligations of writers to be correct, while encouraging those writers to develop a command of style. I'd like writers to see correctness as necessary but not sufficient for a strong style. And I would like them to see style choices as inviting, as an opportunity to choose structures and gauge effects. I am going to keep working to make these pedagogical goals visible in the table of contents.

Bits 42: written affirmations

12/10/2013

We finished the term Wednesday, the last day of our introcomp class. The major researched papers had been returned with scores and comments, and students had just turned in their learning lists as their final assignment. The lists, compiled throughout the term, detailed their individual learning goals—what they needed to work on, what they did to improve, what evidence they had that they were now in control of their writing. We reviewed the learning outcomes for the course, talking about where we had done well and where we saw evidence of learning and improved writing. Then I asked the students to open a file and write several affirmations regarding their writing. They might choose to affirm a particular skill, a value, an intention, or an accomplishment. I let them know this task was for them, not me. They went right at the task, typing away.

Google "affirmation" and you will find links to both pop psychology and scholarly research. In academic settings, affirmations are intended to counter stereotypic threats to identity. Universities signal in many subtle ways who belongs and who does not, who is assured of success or who is likely to fail. Most of us have experienced in one setting or another the "imposter syndrome," the feeling that we don't fit in because we are not smart enough or talented enough or sufficiently prepared. Such feelings are intensified for Latino or African American students, who have good reason to feel they do not belong and may not be destined for success. If your campus is like ours, we don't do very well at recruiting from under-represented groups—so they don't see all that many students like themselves—and then we do even worse at supporting our students toward graduation within five years.

What's interesting about the growing literature on affirmation is that even relatively small interventions can have significant and lasting effects on persistence, performance, and success. The research is nicely summarized by Stanford psychologists David S. Yeager and Gregory M. Walton in "Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic" (*R. of Educational Research*, v81, n2, June 2011: 267-301. DOI 10.3102/0034654311405999). They cite some remarkable studies that show that even brief interventions, where students write about their sense of belonging or their values, can positively affect their grades and dramatically narrow the achievement gap between whites and African American students. It's not magic: the interventions have to be well timed and the conditions need to be carefully set. Though the interventions may appear small in terms of time or task, to students they can be of large import. Knowing that other students feel they don't belong or have anxiety about success can be reassuring. Hearing from other students that these feelings will disappear over time allays the anxiety and ramps up performance.

My end-of-term exercise was meant to reinforce for students their sense that writing would be important to their success, but also that they were in control, that they would grow as writers and improve their mastery of this critical academic skill. I don't have the means to follow up or measure their progress, but I am optimistic.

Bits 43: the writing on the wall

1/24/2014

We've been busy building new spaces for learning at the University of Delaware. As we upgrade classrooms and public areas, we are trying to build spaces that encourage the kinds of social interactions that support learning. In this *Bits* column and the next, I'd like to discuss some of our actions. What I'll be discussing is not so much writing classes and classrooms, but the more general instructional environment. As a writing teacher, I try to influence what happens across campus to support writing as a mode of learning.

Last fall, we opened our new ISE Lab (Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Laboratory). It's a beautiful building, meant to support both interdisciplinary research and teaching. All labs in the building must cross disciplinary boundaries. Classes meeting in the building are likewise expected to be interdisciplinary. Four floors of new problem-based learning classrooms are designed for groups of 48 students in introductory science courses. Each team-based classroom is flanked by two labs with 24 workstations.

One very cool feature is the paint on the walls. It's writable. So students and faculty can stand at the walls and write—just about anywhere. The painted surface is better than whiteboards, erasing easily and cleanly, and people love it when they first see it. I think it has something to do with our toddler instincts to pick up a crayon and use the surfaces in front of us for drawing and writing. There's a feeling of violating a long-standing prohibition.

Our writable walls follow various experiments that move us from classrooms with a single front blackboard, to classrooms paneled in blackboards, to better surfaces, with walls that serve as useful projection areas, walls covered in hard plastic panels that accept dry erase, walls with monitors, projectors that allow annotation on and capture of projected texts, and so on. I tend to encourage all such developments. If we want to encourage teamwork, collaboration, and group problem solving, then teams need places to think, spaces to get their thinking out in the open. The best way to do that is to write ideas where everyone can see them.

The importance of shared spaces to creative problem solving is something I've written about, following my work in the pharmaceutical industry. My thinking was triggered in part by Michael Schrage's book, *No More Teams!: Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration* (1995), which arose from Shrage's work at Xerox's PARC labs. In classrooms (writing and other subjects), we've noticed that we get much better teamwork if we don't allow each student to have a laptop open. We gather teams around a screen, with one person controlling the projected text. Then everyone can focus on the same space and actually work together, writing together. Technology often poses such antipathies, either pushing people toward private worlds or drawing people together into social experiences. Writing, as we know, can be solitary or social. As teachers, we can create mediated spaces to foster the social interaction..


STAFF
Fisherbrand
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Bits 44: making use of review comments

2/18/2014

A visit to the University of Georgia a few weeks ago highlighted the importance of follow through on peer review. When a suggestion is made by an instructor or peer reviewer, do students follow through, get help if they need it, and improve their texts? I met with Ron Balthazor and others to discuss their uses of Emma, a home-grown tool that supports peer review and portfolio creation. Emma very efficiently supports online peer review by allowing reviewers to insert comments and links into draft texts. We talked about how such systems can become widely used across a writing program, and what features are valued by instructors and students.

The first-year writing program at UGA is using *Writer's Help*, which was the reason I was visiting. We were able to share a user report that showed, among other things, that 1,391 students had visited 1,170 unique pages in *Writer's Help* during the fall 2013 term, and that they had generated a total of 57,507 page views. These figures were higher than we had seen on other campuses, and we think the reason is the tight integration of Emma with *Writer's Help*.

The user interface of Emma incorporates a tag set linked to content and exercises in *Writer's Help*. So a reviewer (peer or instructor) works with the review text in the main window and a panel of links in a narrower window to the right. Reviewers can click on drop menus of comments with links to explanations, examples, and exercises. Thesis in need of narrowing? Lack of support? Need a comma after an introductory phrase or clause? A click generates a comment on the text, linked to related *Writer's Help* content via a unique URL.

When a student receives a draft after review, the student can click and follow links to the handbook content. The system makes it easy to get to quality advice. Do students follow the links and use the advice? Do they follow the link to the recommended exercise and learn to control or improve some feature of their writing? In a general way, we can say "Yes," since the user data show high levels of access to *Writer's Help* content. This data is merely suggestive, however, and not what we would call conclusive.

A final lunch conversation with the UGA team highlighted an interest in tracking more closely the student uptake of suggested links. If we make it easy for students to move from their texts, to suggested changes, to supporting instruction, will they follow the links and work to gain control and improvement in their writing? Will some follow through but not others? Can we determine what motivates students to follow through or what characterizes these writers? Can we characterize the behavior of instructors who motivate students to work closely with the handbook?

We are looking forward to answering some of these questions, leveraging the tools we've constructed to support writing instruction and improvement.

Update note: *Writer's Help 3.0* integrated hyperlinks to connect review markup on student writing to corresponding sections of reference material, in ways similar to Emma.

Bits 45: campus-wide handbook adoption

4/18/2014

A few weeks back, I wrote about a visit to the University of Georgia to learn more about how they were using *Writer's Help* in conjunction with their home-grown Emma software, a program that supports peer and instructor review and commentary. We learned recently that UGA would be moving to a campus-wide adoption of *Writer's Help*, meaning all students would have four-year access. This is our first campus-wide adoption at a major university, and it represents an important opportunity. In that earlier Bits post, I described the ways *Writer's Help* had been integrated with UGA's peer review software, with the result that students were consulting *Writer's Help* with much greater frequency and on a wider variety of topics that we have seen elsewhere. Now, we will have the chance to see what happens after first-year writing, as students move into their disciplines and take courses across the curriculum.

From the initial conception of *Writer's Help*, we hoped to create a resource that would follow students as they developed as writers. Wouldn't it be good for students to become familiar with a writing handbook as first-year students, and then to leverage that expertise as they moved into more advanced courses? Could we design a resource that would continue to be useful and valued, consulted with some frequency? Could a handbook become a key resource for independent learning? Could we develop an audience of student writers, in general, as opposed to students in a first-year writing classroom?

As we reworked the content of the Bedford handbooks (especially *Writer's Reference*), we imagined students moving outward from first-year writing. We reworked example sentences to reflect the wider world of writing across professional contexts. We expanded coverage of documentation styles beyond MLA and APA to include Chicago and Council of Science Editors (CSE). We added annotated model documents to capture a wider range of genres. We added content on professional style, document design, and multimodal composing. And we added to existing writing-in-the-disciplines chapters to include engineering, music, criminal justice, and other disciplines.

UGA will be a good test of whether we've been successful in designing a handbook that supports students throughout their college experience. It will be a learning experience for professors in the disciplines, who will need to recognize they have access to a widely shared resource and who will then need to develop patterns of teaching that encourage frequent use. And it will be a good test of whether students can port skills and behaviors from one setting to another, a good indication of transfer. My suspicion is that a truly successful experiment with a campus-wide handbook adoption will require the kind of intentional implementation that characterizes the writing program at UGA, where program goals, shared syllabi, embedded technology, and staff development all contribute to success for student writers.

Bits 46: writers as class guests

5/13/2014

Teaching can be an isolating profession, as Dan Lortie underscored in his classic *Schoolteacher* (U. Chicago, 1975, reissued 2002). Teachers tend to be isolated inside classroom walls with only their students. But classrooms can also be connected—the walls can be porous.

Three guest speakers joined my Introduction to Professional Writing class last week, and I think we all connected. Our guests were two writer/editors (Nicole Gabor and Donna Brown) and a media specialist (Kevin Keane) from *Kids' Health,* a very successful Web site (Kidshealth.org) sponsored by the foundation associated with Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, in Wilmington, Delaware. My students were able to gain an insider's perspective on what is involved in creating an informative and interactive Web site. *Kids' Health* attracts a million visitors per day, providing a full range of information about health, disease, nutrition, sex, and behavior. It is the most successful Web site for children's health.

The speakers immediately focused on their rhetorical strategies for reaching their three key audiences: kids, teens, and parents. They emphasized an early decision to cultivate a plain English style, with a voice that is familiar and comfortable to each of their audiences. It is this plain, yet lively style that distinguishes their site from many health and disease sites. The site explains such topics as why we have boogers and how the nose works, why feet stink and how to keep your tootsies dry.

The speakers highlighted a range of genres for reaching their audiences: animated cartoons, posters and flyers, informative exposition and advice, videos of people speaking to their own bodily conditions, quizzes and surveys, and various data displays. What is in English can be switched to Spanish, and what is written can be spoken with a simple click. Throughout the presentation, the speakers focused on the situation of their audiences: kids with cancer or genetic diseases, teens with anxiety disorders or hormone disturbances, a mother tending a sick child in the middle of the night. It was a wonderful demonstration of what it means to know your audience and to reach them with empathetic information.

My students got to hear discussion of the writing process, including how to choose a topic, how to brainstorm for important content and put that content in "buckets," where to go for reliable research, how to develop multimodal texts, how to storyboard a video or animation, and how to edit toward a finished product. All term, we've been discussion what it means to be a writer as well as a designer, how we might use technologies to our advantage, and how to reach diverse, multicultural audiences. Everything our speakers said reinforced our classroom discussions, projects, and readings.

Most importantly, my students met three professional writers who all felt lucky to be in their current positions, doing important work, and enjoying being part of a strong production team. The students got a glimpse of working professionals who found great satisfaction in their careers as writers and designers. They gained some perspective on how to establish a career goal and what skills and behaviors to develop. They learned something about the often irregular path toward one's ideal job. And they discovered the could identify with individuals out there, beyond the classroom walls.

Bits 47: language decline

7/8/2014

After teaching English for 40 years, I've grown accustomed to the predictable responses I get when I meet someone and reveal my occupation. Many say "Oh, I better watch my grammar," while others say "That was never my best subject." Increasingly, the response I am getting goes something like this: "Isn't it something the way students have lost the ability to write a decent sentence? They do so much texting and tweeting that all they know how to do is write shorthand messages, full of internet slang and acronyms." I get this response from people outside the academy, but also from instructors in other disciplines.

The temptation is to agree, since the person who says that to me is empathizing with me over the challenge of my work. But I can't resist being honest, perhaps even disagreeable. So my quick response is always something along these lines: "Well, to be honest, I don't see that as a problem in student writing. I rarely encounter students who use inappropriate net language in their writing for my classes." I respond this way for at least two reasons. First, it's true, at least in my experience, and I teach a lot of writing classes. I can't think of a single time a student inserted an internet slang acronym in a class paper, unless it was for ironic effect. Second, I've always felt the impulse to defend my students. I think they are bright, well intentioned people. I think they are clever enough to adapt their language in ways appropriate to the situation. They know when they write a report or a memo for me that they need to call upon a school register. So I don't take much pleasure in bashing students.

What I think is much more interesting about our students are the many ways that writing has assumed primacy as a communication medium. I recall John Slatin at the University of Texas arguing years ago, when we were first integrating computers into writing instruction, that for written literacies to improve, it would be necessary to return to an epistolary culture. At the time, it was conventional to talk about secondary orality (a term from Walter Ong), based on the notion that our culture had been reliant on writing and print (books, letters, newspapers, formal speeches and sermons), but that with the advent of radio, telephone, and TV, the culture had returned to an earlier reliance on the spoken word. I think Slatin (sad to say, John passed) would be surprised at the extent to which we have become an epistolary culture. Texting takes over from voice calls, news readers write comments and engage in written dialogues, people tweet and retweet, keeping written texts in circulation, accompanied by an accretion of commentary. We email instead of calling, and we browse the net instead of watching the nightly news.

So, no, I don't really think we have declining skills, and I don't think students, or other people, are apt to use inappropriate language in some unthinking way. That said, we ought to help students think explicitly and reflectively about how they can adapt language to situation. We can do so by creating assignments that ask students to repurpose writing for different situations or different media. When students work to transform an existing text for a new purpose or audience, they must think about register—about how stylistic choices are influenced by medium, audience, and situation. In such assignments, students can use what they know intuitively about how writers choose an appropriate register, given what they are trying to achieve with language. With such assignments, students can focus on reworking existing content, instead of having to invent new content.

Transforming existing content is good preparation for the kinds of writing demanded in various workplaces. It's frequently the case that a writer reworks an existing text to make it suitable for changing circumstances—updating an older report, reaching a new audience, or moving a text from print to online. Revising an existing text can be as valuable as creating a new one. Working with students in such ways will give them a real advantage as writers.

Bits 48: on using the handbook

8/12/2014

I'll be visiting the University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse (and perhaps University of Minnesota-Duluth) next week to talk with their instructors about using *Writer's Help*. Lacrosse was an early and enthusiastic adopter; Duluth's decision to use *WH* was much more recent.

It would be a shame to adopt a book and not get good value from it, but I know that happens a lot. You may remember when we used to require that all students buy a college desk dictionary such as *Merriam Webster's* (and many arrived with such graduation gifts for their dorm rooms), but we seldom did much with the dictionary. We presumed students would use it as needed. I don't think that works. Students increasingly wait to see if they really need to buy the assigned textbook, and only about 1 in 3 do (1 in 4 for first year students). For a fine elaboration on this topic, see Marc Parry's *Students Get Savvier about Textbook Buying*, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 27, 2013). Some get their books through illegal downloads, others share through social media, and some just get along without.

I have a good colleague in Chemistry at the University of Delaware, Sue Groh, who has figured out that if students are going to engage with the chemistry book, they will have to *use* it, not just be told to *read* it. So Sue gives students problems that require the knowledge in the textbook, but they have to figure out where the information is, what's relevant, and how to apply the textbook knowledge to the problem at hand. Her problems are deliberately complex, and any solution requires knowledge that is spread across various chapters. In addition to the required textbook, Sue keeps a set of used textbooks from various publishers in her classroom cabinet, and students can consult these sources as well. Sue has figured out that students will consult textbooks when confronted with a problem and when they can articulate a set of *learning issues*—topics they know they need to learn more about.

That's my primary message when I go on campuses to talk about how to use *Writer's Help*: we need to put students in the position of knowing what they need to learn. The name of our product reflects our design goal of creating a useful help system for writers. The corresponding instructional goal is to help students become independent learners, writers who can identify and solve their own problems, who are aware of their own learning issues. If instructors adopt the goal of creating independent learners, they will create opportunities to help students realize what problems writers typically face, how to seek answers, and how to apply advice to one's own writing. They will also help students realize that different writers have different learning issues and that it helps to know your own needs.

When I teach introcomp, just as I remind myself that we ought to be writing in class each day, I remind myself that we ought to be defining learning issues and consulting the help system each day. We ought to get in the habit of looking up what we need to know. If we do this consistently and frequently, with increasing levels of success at defining learning issues and finding solutions, then we instill in students certain habitual behaviors that will serve them well throughout their careers as professionals who write.

Bits 49: on affirmations, redux

9/10/2014

An important *New York Times* article has been circulating that focuses on questions of persistence in college. The lessons of the new lines of research as represented in this article are important for those of us who teach writing to first year students.

Many years back, Stephen Brookfield in *The Skillful Teacher* identified what he called "the imposter syndrome," the belief held by many students that they don't belong, that others are smarter or better suited to a particular school or program. I used the imposter book chapter to great effect with new grad students at New Mexico State U when I was teaching in the PhD program in Rhetoric and Professional Communication. Everyone related to the feeling that others were better prepared and more likely to be successful. Crassly, others were just naturally smarter. The reading allowed us to talk together about such concerns, to focus on what was under our own control, and to develop both the self-confidence and scholarly habits that would lead to excellent performance.

The news as represented in the studies cited in the *Times* piece suggests that feelings of inadequacy strongly affect performance and persistence, and such feelings disproportionately affect lower-income students. Students may fit the institution's admissions profile—they are smart enough and sufficiently prepared to do well. But they are often confused about how to be successful and afflicted with self-doubt.

The good news is that schools can take action to improve persistence and success for low-income students. The *Times* article details University of Texas programs that treat the target group of students as high achievers and leaders, providing challenging intellectual enrichment experiences. The program has had great success.

But we don't need to think only about big programs and initiatives. The article also calls attention to the research of David Yeager. From the abstract of his article on interventions, we learn that "Seemingly 'small' social-psychological interventions in education—that is, brief exercises that target students' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in and about school—can lead to large gains in student achievement and sharply reduce achievement gaps even months and years later."

I don't think there is a better place for such interventions—where students begin to affirm their identities as successful college students—than introductory composition. We have the interpersonal closeness, the small class setting, and the focus on writing that make our classrooms a natural fit for such brief interventions. Peer interaction and class discussion can bring out the shared feelings—the fears, uncertainties, and doubts—that affect many college students, allowing them to see that what they feel is widely shared. Yeager's work is exciting in part because he demonstrates that very brief exercises of 25 minutes or so can have lasting effects on performance.

What might some brief writings or activities focus on? I'd suggest such topics as these:

- Can you improve your thinking? Can you become smarter? How?
- Talk to a successful junior or senior. What have they done to be successful at college?
- Suppose you get a bad grade on a writing assignment. What's your next step?

- Write an email to a friend who is still in high school. Based on what you've learned since coming to college, offer your friend advice on how to be successful.
- What are some common stereotypes that might affect how you or your classmates perform in college?

I would not make these huge assignments, just brief writings. Depending on the class climate, students might post in the class forum or exchange writings in small groups. Yeager's findings suggest it is simply the process of engaging in these types of thinking that leads to changes in behavior, so it is not necessary to spend a lot of time drawing out all the complications.

Some of these writings might lead to more extended pieces, perhaps drawing on primary or secondary research. If real interest surfaces, for instance, on getting smarter through brain training, there are plenty of recent articles out there in brain science that show just how malleable an organ it is. But that is not essential. What's essential is helping students develop the self-confidence and sense of identity that lead to success in college.

Bits 50: a plethora of words

9/24/2014

Reading sets of first-year essays typically offers teachers some curious insights into the minds of new college students. For several terms, I've found myself wondering about the word *plethora*. It's of Greek origin, meaning fullness, and it has a specialized medical meaning related to perfusion, as in excess local blood flow. It's also a word that turns up more frequently than I would expect in the writings of more than a few of my students. I can only speculate why.

Perhaps it's a favorite word for vocabulary lists in high school English classes, or perhaps it appears in test preparation programs for the SAT verbal. It's one of those words that is attractive to students, and easy to spell, but difficult to use. When I encounter the word, I am typically brought up short, thinking "That's not quite the right way to use the word—the collocation is slightly off." But I let it go. I can't teach students the subtle nuances that make a word fit the context, and I'd rather concentrate on important aspects of their writing the students can control. Besides, if the student uses the word, he or she is likely to attend to it in various reading contexts. I am sure that command of vocabulary comes from encountering words in context, not from memorizing lists or definitions.

The lists that circulate for test prep always contain some odd choices, including slightly archaic or literary terms. I just pulled a list off the Web that has terms such as *resplendent, epistolary, acrophobia, obsequious, pontificate,* and *histrionic*. Useful? Maybe. Certainly interesting to those who like words. I didn't mean to choose multisyllabic Latinate terms, but that pretty much describes this quick pick list.

We might think instead about more useful vocabulary, in college and beyond. Math demands control of such terms (or concepts) as random, distribution, normal, exponential, dependent variable, or regression. Scientific terminology is increasingly essential to both scientists and non-scientists: phenotype, homeostasis, cell transport, metabolism, ecotonic, resistance, neutrino.

I suspect many of us could do more in our comp classes to push students into disciplinary forums where they would exercise specialized academic vocabulary. I've posted here about several of my approaches, including an assignment on student debt that pushes students toward business and finance, researched papers that put students inside their majors, and final exams that have students prepare for essay exams in their other courses. There surely exists a plethora of assignments that create opportunities for students to write in their disciplines, and in the process, to develop a professional vocabulary.

Bits 51: TED talks grammar

10/24/2014

My friend and colleague, Barb Lutz, who directs the Writing Center at UD, recently linked a Facebook post to TED Ed: Lessons Worth Sharing. TED-Ed brings together the volunteered work of educators and professional animators to create short (3 to 5 minute) lessons on a variety of subjects. The results are quite professional: brisk scripts, clever animations, high quality voice-over narration.

Is there any interest in short video lessons on grammar? Well, the lesson on the ever-contentious Oxford Comma certainly suggests so, with over 230,000 views, inflated only slightly by my watching twice. It's a very sharp presentation, with clarifying examples and explanations that show why the choice of whether or not to use a final comma in a series is such a tricky issue. Other topics have generated hundreds of thousands of views, too.

I am not quite as enamored of a lesson on the use of the words *good* and *bad*. The broad message is to avoid commonplace (and presumably empty) words like good and bad in favor of more specific terms. Good lesson? I tend to think word choice is trickier than simple prescriptions would suggest. But you be the judge. It's still a well-designed and executed lesson that I am sure that many teachers would find useful.

Another lesson takes on a more complicated subject: deciding how to place commas with coordinate and subordinate clauses within sentences. I see problems with this lesson. Some important grammatical distinctions are elided: what is a clause and what is a sentence? What is a conjunction? Can you contrast *conjunction* (referring to coordinating conjunctions) with *subordination* (referring to subordinating conjunctions)? Not in the terminological system I learned. The lesson suggests graphically and metaphorically that conjunctions do light lifting or balancing while subordinates do the heavy lifting. This lesson makes me wonder if a short animation can do justice to the complexities of punctuation by clause structure. Again, check out the video and see if the simplification of complex syntactic matters is adequately addressed by the lesson.

I don't want to be too negative. A lesson on plagiarism is quite good (there's that word). It's memorable, clarifying, and a fine starting point for a more nuanced discussion in a writing classroom. There are quite a few lessons that offer perspectives on the English language, some generated by noted linguists, and these lessons could stimulate interest among students in broad issues of how language works. I hope to see new, useful lessons on writing, usage, word choice, and other topics that we all care about. Ted Ed is not a bad start.

Bits 52: writing about campus rape

11/24/2014

I am having a hard time *not* thinking about the disturbing *Rolling Stone* expose on the rape culture at the University of Virginia.

Reporter Sabrina Rubin Erdely doggedly pursues a story focused on the experience of a first-year woman student, Jackie, who was brutally gang raped at a fraternity house party just after she arrived on campus. And no, she was not drunk or passed out, but keenly aware of what was happening to her by nine men in a pitch-black room. It's the story of her life unravelling as she experiences and re-experiences the trauma of the event. It reveals her subsequent, inadequate, attempts to come to terms with her rape. The story reveals the inadequacy of the student's social support networks and of the university's student support services. It's also the story of an institution that is conditioned to do more to protect its reputation than to serve its students. The voices of other victims corroborate Jackie's story.

The story is an exploration, or expose, of a brutal and largely hidden side of campus life. The campus system is set up in such a way that legal process is subverted. Criminal behavior is excused by redirecting the victim from the criminal justice system toward a campus judiciary system that suppresses victims' rights, dissuades victims from filing suit, and quietly allows horrific abuse to continue. It took the public embarrassment of the *Rolling Stone* story to get UVA to take action, to get the police involved, and to suspend fraternities for at least the short period of investigation. The story demonstrates the power of careful research and reporting. And it is also the story of the student, Jackie, and many more like her, finding the courage to speak out about a campus problem.

I am trying to figure out now how to use these issues as a focus for a series of assignments for my spring introcomp course. I am hoping students can connect from one of many angles: law and justice, individual and institutional ethics, individual vs. group behavior, the experience and aftermath of trauma, cultural norms and institutional policies. My students should be able to feel the urgency of the story, since campus predators target first-hear women who are naïve as to the dangers of campus culture, inexperienced with alcohol, likely to feel powerless, and predisposed to withdraw rather than challenge the system. Perhaps an introcomp class can be a place to begin researching, speaking, and writing about important campus problems?

The focus on coercive sex has particular resonance on our campus at the University of Delaware, as a case played out this term involving a popular sociology professor accused of preying on a female undergraduate, pressuring her to have sex in his office. A student reporter picked up the story and did an excellent job of reporting the student's experience and frustration with the process of seeking redress. The victim connected with a professor who helped her work through her feelings and take appropriate action. A series of stories, editorials, vigils, and letters to the student newspaper kept the story alive and in focus. Student voices, written and spoken, were the primary forces triggering a community response.

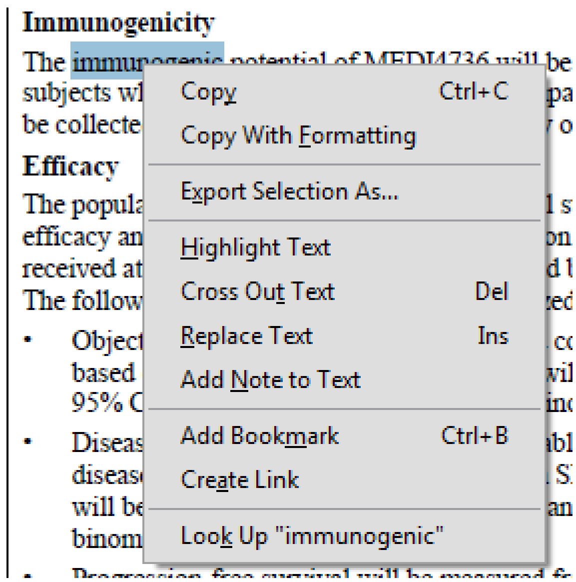
I hope my students will be able relate to these issues and that writing about such situations will give them some ideas about individual agency and the power to change university culture. I have to figure out the best ways to approach the assignments. If one in five undergraduates are the target of some form of sexual predation on campus (a figure commonly cited, including in the *Rolling Stone piece)*, I am very likely to have women in my class who have either experienced or know about such cases. It's the sort of assignment that raises issues that are difficult to deal with, both emotionally and legally.

I hope to get various campus players involved in classroom interviews, perhaps our Title IX officer, or the faculty member who supported the student (who is also a scholar who studies gender and harassment issues), or someone from our Women's Caucus. One aspect I would like to stress is that there are different perspectives on any complex social issue, depending on who we are, where we work, what groups we belong to, and so on. In my introcomp classes, we talk a lot about "angle of vision" or "bias" or "positioning" or "stakeholders" with regard to discourse. The rape case at UVA raises such issues explicitly.

Bits 53: look it up!

12/26/2014

Working on some medical texts last week, I was continually impressed with the ease of looking up unfamiliar words. Pretty much without fail, if I right-clicked on a medical term, *Adobe Acrobat* would drop a box with the last choice being Look up “xxx”:



From that choice, I could click through to a screen like this one:

Pretty handy! Two clicks from term to definition and pronunciation. The entry continues with alternate forms, etymology, a British dictionary entry (*Collins*), and a medical dictionary entry (*American Heritage Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*).

Maybe a Latinate compound like *immunogenic* is too simple, since a reader can practically figure it out from the two root words. However, as I kept using the Look Up feature, it was rarely stumped. Here are the main entries, for *dacarbazine* and *lysine*:

dacarbazine

[duh-**kahr**-buh-zeen] Spell Syllables

Word Origin

noun, *Pharmacology*

1. a toxic, light-sensitive powder, $C_6H_{10}N_6O$, used in the treatment of Hodgkin's disease and metastatic malignant melanoma.

lysine

[**lahy**-seen, -sin] Spell Syllables

Examples Word Origin

noun, *Biochemistry*

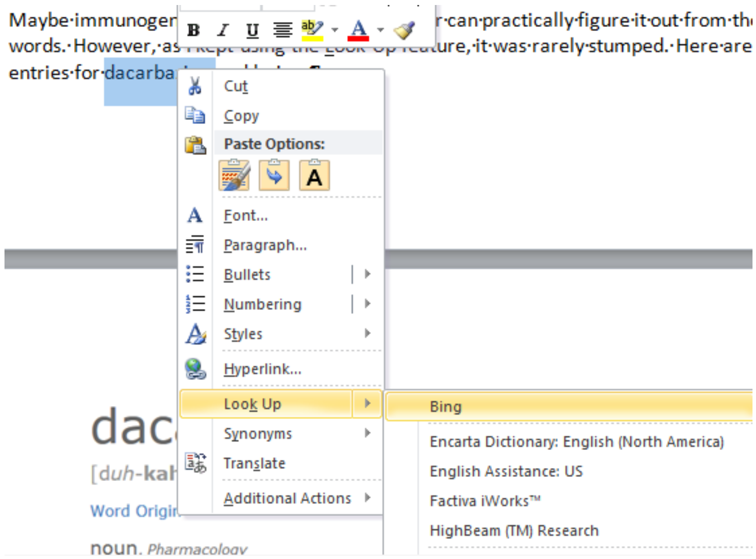
1. a crystalline, basic, amino acid, $H_2N(CH_2)_4CH(NH_2)COOH$, produced chiefly from many proteins by hydrolysis, essential in the nutrition of humans and animals. *Symbol:* K.
   Abbreviation: Lys;

Wow, an *Unabridged Random House Dictionary* entry on dacarbazine, complete with a clear pronunciation and the chemical formula. And a *Random House Dictionary* entry on lysine.

Dictionary.com, according to information on their Web site, is part of a Nasdaq-listed company (IACI), located in Oakland, CA. Their site is literate, sprinkled with interesting quotes about words, and it portrays the work environment of a lively Bay Area culture, with their mission being to "to delight and inspire anyone using the English language by being the most innovative and comprehensive digital source for everything related to words. We provide resources that help people accurately define, pronounce, and apply words in the moment." They manage to do so supported by fairly non-intrusive on-screen ads.

That Dictionary.com provides these resources for free with such easy access "in the moment" makes Dictionary.com a superb resource for writers who wish to help themselves. The threshold is now so low for looking up words in the dictionary that individual inertia is no longer a concern.

Similar look-up functions exist with a right-click in *Microsoft Word*, though not quite as slick as those in *Acrobat*:



The *MS Word* allows a *Bing* search on the term, along with access to several Microsoft proprietary tools, like *Encarta*. But what you don't get is immediate access to two of the English language's best dictionaries, *Random House* and *American Heritage*. Too bad, because this is where "in the moment" help is really helpful.

As we work with students to help them become independent learners, the tools under right-click are worth exploring.

Bits 54: personal learning networks

2/26/2015

We had a faculty development workshop at UD over three days in early February and welcomed keynoter Ann Hill Duin from the University of Minnesota. Ann is in technical and professional communication and has held various administrative positions at UM, especially focused on teaching and learning with technologies. Ann's talk was about connections, connectivity, and connectionist theory as these concepts relate to learning.

An activity she suggested is likely to have high value in one or more of the classes you teach. She suggested having students draw a personal learning network, a diagram of where a person's learning connects to resources, groups, situations, individuals, experiences. She helpful suggested two tools: text2mindmap.com and coggle.it. Both are free and simple apps that support drawing networks—nodes and connectors.

My colleague, Hal White, is a biochemist, and we started drawing Hal's PLN—connections to research labs and fellow scientists, to people at NSF, to journals and books, to editorial and review roles he plays, to online communities to which he belongs, to conferences and symposia. Drawing triggered engaging conversation about where and when and from whom we learn. We started talking about Hal's students and what their PLNs might look like. The beginning of Hal's PLN is presented here in Coggle format.

Hal has always been a big mind-mapper, having students draw connected understandings of some specific biochemical phenomena, some cellular or molecular process, or some complex system, like blood chemistry. He uses mind maps to figure out what his students know, where their concepts are faulty, and what he should be teaching. He also uses mind maps as semester exams, because he can see what students understand.

I used a similar approach in a "rhetoric of the professions" course, having students create a knowledge network on the first day of class. I collected their work, put it away until the end of term, and then had them re-do their network diagram to show what they had learned about rhetoric and what they understood to be the important connections and relationships. It was a fine way to see (some portion) of what students had learned. It also helps students reflect upon and consolidate what they know into an organized space.

My thinking here is influenced by a recent Bits posts by Traci Gardner's on digital identity mapping. Her post is all about having students map themselves, with a focus on how they live digital, connected lives. Traci's approach provides a nice alternative to literacy narratives, a genre covered in *Writer's Help*.

It's not hard to think about how a class or sequence of classes ought to extend a student's PLN or their digital identities. In all cases, students ought to be better learners, better researchers, with more connected and complex networks for learning what they need to know. They ought also to be more self-aware of what they do when they need to learn something. That's one outcome worth measuring.

Bits 55: peer groups in the writing classroom

3/7/2015

I suspect we all use peer review in some form or other. If we can help students become effective peer reviewers, then we give them a skill that helps them improve their writing without a teacherly intervention. Peer review makes writing public, so students see what others are doing and learn indirectly. We also help students become valuable workplace writers, because they know how to interact with others to improve writing within an organization.

My typical pattern in my introcomp class is to have students arrive at class with a completed drafts, ready for peer review. We work from stated criteria on a given assignment, so students get in the habit of asking whether a document fulfills requirements and meets the purposes of the assignment. Comments, of course, range widely, and do not stick strictly to the criteria on the rubric, but that is OK. We will often work in pairs.

I have a morning class this term, and I generally set a deadline for 11:30 pm that evening to turn in revisions. What I like about the system, and students like it, too, is that peer review makes a difference, immediately. Students might get some really helpful feedback and want to act upon it. Students might decide after seeing a couple of papers from others that they need to make some major changes. Or they might realize they fulfilled part of the assignment, but forgot to attend to some criterion. Or they might realize they have pretty good work in hand and just need do some final editing before submitting. Because the assignment is due the same day, students get immediate help, and the peer comments are fresh when they revise later that day. I get better work, and I get more work out of the students.

There are different ways to do peer review. In my class, everyone brings a laptop (and we have a few Surface tablets for those without), and sometimes I have students pull up their texts in Word, turn on Track Changes, and then we play musical chairs. Students work at the author's laptop, inserting comments and suggesting changes. They learn to use some very useful editing tools, and each student can quickly review two or three papers, so everyone gets feedback from more than one reader. Students like this approach because they feel free to offer criticism, to suggest meaningful revisions, and to ask real questions about the text and its effectiveness.

But I also like to mix up my approach to peer review. My students sit at tables where they have a large shared screen. Anyone can connect by cable or wirelessly, and students can put their work up in front of other students. So sometimes we will put up a paper, especially an early draft, in front of the whole team (4-6 students per team). They can talk as a group about the writer's approach, the strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps review two papers in class with the group agreeing to offer individual peer reviews to others outside of class. I let the teams manage the logistics.

My team tables are permanent through the course term, so students really get to know one another and establish good working patterns. But sometimes we work across teams. I'll have everyone post their work to Sakai, our class management system, in the Forum (or Discussion) area, as an attachment. Students can then download the attachment, comment on the text either in the text itself or in the dialog box in Sakai, and review anyone's text. I ask everyone to give at least two reviews and get at least two. Some do more. Many, I suspect, read quite a few of their classmates' texts, learning to see what is strong or weak, what is novel or predictable, in the work of others. A collateral benefit of this approach is that students learn to be careful when downloading, renaming, and saving files so they can work on them. They use those handy Word tools to track changes and comments, and then upload their annotated files to the Forum. Students get to see what other reviewers do, and we can have a follow-up discussion about whose review comments were most helpful and why. A very natural modeling process for peer reviews leads to stronger future reviews.

Bits 56: writing, speaking, and everything else

11/16/15

When I was first trained to teach first-year, introductory composition at the University of Michigan in the late 70s, one of the encouraged class activities asked the instructor to work at the board and lead the class in a discussion contrasting *Spoken Language* with *Written Language*. It was always a productive conversation with the class, since students could come up with important differences in sentence and discourse structure, vocabulary and usage. They could raise issues of register, formality, permanence, intimacy and immediacy, considering how language could fit a particular situation, a notion at the heart of rhetorical analysis. We would urge students to be conscious of the differences between speaking and writing, and to move toward the more formal control characteristic of academic writing and Standard English.

In the years since, the emerging hybrid genres of electronic communication blur what once seemed fairly comfortable distinctions cast in the useful polarity of speaking vs. writing. Is email more like speaking or writing? What about messaging or Twitter? They have a certain permanence, but what about Snapchat? What about recorded conversations or online meetings or podcasts? What about video?

Differences among hybrid media genres are of pressing concern. Hillary Clinton cannot shake the accusations of mismanaging her email communications, but she can be forced to surrender all the email that was not effectively deleted. Email is a written record and therefore discoverable. Would instant messaging, or Skyping, or Snapchatting have the same qualities? Face-to-conversations still provide some measure of confidentiality, but what about phone conversations? Could she have managed her communication, keeping private or confidential or top secret communications all contained within appropriate media? What are the differences among media, the affordabilities and the risks, and how do we choose what to use? From the current vantage point, it is ironic that Nixon got into trouble by choosing to tape oral conversations, while Clinton gets into trouble by trying to hide written conversations.

Over the years, I have urged students in business communication classes to choose carefully when to write and when to speak, what to put in an email and what to convey F2F. But we now see an explosion of video coverage and reportage of supposedly spoken messages. Police are caught by lapel cameras and recorders; domestic abusers and homophobes are captured on phone cameras. Everyone is viewed by security cameras, so you can't even rob a bank anymore without your face being shown on the news.

As I write, we have a wave of resignations at the University of Missouri for things people said that were captured and repeated: a command to bring in some "muscle" to remove video reporters from a campus demonstration site and an email to class about standing up to hatred resulted in the resignations of two professors. The president and chancellor both resigned, more for what they did not say (and do) about campus climate than for what they did say. So even being silent or too quiet can bring down top administrators.

We can't put two columns on the board anymore, contrasting speech and writing. But we can raise awareness of what happens in a media-saturated environment, where it seems that very few communication events are not recorded in some form, and where intended audiences are often not identical with broad, unintended audiences and consequences. As we continue to move toward teaching diverse, hybrid, multimodal genres, we can engage students with thinking about when to communicate, using what technologies, always anticipating how messages will often escape our control. That is still what rhetoric is about.

Bits 57: writing with *Writer's Help*: in the disciplines

1/20/16

I will be visiting the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in early February to work with their writing programs. The campus is an enthusiastic adopter of *Writer's Help*, currently using Version 2.0. The campus is working to realize a vision we have held for Writer's Help since our initial discussions: Wouldn't it be great to have one writing text that could accompany a student all the way from first-year composition through college and graduation and into the workplace? Since 2003, we've been developing Writer's Help with that goal in mind.

As author, something I have worked hard to do is to make the advice, models, examples, and exercises reflect the many kinds of writing found not just in first-year comp, but in all classes and in workplaces beyond college. The original author of Bedford's *Writer's Reference*, Diana Hacker, was great at understanding how to offer advice and examples to students in a first-year writing context, where academic essays and library research papers were the dominant genres. We worked from her strong base to address more broadly the many genres of contemporary writing in both printed and electronic modes.

I should have a chance to meet with instructors from various disciplines when I visit La Crosse, so I am looking forward to hearing about their experiences. Do we have the right coverage and depth? Are they able to integrate the resource with their teaching goals? Is it enough to say "Use *Writer's Help* when you need it" or are there more intentional strategies?

If called upon to offer advice, here is a first pass at what I would say:

- As you create your writing assignments, look at the sections of *Writer's Help* that show students how to read and interpret writing assignments. Make sure you clearly establish a purpose and audience for writing, and that you set expectations and constraints for writing in a particular genre. Make your assumptions explicit.
- See if there are good model papers in in your chosen genre. If you are asking for an annotated bibliography, or literature review, or field report, be sure to explore the models in *Writer's Help* and point students in that direction.
- Call attention to those aspects of writing you care most about (i.e., strong argumentative thesis, supporting data, inclusion of charts and graphs, documentation according to APA style). Include suggested links in your assignment.
- Consider how to stage an assignment effectively, by requiring some in-class time for discussing topics, doing some brainstorming, and organizing ideas. Consider intervening at various stages while the papers are in development, perhaps in conference. Set aside time in class for peer review of drafts. Have a proofing and editing session for final drafts. Spend less of your time responding to final papers and more while work is in progress. Make the work more social and collaborative. *Writer's Help* has good advice on all these activities.
- Use your class management system to post drafts, gather peer or instructor feedback, and expose students to the work of others. Doing so will raise the bar for performance.

In short, think about how best to use an available resource to support your teaching strategies and learning goals. Make *Writer's Help* a valued resource for being successful in your class.

Bits 58: Collaboration and Teamwork

2/19/2016

My guess is that writing teachers all use peer review as a primary instructional strategy. I imagine many fewer teachers use collaborative writing or team-based assignments. I see the strategies as related, particularly in first-year composition. Though I have always taught first-year writing, my research and professional interests, from dissertation onward, have focused on scientific, technical, and medical communication. In all such contexts, documents tend to have multiple authors. These authors must plan, draft, and revise documents as a collaborative process. My work in various industries (computer, health, pharmaceutical, government) has convinced me that ability to write in teams is a critical workplace skill. And having to perform as a group member is increasingly typical of many college classes.

When I teach first-year writing, I import instructional strategies that have proven productive over the years in my tech or business writing classes. So while I begin the term with an individual writing assignment, with peer review, I then move to a second assignment, where pairs of students work together to produce a single text. Writing with a partner brings process issues into open discussion: What are we trying to do? What do we know or need to learn? How do you want to manage this assignment? What's our timetable? Should we meet and work together or pass the draft text back and forth? Can we simply divide the text into parts, compose individually, and then fit them together? (Probably not, at least not without sufficient planning.)

A third assignment places students in teams of four, by combining two pairs. I am lucky to teach in spaces that support teamwork with tables and shared monitors. By this point, I've seen individuals and pairs perform, so when I match pairs, I can try to spread talent and motivation evenly across the teams. Students have the advantage of knowing another's habits and talents, while the challenge of collaboration is ratcheted up.

Working with three other people is much more difficult than working with one other person. I ask for a written team plan, based on a clear task description, indicating roles and responsibilities, providing a schedule, and allocating hours among team members. Explicit planning helps me know what is going on in the teams, and it helps teams coalesce around shared goals. Teams allocate time for research, drafting, reviewing, and revising, with the goal of bringing an explicit process to their collaborative efforts.

Throughout this work, I stress commitment to team members. Students must notify their teams if they are going to have to miss a class. Students are coached to discuss team issues and individual performance on a regular basis. With five or six teams in the room, I can easily visit each team each period, so I know how things are going. Team members formally evaluate each other on performance, in writing and orally, at project midpoint and in a debriefing at the project closeout, where we reflect on how the teams have performed. Teams know they will share one grade.

In the final third of the course, individuals pursue independently researched projects related to their majors. They stay on their teams, so they have a forum for discussing their projects, and so they have trusted peers to review their work. The pacing of the course, from individual to pairs to four-person teams, and then back to individual performance gives a nice rhythm to the course, and it allows grades to be assigned as a combination of individual and collaborative performance.

If you are someone who values peer review, I would challenge you to extend your practice to collaborative writing.

Bits 59: start with a plan

3/30/2016

Good writing begins with good planning. I like to formalize planning with a required document—a project plan. You might do something similar.

For a researched argument, I'll have individual students complete a worksheet I call "Nutshell Your Argument." In this one-page document, students identify the topic, the thesis, the audience, the main lines of argument, the counterarguments, and the sources of evidence. The assignment helps students get a fix on just what they are going to accomplish. They must consider the difference between *topic* (or subject) vs. *thesis* (or argumentative stance or purpose). They develop ways of thinking and talking about "lines of argument"—what that means and how to apply such thinking to their writing. They think about intended audience and the counterarguments an audience member might launch.

The nutshell provides me with an early check on assumptions about source requirements, allowing me to guide students toward academically respectable source material, and gives me a chance to intervene early in the assignment process. When we have time, each student briefs the class on his or her nutshell, offering a chance to clarify thinking through oral presentation and Q/A. I keep the presentation low stakes—everyone who does it gets credit.

With team assignments, I ask for something similar—a team project plan that presents the following:

- Problem statement: what issues are being addressed or what problem is being solved
- Significance or importance of project
- Team information: contact information and team roles
- Team rules or work expectations
- Task breakdown
- Schedule of work (typically as a chart or table) with project milestones
- Anticipated hours to be spent on project (budget)
- Cost (hours x hourly rates)

Writing a team plan accomplishes a number of goals. It forces teams to plan ahead and start to formulate individual commitments to team goals. It helps them think through how successful teams reach shared goals. It clarifies the anticipated outcomes and scopes the work to be accomplished. It ensures students know how to contact each other and helps them think about who will do what. It also underscores the adage "Time is money." Students consider what the project is worth and what time they are willing to commit over the course of the project.

The team plan also works really well as a document design project. I ask students to use headings and to tag those headings, paragraphs or other elements in the style sheet. I encourage a visual presentation, with sections presented in tables or charts. I show students (in a mini-lesson) how to set up a document template, select or create styles, and format headers and footers. These are skills every writer needs. We post our plans to our discussion board so teams can see what other teams are up to and can "borrow" good ideas or design elements.

A formal plan can be updated for major projects in the form of a progress report. That allows teams to think through the difference between a prospective plan and a progress report, considering what to reuse and what new information should be added. The repurposed document can later be used as the backbone of the final report or an oral presentation. The final document can also chart the hours spent on the project and compare cost estimates to actuals.

We often think of planning and invention as synonymous. But a conceptual move from planning as *gathering ideas* to planning as *project management* will equip students with a valuable toolset and encourage them to see writing as a way to manage various activities, either individually or as a team member.