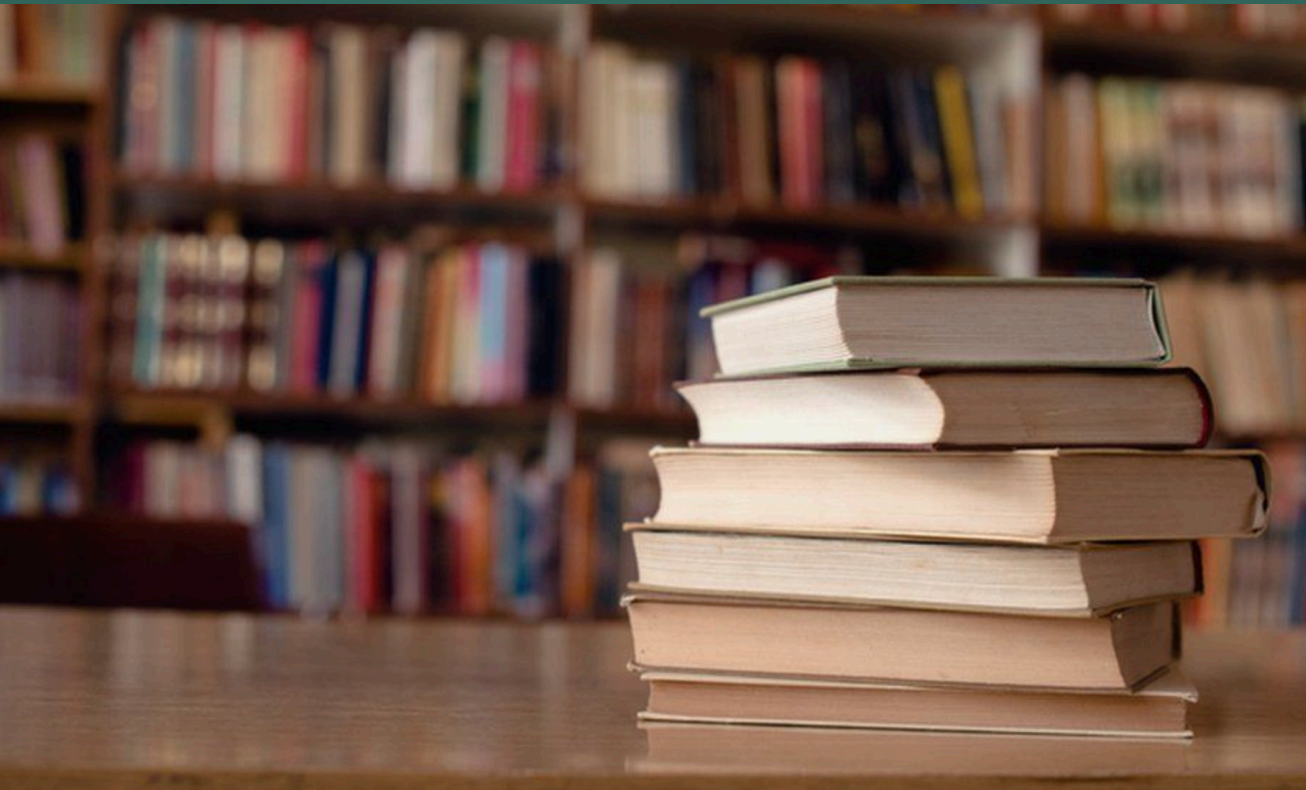


Writing Across the Curriculum

Spring 2022



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Special Issue: Instructional Technique

As we return to the in-person classroom, questions of instructional technique are high on many of our agendas. With so much to consider and experiment with regarding syllabi, assignment design, curriculum, grading and so on, it's easy to forget to think carefully about what we do when we're actually in the classroom. Moreover, the unique features of classroom interaction provide us with an invaluable opportunity to achieve various pedagogical aims. And no matter how well we design the rest of our courses, good or bad instruction can make or break a class.

In this issue, the WAC team explore some key questions regarding instructional technique. What are the key goals that we should be seeking to achieve with in-class exercises? What are the major advantages and disadvantages of different techniques for achieving those goals? And how can we tell when we're making progress?

Contextualizing Grammar Instruction in the Classroom

Chris Carpenter

Most of us who incorporate writing into our classrooms would agree that grammar instruction poses a particular set of problems. It's obviously crucial for ensuring clarity in writing assignments, but few of us are trained as grammarians. Students are deeply concerned with improving their grammar, but focusing on these issues can detract from more important lessons. Then there's the prescriptivist/descriptivist divide: are the "rules" of grammar simply objective laws that must be followed unquestioningly, or are they expressions of complex social, political, and historical relations that have changed over time and across space? Finally, and perhaps most pressing for CUNY instructors, there are the distinct challenges posed by English language learners, those who enter our classes with widely varying degrees of exposure to English grammar. This article will attempt to provide some context for these debates and to help us approach grammar instruction in the classroom as productively as possible.

One important context is the tension between our goals as instructors and the goals of students. Students quickly learn that grammatical errors can result in poor grades and reductions in social esteem. As Mark Blaauw-Hara argues in the pages of *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, "our students need to be able to adhere to standard

English to succeed in other classes and to get jobs at the end of their schooling, and it's our responsibility as writing teachers to help them in that task" (2006, 166). This responsibility, however, often overlaps only intermittently with the skills and practices we hope to teach. In my own writing classes, for example, I want students to learn the skills of critical inquiry, close reading, the structure of arguments and effective methods for using evidence to support those arguments; grammar errors can impede success in those areas, but they can just as often present nothing more than a minor annoyance, noted with a quick marginal comment. To me, the error of writing "they was" instead of "they were" is entirely incidental to the fulfillment of crucial goals. But to a different professor, or a potential employer, this error can signal a more profound inability to conform to standard English, and therefore a potential inability to conform to standards in general. Regardless of our feelings about these kinds of reactions, we must accept that they exist and do what we can to ameliorate them.



One way to do this is to approach grammar issues rhetorically. Instead of identifying errors and asking students to fix them—a method that, as many studies have shown, fails to generate significant improvement (Haswell, 1983; Giberson, 2002;

Shaughnessy, 1994)—we can approach grammar as its own critical object, a set of norms situated within shifting contexts and responding to different goals. “Correctness” and “incorrectness” become categories subject to productive discussion, raising issues of class, race, ethnicity, and social status. As Blaauw-Hara observes, “incorrect” formulations often present no problem from a communicative perspective; rather, “the problem lies in the fact that the student has violated a rule of etiquette” (2006, 168). In other words, the problems we encounter with grammar issues are not those the math teacher must address when a student claims $2+2=5$; they are more complex, contingent, and indeterminate. The student who writes “they was” instead of “they were” can be given the proper “rule” for subject-verb agreement, but they can also use that error as an entry point for discussing dialect and lexical diffusion, the intersections of institutional authority and histories of race and class, or any number of other social, political, and historical issues. The student can begin developing an understanding of why subject-verb problems might escape notice entirely in a song or a conversation in certain settings, but set off glaring alarms in a professional email or an academic essay.

If we teach the latter contexts as “normal” and the former as deviant or aberrant in some way, we risk reinscribing problematic structures of knowledge that constitute many of the objects we want our students to understand critically. This is not to suggest that something like “standard English” doesn’t exist, or that it should be dismantled entirely; rather, we want our students to understand why and how it exists. A Chinese student who learned English abroad and recently moved to the US to study will generally have had a

very different encounter with grammar than a native-born student who attended public schools in an impoverished neighborhood. The former might have an excellent command of grammatical rules but difficulty forming smooth, coherent sentences; the latter might be able to write beautifully, but follow grammatical norms that diverge from those of standard academic English. How do we help both of these students become better writers? How do we avoid the language of deficiency or deviance that can make students feel like their own experiences are somehow lacking?

“This is not to suggest that something like “standard English” doesn’t exist, or that it should be dismantled entirely; rather, we want our students to understand why and how it exists.”

Teaching grammar as part and parcel of the rhetorical situation of any given text can help us navigate these difficulties. When I assign a literacy narrative essay, which asks a student to interrogate their own experiences with language and identity, they are encouraged to write in their own idioms and dialects while analyzing how these “other Englishes” might conflict with school English, work English, or family English. When I assign traditional research essays we take time to examine the language of the scholars they’re citing, taking seriously the common question: “why do they write like this?” We can begin to understand how formulations that might appear “pretentious” or “convoluted” utilize (and often subvert) complex grammatical norms in order to make substantive arguments. (An example: as an undergraduate in beginner French class, I stumbled across the

famous Rimbaud line: “je est un autre.” I asked my instructor: “Isn’t that the wrong conjugation of the être verb?” I’m still immensely grateful he didn’t just say “yes.”) The norms of standard English are understood not just as rules given from an authoritative arbiter, but as social and historical formations. By utilizing different linguistic forms students learn how rhetorical situations can allow different grammatical norms that can effectively address different audiences.

The rhetorical approach to teaching grammar also fosters an understanding of writing as a process, one that continues indefinitely. As students experiment with articulating complex ideas their writing will often exhibit new errors. Rather than treating these issues as a sign of deficiency, we should view them as indicators of progress, giving students the leeway to make mistakes as they exercise unfamiliar linguistic muscles. I’ve often made the mistake of telling students to “simplify” their writing when these issues crop up, but by reducing the opportunity for errors I’m also reducing the opportunity for new forms of expression and articulation.

These approaches undoubtedly require time and attention, but I would argue that they can actually be labor-saving: all that time spent covering student drafts in red ink can instead be put to use tying grammar to the larger issues we really want to teach. A student’s desire to master the norms of standard English – for academic, professional, or personal reasons – doesn’t necessitate trotting out the old workbook or reaching ruefully for the red pen.

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WAC Perspectives

Our Spring 2022 WAC training fellows reflect on a semester's work...

The experience has heightened my awareness of the importance of writing as a means of learning. It has made me aware of new ways to improve writing and enhance my feedback.

Brett Whysel, Business

I think what I appreciate most were tips and ideas around assignment scaffolding. I will be much more mindful in writing out instructions that generate student writing and outcomes I'm after from their coursework. Occasionally, I struggle with sequencing assignments with some groups of students who demonstrate challenges in executing the assignment that will support higher stakes assignments. Classroom activities suggested from these workshops will help me with some earlier interventions around classwork and close reading for student assignments.

Syreeta McFadden, English

I teach computer science courses and find that students in CS lack training in writing. They have difficulty writing a high quality project report. However, software developers are required to complete software development documentation and project reports. The discussions, practices and strategies on this workshop definitely helped me to build scaffolding writing assignments and provide detailed rubric and feedback for students to improve their technical writing skills, which is a learning goal.

Hao Tang, Computer Information Systems

The reading and discussions of the textbook helped me a lot not only to identify techniques and activities that we already use in the class, but also to (re-)assess their effectiveness. I have learned the importance of having clear instructions and goals for each assignment without forgetting the main objective, which is the production of a formal written text.

Berenice Darwich, Modern Languages

Thinking Allowed: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Classroom Discussion

Callum MacRae

Classroom discussion can be a wonderful thing. Leaving a classroom after an intelligent and illuminating exchange of ideas between one's students is amongst the most edifying experiences undergraduate teachers can have. Many current and former students (this author included) report that good discussion classes are amongst their most memorable and pedagogically significant college experiences. Moreover, recent research has consistently found that active participation in the classroom is significantly linked with various important learning and equity outcomes at the college level (Howard, 2004; Hackathorn et al., 2011; Morton, 2016.)

I've known all this for quite some time. But it is only embarrassingly recently that I have started to make classroom discussion the center of my own approach to teaching. Like many instructors, despite knowing the theoretical justification for teaching through classroom discussion, I harbored various doubts about implementing the approach in my own classroom, and frequently retreated to the comfort blanket of lecturing.

The following is an attempt to summarize my own internal interrogation of my doubts about discussion, and the path I took to eventually overcoming them. The sketch is personal, but I

hope it may in parts be helpful to fellow instructors wrestling with their own worries about how best to go about their teaching.

Doubt 1: *Classroom discussion allows self-confident students (who are disproportionately from privileged backgrounds) to thrive at the expense of those less willing to engage in public speaking.* The main impulse behind this doubt is an entirely legitimate concern, and one that instructors frequently fail to pay due attention to. But the mistake comes in conflating well-designed and well-managed classroom discussion with poorly designed and managed classroom discussion.



We have most likely all sat in classes where a laissez-faire discussion leader allows a few precocious students to dominate discussion at the expense of the rest. But not all classroom discussion need take this form, and pedagogical theorists have long been experimenting with different instructional techniques to help facilitate genuinely inclusive classroom discussion. From [structured discussion techniques](#) (such as [think-pair-share](#) and [structured academic controversy](#)) to [seating arrangements](#) to [student-generated discussion questions](#), there is an abundance of tools for steering discussion away from an

oligopoly of the talkative and towards a genuine space for all to test their ideas in a public forum. (In addition to the above links, see Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009 and Brighthouse, 2019 for some helpful tips on how to manage discussion in this regard.)

“there is an abundance of tools for steering discussion away from an oligopoly of the talkative and towards a genuine space for all to test their ideas in a public forum.”

Doubt 2: *Using classroom discussion is lazy. Teachers only argue for its efficacy to rationalize their own reluctance to put in the hard graft of preparing their own material.* I have little doubt that there are teachers who use classroom discussion as an excuse to spend less time preparing material for their students (you may well be able to name some from your own experience at college.) But the discussions in these teachers’ classes will, most likely, be extremely poor. A good discussion requires a lot of careful planning, often includes [preparatory materials](#), and requires constant adaptation to the specific dynamics of the classroom at hand. All this takes a lot of work and effort. Bad teachers might use bad discussions to avoid hard work at the expense of students. Good teachers put in the hard work necessary to facilitate good discussions to improve student development.

Doubt 3: *Classroom discussion might work in circumstances where students are already predisposed to participate in discussion. But in classrooms where students are shy or unmotivated, classroom discussion just doesn’t work.* This seems to me to get things precisely backwards. When

classroom discussion works well it helps students to develop skills that they don’t already have. This means that it is of greatest use to us as teachers when we are dealing with students who aren’t predisposed to speak up. Discussion can feel like it’s not going well when students are not leaping at the opportunity to contribute, but as teachers we should take this to be a sign that publicly exchanging ideas is a skill that our students have not yet acquired—which means that classes designed to elicit productive discussion have a real chance of helping students learn how to master a new skill.

Doubt 4: *Classroom discussion sacrifices rigor and accuracy for other goals, but rigor and accuracy are crucial to learning.* The premise that rigor and accuracy are vital to education is surely correct. But what this doubt misses is that what matters in education is that students learn the value of rigor and accuracy, and develop the skills to practice such intellectual virtues in their own thinking. Here’s one way to ensure that our classrooms are full of rigor and accuracy: devote the majority of classroom time to carefully constructed lectures, carefully vetted for any hint of error, with little opportunity for student intervention. This may (if you’re lucky) expose your students to a good deal of rigor and accuracy. But exposing students to rigor and accuracy is not the same as (nor the most effective means to) helping them develop those skills themselves. Discussion does not sacrifice rigor and accuracy to promote some other goal; it provides students with opportunities to develop the virtues of rigor and accuracy themselves.

Doubt 5: *Classroom discussion only works with small class sizes. My classrooms are too big for effective discussion.* Again, there is much that is

legitimate in this worry, and ever-increasing class sizes do present a serious challenge to effective discussion-based learning. But two important points are worth bearing in mind before one writes off classroom discussion entirely as inappropriate for one's class size. First, though it is most likely true that a discussion-based approach would work better with a smaller class than a bigger one, it doesn't follow that lecturing at a large class will be more effective than taking a discussion-centered approach with a large class. Secondly, it is worth remembering the range of techniques available for facilitating class discussion. These include: [group-based discussions](#); [structured academic controversy](#); [think-pair-share](#); and [jigsaws](#). Though a whole-class free-for-all might be impractical and ineffective with a large class, more sophisticated methods may well have greater prospects for success.

This list of doubts is by no means exhaustive, and neither are the responses demonstrative proofs of the efficacy of classroom discussion. Moreover, to the extent that the responses are successful, they do not show that discussion-based learning is a magic recipe for overnight classroom success. As I have tried to emphasize, becoming a good discussion leader is hard work, and it takes time to develop the skills that enable one to make effective use of discussion to facilitate student learning. But if it makes us better teachers and improves the classroom experience of our students, then to this teacher at least it seems time and effort well-spent.

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ADDITIONAL LINKS

[The Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning Guide to Advanced Discussion Leading](#)

[The Derek Bok Center For Teaching and Learning Guide to Leading Discussions](#)

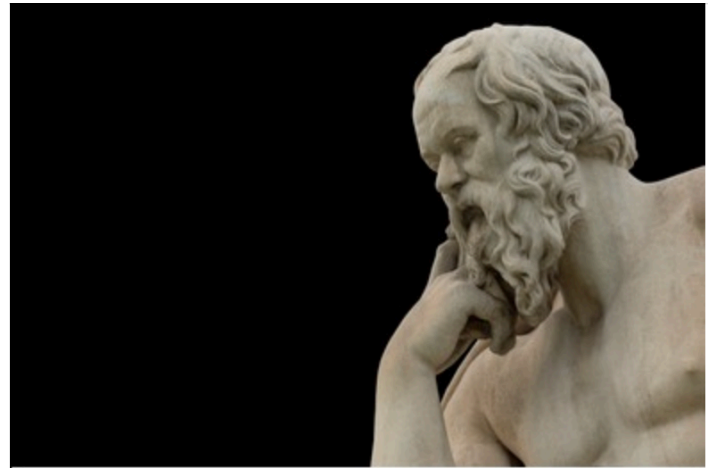
The Resurrection of Socrates

David Marker

When I was a lowly first year law student, I was introduced to the overarching pedagogical tool used by most law schools in the US – the Socratic method. It went something like this: You walk into your business law class with a gut-wrenching anxiety that today is the day that the legal gods will frown upon you, and you will be randomly called on to discuss one of the assigned judicial opinions, in open air, in front of the rest of the class with the professor grilling you from every theoretical angle.

The ritual starts out by the professor suddenly calling your full, first, and last, name sending shockwaves through your entire body. To your surprise, some mysterious force lifts you out of your seat onto your trembling legs where you teeter faintly in the middle of the lecture hall facing the professor at the front of the room. Dozens of exhaling students stare up at you in ghastly awe like a trolling line of drivers gawking at a car wreck on the other side of the highway. In an out-of-body experience, you watch yourself with them, except you can't ultimately escape your own doomed corpus.

Your vision blurs as you scramble to desperately scan your notes from last night's readings as the professor fires out questions to you like a supreme court justice torturing a clueless trial lawyer from the bench. Miraculously, words come out of your mouth. For the next few minutes, you sink or swim, alone, based upon your preparation and ability to



discuss the factual scenario and theoretical arguments of the legal opinion at hand. There will be no quarter, no lifesaver thrown. When the ritual mercifully ends you crumple back down to your seat, relieved, yet feeling oddly accomplished. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

The Socratic method is beneficial to student development and critical thinking skills. When implemented properly this methodology enables students to internalize arguments and master complex issues by comprehending and expressing multiple sides of an argument regardless of one's personal biases. This process not only strengthens a student's understanding of the issue but enables the student to be "more inclined to respect the opposing position and to be curious about the arguments on both sides, and what the two sides might share, rather than seeing the discussion as simply a way of making boasts and assertions." (Nussbaum, 52)

I challenge you to challenge your students to utilize the Socratic method in your classroom. While the above example might not be suitable for a non-legal classroom, there are elements of the Socratic method that are perfectly adaptable to myriad academic settings. Paramount is nurturing the

student's ability to approach complex, even contentious, subjects from multiple, dispassionate viewpoints even if it involves pushing students out of their comfort zone. Additionally, the Socratic method does not need to take place as an oral argument but can be easily adapted into a writing format. An example would be a written assignment that asks the student to craft a dialogue between two people who are discussing disparate sides of an issue or problem that your course is addressing. Students can also be randomly assigned positions to advocate for and have mock oral or written debates with their classmates in small groups. The Socratic method can be implemented in an informal in-class exercise, or it can be worked into a formal writing assignment. Design creative assignments that place an emphasis on the student's ability to apply multiple viewpoints and positions to a factual scenario or topic.

“The Socratic method fosters critical thinking skills by asking students to embody different positions of an argument to better understand the overall complexity of a given topic.”

The Socratic method fosters critical thinking skills by asking students to embody different positions of an argument to better understand the overall complexity of a given topic. This does not require students to abandon their personally held convictions but does require them to interpret and even objectively argue the rationale behind opposing viewpoints. The Socratic method is a form of healthy discourse ideal for the classroom setting where students can engage with complex

issues and multiple viewpoints in a theoretical sandbox better equipping them to deal with the world outside of the classroom. You don't have to make your students sweat bullets by debating them in front of the rest of the class but pushing your students to learn the skills of arguing multiple sides of a complex set of facts will enable them to better navigate a world flooded with information, disinformation, information bubbles, influencers, and everything in between.

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Welcoming New WAC Faculty

This spring we trained a new cohort of faculty in WAC pedagogy: Soo Ran Choi (Art History); Berenice Darwich (Modern Languages); Angela Elbanna (Speech); Syreeta McFadden (English); Carline Romain (Speech); Hao Tang (Computer Information Systems); Nicolas Westemeyer (Speech); Brett Whysel (Business). Each will be teaching their first Writing Intensive course in the fall. Welcome to the WAC community!

Get Involved!

If you would like to integrate effective and interesting writing into your specific course curricula and become certified to teach Writing Intensive courses, we invite you to apply for the Fall 2022 WAC Faculty Training Workshop. The deadline for applications June 9th. You may access more information and the application on our [website](#).

If you have questions, please contact Rifat Salam: rsalam@bmcc.cuny.edu.

Other WAC Resources on the Web

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): owl.english.purdue.edu/owl

The WAC Clearing House: wac.colostate.edu/intro

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