Writing Across the Curriculum

Freewriting: Finding Confidence and a Writer's Voice *by Shane Breaux*

Associate Professor of Sociology Dr. Elizabeth Wissinger uses Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) principles in her classes at BMCC, even those that are not designated as Writing Intensive, because she has found that they often have a remarkable impact on student learning and writing. For Professor Wissinger, low-stakes freewriting exercises in particular take the "scary, paralyzing aspect of writing away by allowing them to think with their pens in their hands." Even further, she has found that after students learn to work through this fear, they begin to find and hone their voices as writers. She knows this not only from her experiences as a teacher but also from her own experiences as a graduate student and a scholar. After earning her PhD in Sociology and Women's Studies from the CUNY Graduate Center in 2004, Dr. Wissinger conducted additional research and greatly revised her dissertation in order to publish it as the book *This Year's Model: Fashion, Media, and the Making of Glamour* in 2015.

Dr. Wissinger said students usually laugh when she first introduces the freewriting exercises and asks them to write without stopping for ten full minutes, even if they do not know what to write. She tells them, "You don't know what to write? Write that down. 'I don't know what to write. My professor told me to write something. I hate writing. I don't want to write this right now.'" Eventually, most students find themselves having a great deal to write, "and some of them begin to adopt the practice and use it at home to think with." To further build students' confidence in learning and writing, she encourages them to write about their reading assignments in terms of what is confusing or what they disagree with. This "gives

them permission to not know" or fully grasp course concepts, while still critically engaging with the material. Freewriting is "a very powerful tool to help them get in touch with what their thoughts are."

As the freewriting exercises in her classes foster student confidence in their ideas, they also help her students find their own voices as writers. Dr. Wissinger shows them they can be themselves in print, and that they do not have to adopt a stilted "academic" voice when completing the formal writing assignments that come out of the freewrites. She believes that writing in one's own voice can be daunting because it can be more personally revealing than writing mostly in formal jargon. The freewrites provide a safe space for them to explore their own voices and find a balance between that and the more formal voice required in high-stakes essay assignments. She sees freewriting as a place for the students to ask themselves, "What do *I* have to say?" Building on this, she sees engaging the course content through writing as a means of bolstering many of her students' sociological and political activism by supporting their personal experiences with concrete facts and data and clearly communicate them with authority. This is when they really begin to recognize the power that their education is providing them.

Another benefit Dr. Wissinger sees of regular freewriting exercises is helping to curb plagiarism. Regularly required freewriting starts a habit of writing about the course material
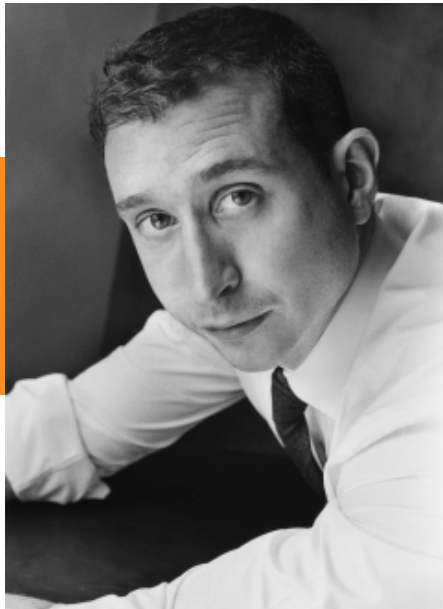
early in the semester. Also, when a formal essay assignment is scaffolded from the freewrites, the student is not starting the final assignment from scratch on a scary blank page. Because the students have already established a habit of thinking through the material by writing, they are less likely to panic and resort to plagiarizing. Reading the students' freewrites also allows the professor to become familiar with each student writer's voice throughout the semester, which helps her recognize if the voice shifts to someone else's.

Dr. Wissinger credits Robert R. Alford, one of her professors at the Graduate Center, as the person who really taught her how to write, and upon reflection, she realized that his techniques align with WAC principles. In his course The Craft of Inquiry, Professor Alford asked the PhD candidates to write "little memos" rather than a paper. The memos were required to deal with some aspect of their research and writing their dissertations, which would then be reviewed by the other candidates in the class and were allowed to be revised as many times as they wanted. Dr. Alford assigned memos rather than papers because "he knew papers were scary," Dr. Wissinger said, even for doctoral candidates. With her students at BMCC, she carries on Dr. Alford's approach of alleviating student fear of thinking and writing in their own voices and guiding students to discover their personal power through writing exercises. ■

Profiles in Writing: *Jason Schneiderman, Assistant Professor of English*

Interview with Jason Schneiderman, Assistant Professor in English, BMCC.

By Leslie Synn

students. It's also a metaphor that suggests that writing takes time. They understand that you can't start training for the Olympics the night before in a way that they don't understand that you can't start writing your paper the night before.

LS: Could you tell me a little about how you see your own role as a writing teacher?

JS: As much as I hate to use this metaphor, I basically see myself as a coach. I can't do the writing for my students, but I *can* demonstrate good technique, offer models, and point out strengths and weaknesses, as well as make suggestions about how to improve. I find that students find the coaching metaphor really helpful because it helps them see writing as a skill that can be developed and improved with practice. Even the worst tennis player has to get on the tennis court and play tennis if they want to improve, and that seems to make sense to my

LS: What do you value about your work as a writing teacher in an academic setting like BMCC?

JS: I really value teaching the concept of revision to students at BMCC. Studies do show that students across the board generally see writing as something you do once—you sit down and write a paper, and then you turn it in. If it's good, you're good at writing, and if it's bad, then you're bad at it. Most students share this view on writing, and it's tough to shake. I find myself explaining over and over to students that a paper needs to have the thoughts in the order that the reader needs the information, not the order in which the writer thought of the information.

I try really hard to insist on a growth mindset rather than a deficiency mindset. Embracing revision is a really powerful way to make that distinction real to the students. It's not that you're a bad writer, it's that there are more steps to take if you want to get an A.

LS: Is there a particular quality/aspect in writing you especially value?

JS: As much as it might surprise my students, probably my highest value is clarity. (I say that because a lot of times, I think they find me pretty hard to understand.) I value rubrics precisely because they offer clarity and complexity. It's a way of saying clearly what I want from the student, while still maintaining a level of complexity regarding what is possible.

A lot of times, people see clarity as the enemy of complexity—and I do understand that when anyone is trying to say something that hasn't been said before (or that they haven't said before), clarity is hard to come by. I find that my greatest successes as a writing teacher are when I can point out contradictions in a student paper, and then encourage the student to synthesize the two positions, rather than picking one side or another.

LS: How has your perspective on teaching changed over the years?

JS: When I first started teaching at the college level, I had a much clearer sense of where I thought the students should be, and if they weren't there, I felt very frustrated. I'd come home from my classes, complaining about what my students couldn't do, and my husband would say, "Well, if they could do that, they wouldn't need you. You're a teacher, so teach them to do it."

I am much more focused now on figuring out where my students are when they start the class. My goal is to meet them there, in order to build on the knowledge they already have. I still have goals in terms of what they need to know or to be able to do by the end of the semester, but I'm much more comfortable tailoring my approach to their needs. If you pitch a lesson too low for your student's reading level, it's insulting, but if you pitch it too high, it's unintelligible. I think that's true for all teaching. You teach the students you have, not the students you want. The truth is that the students I have are pretty amazing. I've taught at a lot of places, and, to be honest, these are the students I want. ∎

Tutoring in the Writing Center: Critical Thinking and Cultural Capital *by Alana Murphy*

Near the end of last semester, a student came to me in the BMCC writing center for help proofreading her "so-chology" paper.

"Do you mean *sociology*?"

"Yeah."

"Or *psychology*?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Okay!" I said. "So, before we get to any consideration of grammar or vocabulary, our first task is to figure out the name of the class that you've been enrolled in for the past four months…"

This is an extreme example, but students have often come to my sessions expecting a "quick fix," only to reveal a deeper lack of understanding of their assignments and subject matter; I'm often compelled to address these deficits first. Sometimes this comprehension gap is related to shortcomings of the prompts themselves—i.e., teachers having posed questions that are vague or open-ended, or don't

specify key parameters such as length, appropriate primary/secondary sources, citation style, and general analytical approach. These are issues that our WAC faculty workshops aim to troubleshoot.

Still, even when teachers' instructions are amply detailed, students often don't seem to understand them in full. Many tutoring sessions have required me to help a student grasp concepts like what constitutes a thesis statement, what makes a source trustworthy, and why citation is a necessary practice. These issues fall under the umbrella of "critical thinking"—a difficult-to-define term, but the absence of which is easily recognizable. I sensed this absence in my "so-chology" tutee, who didn't get any copy-editing out of me. Instead, I asked her to look up the definition of sociology (her course's subject, as it turned out) and only after she was able to explain to me the core tenets of sociology did we return to her assignment.

At a recent pedagogy workshop, a group leader remarked that one of WAC's purposes is "to give

students tools to understand and critique the systems that are manipulating them." Rifat Salam, our BMCC WAC coordinator and a so-chologist by trade, puts it another way: "Reading and writing effectively in English is a form of cultural capital." Yet the somewhat narrow prescriptions of "good" academic writing within American higher education—linearity, evidence-backed assertions—can pose special challenges for students who are English language learners or who come from cultures that value models of discourse that are less argumentative or thesis-driven. It's a delicate balance for tutors not to impose rigid stylistic expectations on students' writing, yet still help them succeed within longstanding paradigms.

My colleague Shane Breaux described a tutoring experience in this vein that was especially poignant and telling. A student was writing an essay about how she never wanted to lose her Spanish accent. As Shane helped the student tighten up her grammar and sentence flow, they both realized that in a sense her natural "accent," which came out in her writing voice, was being effaced. But she would likely get a better grade in adhering to a particular standard of correctness. "You kind of just have to master the system first," he said to her. "Then, from inside of it, you can challenge it, start to use your own voice." ∎

Reminders from the recent WAC Refresher Workshop, "Out of WAC? Refreshing Your Writing Intensive Assignments and Syllabi"

✦ Include the definition and requirements of WI courses provided by the WAC Coordinators on all WI course syllabi.

✦ Explicitly point out which assignments are formal and informal, high and low-stakes, and what their grade weights are.

✦ Clearly indicate the relationship among course material, low-stakes and high-stakes assignments, draft(s), and final essay(s) in scaffolded assignments.

✦ Explore ways to incentivize students to submit drafts of formal assignments if they are not required or graded.

✦ Write a specific and detailed assignment prompt to inspire students to write specific and detailed essays.

✦ Align the assignment prompt and requirements with your Course Learning Outcomes, and align the grading rubric to both.

✦ Remember not to assign too many writing assignments over the semeseter.

WAC at BMCC

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WAC Resources Online

BMCC WAC Site
http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/wac/

The WAC Clearinghouse
wac.colostate.edu/intro/

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

Photo by Louis Chan.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT (FRONT ROW): Ilir Disha (Criminal Justice), C. Ray Borck (Sociology), Elizabeth Fow (English), Nicholas Smith (Academic Literacy and Linguistics), and Brenda K. Vollman (Criminal Justice). BACK ROW: Rifat Salam (Sociology), Holly Messitt (English), Leslie Synn (WAC Fellow), George Nossa (Computer Science), Alana Murphy (WAC Fellow), Monica Foust (Psychology), Berglind Ragnarsdóttir (WAC Fellow), Peter Yu (WAC Fellow), Daly Guilamo (Center for Ethnic Studies), and Drew Bucilla (WAC Fellow).