

Writing Across the Curriculum

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Spring 2017

As another academic year comes to an end, those of us in the BMCC WAC program would like to share some reflections on the past year, as well as information gathered during our writing workshops. We had 9 faculty members train in our program this Spring semester, working with our cohort of 7 writing fellows, all of whom are PhD students at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Several faculty members, who trained last Fall, successfully taught their first WI courses this semester. Congratulations to all! We wish everyone a relaxing and restful summer break.



Spring 2017 WAC Fellows, Coordinators and Training Faculty (Clockwise from top left): Survo Banerjee, Genevieve Waite, Mark DeBellis, Alana Murphy, Shane McConnell, James Hoff, Liora Schulman, Keith Carter, Christine Farias, Holly Messitt, Maria Pagan Rivera, Jennifer Longley, Shin Ae Lee, Drew Bucilla, Chirag Rival, Rifat Salam, Vanessa Troiano.

Tips for Creating Collaborative Writing Assignments

by *Vanessa Troiano*

Collaborative writing requires students to work in a group to produce a written work, in which each member of the group has contributed more or less equally to the content of the text. As with any good writing assignment, the collaborative one needs to be well-planned and carefully designed. Here are some tips to make your collaborative writing

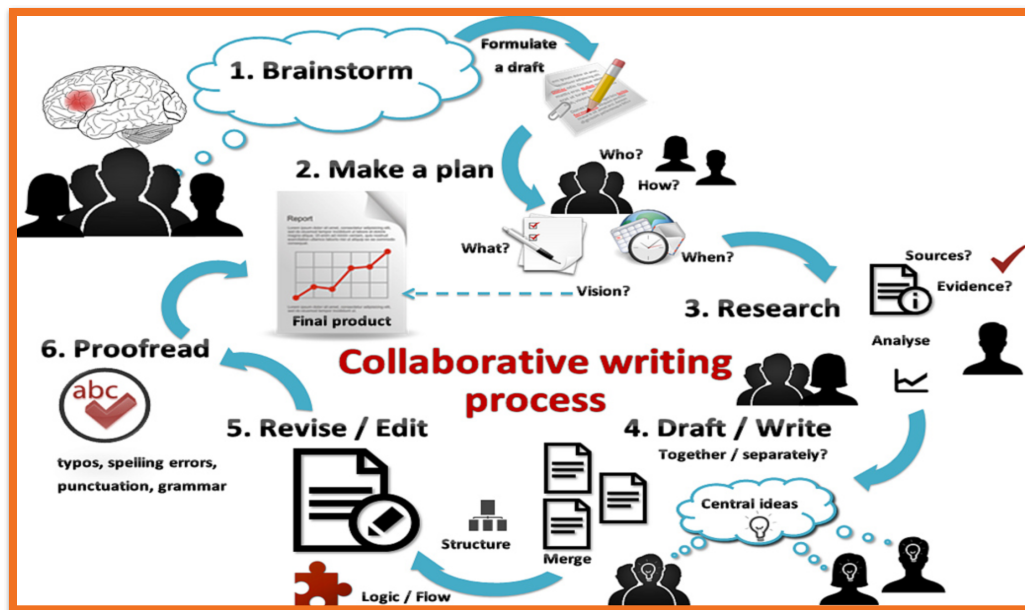
assignment effective and engaging.

- ***Before assigning a collaborative writing assignment, spend time getting to know your students, and allow your students to get to know each other.*** If you choose to form the groups, the time spent getting to know your students will allow you to decipher which students will work well with each other.

It will also allow you to create groups with students of diverse intellectual capabilities, so that “A” students will work with “C” students, leveling the playing field for all groups. If you allow students to form the groups themselves, give them in-class activities in the first few weeks of the course that will encourage them to get to know their classmates so that they can develop a sense of which students will be best for them to work with.

- ***Devote some class time to group work.***

Especially at universities like CUNY, in which most of the students are commuters, and many of them have jobs and families outside of school, planning to have time for students to work together in class will give them the opportunity to discuss their project and devise an approach for completing it together. You may also wish to hold conferences with groups to discuss their progress and work.



- ***What is the best size for groups?*** Research has shown that groups of students work best together if they have 5 or 6 members. Anything less and the members will either pair off with each other or isolate a lonely group member. Anything more and the group will be too diluted for an effective participatory experience.
- ***Design a writing assignment that is best completed collaboratively.*** One option could be a labor-intensive assignment, so that the task can be divided into subtasks for each group member to work on. If you wish your students to work more dialogically, create an assignment that requires interdependence of the group members. Assignments more focused on the generation of ideas rather than research tend to promote more dialogue amongst the students.
- ***Ask students to prepare a Group Proposal for the assignment.*** This will help students devise a plan to tackle the assignment collaboratively. The proposal could include a brief abstract or explanation of the topic, meeting and due-dates schedule, and a list of responsibilities for each group member. You can also assign progress reports and draft reviews.
- ***Consider using online collaborative writing tools.*** You may wish to encourage your students to use a wiki-based platform to write their group essays. Google Docs is a good online tool that allows students to write and edit collaboratively. Changes can be tracked by each contributor and the revision history is automatically saved.

- ***Be clear about grading.*** Tell your students exactly how you will grade the project. You can assign a single group grade for the final product, and then ask the group members to grade each other based on their contributions to the assignment.
- ***Prepare for resistance.*** There will indubitably be

instances in which group members conflict with each other. Establishing a fair grading scheme and encouraging groups to meet deadlines and responsibilities can help alleviate tensions. Remind students that creative conflict is often a part of successful collaboration. Be willing to listen to students' concerns and address them appropriately. ■

The Benefits of Writing Intensive Courses from a Student's Perspective

Cynthia Morales, Women and Gender Studies major, Class of 2019

W *hat aspects of your Writing Intensive (WI) course at BMCC did you find most beneficial?*

What I found most beneficial from my Writing Intensive course was that it provided me with the necessary tools to master the course material. I was able to make connections between assigned readings, lectures, and handouts so that once I had to write an assignment I had a better grasp of the topic. The small writing assignments given in class helped me work towards becoming a better writer. From what I learned in the Writing Intensive course I was able to apply the same tactics for my other courses respectively.

What was your writing process like before and after taking a WI course?

My writing process before taking a Writing Intensive course was frustrating. I would always have trouble with gathering my thoughts and ideas into a clear and concise essay. My sentences wouldn't flow or make sense. I didn't enjoy the writing process before but now I feel differently about it. Now I am able to gather my ideas in an organized collective manner and get my point across with the use of stronger sentences with fewer words.

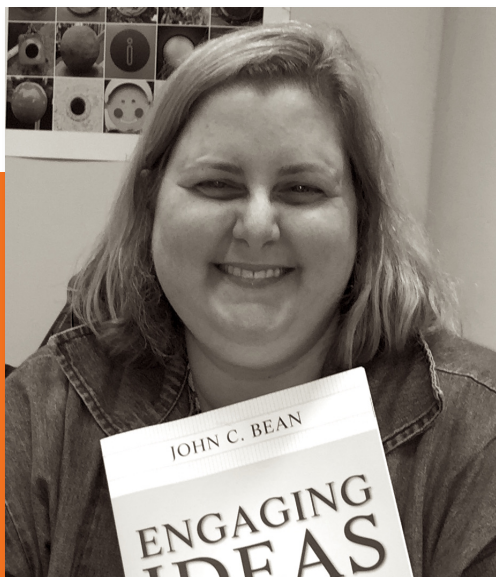
What to you is the importance and value in learning how to be a better writer?

The importance and value in learning how to be a better writer to me is that I think there's always room for improvement. Specifically, with pursuing a higher education I am always trying to pick up on habits that can help me become a better student. It helps me think more critically and cognitively. This type of tool not only works in a classroom setting but can be applied to interpret the world in a meaningful manner.

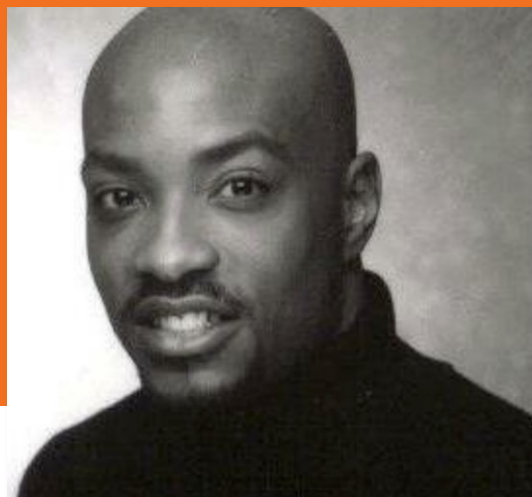
How has your experience taking Writing Intensive courses transformed your performance in other classes?

My experience in taking Writing Intensive courses transformed my performance in other classes because I've used the same writing techniques that I've learned and applied them to my other classes. I've learned to think more critically and cognitively and have applied this to interpret the world in a meaningful manner. After taking one Writing Intensive course I wanted to continue improving and mastering my writing skills to prepare me for when I attend a 4-year college. ■

Reflections on WAC from Spring 2017 Training Faculty Members



Jennifer Longley



Keith Carter

Below are BMCC faculty responses to a survey, which was distributed during a WAC training session this semester.

Jennifer Longley is an Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Department. Shane McConnell is a Lecturer in the Department of Academic Literacy and Linguistics. Keith Carter is a Faculty Member in the Human Services and Social Sciences department.

What spurred your decision to sign up for the WAC training program?

J. Longley: I participated in the WAC training program to expand my repertoire of techniques to support my students to improve their writing skills.

S. McConnell: I wanted to provide a deeper learning experience in the classroom and I wanted to discover what WAC would offer.

K. Carter: To improve my skills with developing writing exercises that better assess students in their educational experiences.

How has the WAC training program influenced your pedagogical thinking and practice?

J. Longley: Through the training program, I have learned a variety of techniques to help my students write in-class to support both their academic learning and creating rich assignments.

S. McConnell: It helped me redefine my learning objectives and bolster the scaffolding process to

ensure students are well supported in their task completion.

K. Carter: The use of Bean's book, *Engaging Ideas*, and supplemental readings were a great asset to this WAC training program. Overall, this opportunity has helped me to better understand the psychology behind teaching and supporting students in their writing.

What was one of the most interesting things you learned in your WAC training this semester?

J. Longley: One of the most valuable lessons I learned through WAC is that I could stop "editing" my students' papers. I continue to provide detailed feedback and questions that focus on assisting the students to develop meaningful, well-thought-out, structured ideas. I feel as if I now concentrate on supporting growth and development in the writing process, as opposed to hunting for and identifying mistakes and errors.

S. McConnell: I learned more about how best to leave comments on a student's paper, being sensitive to their needs while providing instructional support.

K. Carter: Creating scaffolded assignments that support the final formal assignment. ■

Beyond Appreciation: Teaching Students to Write Critically About Music

By *Alana Murphy*

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” Thus spake Elvis Costello, or possibly Frank Zappa, or possibly Gore Vidal-- the famous quote has never received a definitive attribution, and yet its ubiquity speaks to an underlying truth. As a professional writer-about-music, I can vouch for the truthfulness of the statement: the ephemeral world of tones often evades a satisfying verbal realization.

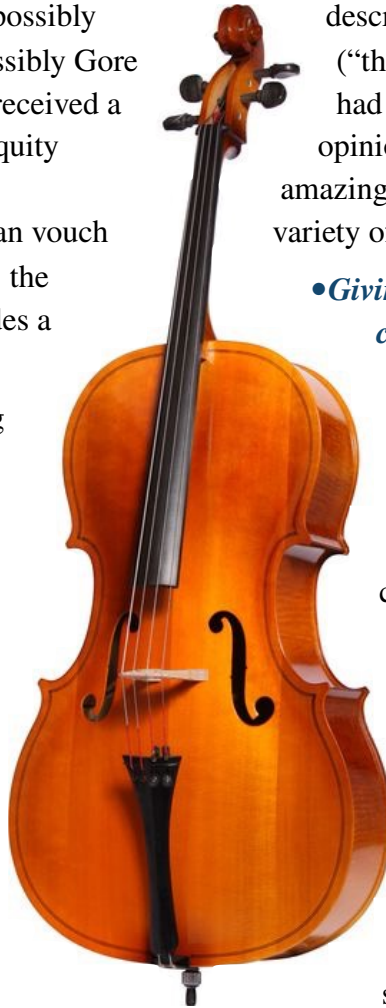
But sometimes I find that attempting to depict musical processes in prose can lead to nuanced observations or epiphanies that I would not have arrived at had I simply let a sonic experience wash over me. And so I happily promote the cross-exchange of words and tones, both as a professional and as an educator.

Undergraduates enrolled in a core Music Appreciation class often come from varying backgrounds - some students may have undergone extensive musical training, while others may have never picked up an instrument or learned notation. Still, everyone is required to complete the same assignments. In the CUNY system, the most commonly prescribed writing task is the concert report: students must attend a live performance (usually classical or jazz) and form some sort of critical response, employing to the best of their abilities the musical terminology that they have learned during the semester.

What constitutes good criticism? I’ve found that

without significant prompting in the assignment guidelines, students tend to turn in purely descriptive accounts of their concert-going (“the performers wore black”; “the Beethoven had a lot of crescendos”) or superficial opinions (“the players were all really amazing!”) To get them to dig a bit deeper, I use a variety of tactics. Here is a partial list:

- ***Giving scaffolding assignments in the classroom.*** I’ve developed a number of free-associative low-stakes writing exercises, such as listening to a piece of music in class and inventing a movie scene to go along with it, or comparing two different recordings of the same composition to get at the subtleties of individual interpretation.
- ***Prepping for a live performance in class.*** I sometimes play a YouTube video excerpt of a recital and ask students guided questions, such as, “How formal do you think this concert is? Are the performers interacting with the audience?” or “Do the performers seem to be struggling technically with their material, or are they in control?” Students often have instantaneous intuitive responses to my queries, and engage in lively discussions.
- ***Providing focused prompts in the written assignment directions.*** The guided questioning that is so effective in the classroom also helps students when they venture out into the wilds of a live performance. I encourage them to take in details about the concert venue, the printed programs, and the audience demographic, before assessing the performance itself.



For the music proper, I ask them to consider a number of things: what is the repertoire - is it contemporary, or from a historical period? What genres of music and types of performing ensembles are represented? Then I ask them to evaluate the quality of the compositions and the quality of the interpretations. Once all of these critical parameters are considered, the students are at long last free to express their personal opinions, as long as they are substantiated.

If the above seems a touch micromanaged, it is in service of a somewhat lofty aim: I want my

students to move beyond an entirely subjective conception of the arts, and express their individual perceptions and responses through a solid framework of inquiry and analysis. Such evaluative skills are transferrable to the visual arts, literature, theatre, film, and beyond. While music may be a particularly tricky subject to pin down in writing, the attempt is inevitably illuminating. As the great Douglas Adams once wrote, "Let us prepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not eff it after all!" ■

Thoughts on Collaborative Writing Pedagogy

by *Vanessa Troiano*

My interest in collaborative writing pedagogy stems from my second semester of teaching at Brooklyn College, when I was observed by a faculty member who was really into Team-Based Learning (TBL), and suggested that I should incorporate some group-work into my course. Admittedly, I was initially skeptical about this suggestion, since my course was a lecture class filled with 50 students seated in a lecture hall with immovable tables and chairs. Furthermore, the course surveyed the entire History of Art from cave paintings to contemporary art - an enormous amount of material - and the thought of sacrificing lecture time for group-work made me wince. However, at the end of this semester, Brooklyn College held a full-day workshop on TBL with Larry Michaelsen, who developed the pedagogical initiative in the late 1970s, and what I learned and experienced about group-work motivated me to incorporate group activities into my lecture course.

For those of you unfamiliar with TBL, it is a



teaching strategy that involves creating groups, or rather "teams" of students (usually 5-6 members), in a classroom that work together all semester long on assignments. The instructor forms the teams so that they are diverse both demographically and intellectually, and they remain fixed throughout the semester. The crux of this set-up is that individual students become accountable for their team's success based on their preparation for class. While some classroom time is spent on covering course content, much of the time is used for working on team assignments, requiring students to study and prepare the material outside of class.

Research has found that TBL engages students more, both socially and with the course material, enhancing their overall learning experience.

This year, as a BMCC Writing Fellow, I have been immersed in WAC pedagogy, which I also find to be an invaluable instructional practice designed to enhance student learning. However, in our workshops or working in the Writing Center, I have noticed that many of the writing assignments we develop and discuss tend to be designed with an individual student in mind.

Knowing that there are benefits to both writing and collaborative pedagogies, it would then seem beneficial if more writing assignments were geared toward collaborative work amongst students. In my own teaching practice I have incorporated collaborative writing assignments, and I would like to share my experience with the hope that other instructors will be inspired to do the same.

Although I did not fully adopt the TBL model, I did begin to incorporate group-work into my lecture course. Specifically, each week I would give an assessed review that asked students to write a short comparative essay about two works of art from the previous week's lecture. I found these reviews to be extremely helpful in preparing students for the midterm and final exams, which are also essay-based comparisons of works of art. Not only did the reviews prompt the students to study the material each week, the reviews also prepared them for the

format of the exams, which, for students new to Art History, is not necessarily intuitive.

Initially, for the first few weeks of the semester, I assigned these reviews individually, so that I could help guide each student on developing the right format for the essay. However, shortly thereafter, I gave the option to the students to work in small groups on the essay reviews, and most jumped at the opportunity. By working collaboratively, the students seemed to enjoy the assignment much



more, perhaps because the pressure of producing essays individually had been lifted. They also got to know their classmates better, leading many of them to form study groups from their in-class review groups, which ultimately helped them better prepare for the exams.

As an instructor, I found the group-work generated an exchange of ideas amongst the students, which they would not have had if they continued to work individually. I also found that students who were struggling benefited from collaborating with other students.

Furthermore, the group-work was a significant help to me, as I had many fewer essays to grade each week.

There were modifications I had to make for the group essays, including extending the amount of time students had to write their responses, as the group-work required extra discussion time. I also decided to allow students to use their notes in the groups, since it was difficult to monitor them otherwise. Although this might have made the review easier for them, I believe they still benefitted more from discussing the material with their classmates.

While the majority of the class seemed to enjoy the group reviews better than the individual reviews, there were students who complained to me in private that certain group members were not pulling their weight, and they thought this was unfair. My response to this was that the reviews were weighted far less than the exams, which I still required students to do individually. Therefore, the overall impact of a “lazy” student benefitting grade-wise from the work of their group-mates was negligible.

Art History, as well as many other disciplines in the humanities, unfortunately does not traditionally encourage collaborative writing, perhaps because writing is often thought of in terms of individual scholarship and authorship. This can also be said of the university system in general, which awards merit based on an individual’s achievements. However, there are many practical and professional applications of collaborative writing, from news and business reports to scientific studies. In a world that is ever-increasingly collaborative, perhaps it is time to incorporate more collaboration into writing instruction and practices.

Several theorists, such as Kenneth Bruffee, Bruce W. Speck and Rebecca Moore Howard, have discussed the host of benefits derived from collaborative writing pedagogy, including the generation of a variety of ideas, as well as stronger and more complex texts. Having experienced some of these benefits in my own teaching, it is certainly a practice I will continue to employ in future classes, and encourage other instructors to at least try. ■

WAC at BMCC

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