

Faculty Focus: January 24, 2005

Welcome to the first Faculty Focus of 2005. It's going to be a great year! Don't worry if you didn't receive your Faculty Focus last month. Since so many people were away from campus during the break, there wasn't an issue. Enjoy this issue and be sure to check out the great book offer!

Ginny Haight, editor

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**Department Seeks and Finds New Opportunities**

Where do you see your department in five years? It's a question that has inspired many a perfunctory report culminating in few tangible results beyond the report itself -- but not in the case of Rowan University's department of composition and rhetoric.

The department, which was formerly known as the college writing department, is one of five in the New Jersey university's department of communication. Until 1999 it was a "service department" without a major and known primarily for its first-year writing program.

In 1997, the administration asked the department to do a five-year plan, a task the department took very seriously. "I think that while the freshman writing program was and is extremely important to us, our faculty also felt that we were able to offer other services to the university and the community as well. We were in a college in which every other department had a major, and it seemed to us, to be taken seriously we also needed to have that kind of stake," says Janice Rowan, chair of the department of composition and rhetoric.

In addition, there were several new faculty members who wanted a more interesting career path than what was in place. Based on the five-year plan, the department created a B.A. in writing arts and an M.A. in writing.

The department's growth and refinement did not end there.

When the college of engineering came on board in 1997 (after a \$100-million gift in 1992), Rowan got involved with the new college immediately because the dean wanted to graduate "truly literate engineers."

"I volunteered to be on the committee that assessed general education courses, served on the hiring committee, and a few of my faculty members started providing the college of engineering with a special college composition II within the sophomore engineering clinic, which is a very successful program that has continued," Rowan says.

Although the department now has its own degree programs, its underlying service philosophy has not changed. The department recently formed a new partnership with the college of business to offer a special writing course for management students.

The department has also reached beyond campus, working with high schools on writing issues. "We decided that while it's very common for faculty at a higher level to blame faculty below them for whatever is wrong with the students' writing or development -- high school teachers blame the grade schools and college teachers blame the high schools -- we decided it was an unproductive path so we started a series of workshops where we met with high school teachers and talked about writing and the problems we had in common," Rowan says.

Rowan and her colleagues are constantly looking for new opportunities. "I think it's important that the department define itself rather than have someone else define it. When we started our transformation, the administration didn't come to us and say, 'Why don't you do this?' We had to take the initiative," Rowan says.

Taking the initiative means seeking key positions on university committees. In recent years, the department of composition and rhetoric has its faculty members on the graduate program advisory committee; Rowan served as chair of the promotions committee; one faculty member was co-chair of the university budget and planning committee ("as involved as faculty ever get to the real running of the university"); another faculty member served as chair of the curriculum committee; another was coordinator of the college intern program; and four faculty members served as senators (two that the department was entitled to and two at-large).

"I think this helps keep us informed about what is going on at the university, and it gives us a chance to put ideas forward in all these different areas," Rowan says.

As chair, Rowan occasionally has the opportunity to recommend faculty members for various committees, and the faculty members take the initiative as well.

"I'm always on the lookout for ways in which my faculty can serve. I do it partly for our program, but I also do it for the faculty. After all, faculty have to get promoted and tenured, and a lot of these prestigious positions look very good in their portfolios as they move forward," Rowan says.

The department's success was recently recognized by the Writing Program Administrators for its holistic approach to writing education. The review by the WPA involved a several-day campus visit that included meetings with administrators, faculty, and students.

In addition to being the basis for an award, this external evaluation also provided the department with other information that will be useful as the department plans for the future.

"The WPA visit came at a good time because we were building, building, building, and it was time to stand back and ask, 'Where are we?'" Rowan says.

The evaluators suggested that the department break into three committees: one that looks at general education, one focused on the degree programs, and one that addresses university-level commitments. "We're spending this year planning where we want to go from here. Can we produce a Ph.D program? Do we have the university's support? What will it mean for our other programs?" Rowan says.

Contact Janice Rowan at [rowan@rowan.edu](mailto:rowan@rowan.edu).

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## **Blogs, Threaded Discussions Accentuate Constructivist Teaching**

Pedro Hernández-Ramos began using blogs and threaded discussions in Santa Clara University's teacher preparation program with three goals in mind:

- to introduce his students to a tool they may use in the classes they will teach in the future
- to help students develop a sense of themselves as creators of knowledge
- to connect students to a network of peers.

"I wanted to expose students to these two different forms of reflection based on the constructivist idea that learning is largely social and that people learn better when they learn with someone else," Hernández -Ramos says.

Hernández -Ramos had each student in his face-to-face course "Instructional Technology for Teachers" create a simple, text-based blog using the free version of Blogger.com ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)). He had each student send him the blog's

URL, and he gave them a rather open-ended assignment: post at least one reflection per week on teaching, learning, and technology.

The threaded discussions were more structured. Students were asked to provide "timely and insightful" responses to three discussion questions during the semester.

Since the blogs were posted on the Internet, anybody, in theory, could read them, including classmates, educators, and members of the community. Access to the threaded discussions was limited to students in the course and the instructor.

"In the blogs I was asking students to see themselves as contributors to a social conversation, to expose their thinking to an unknown audience in the same way that any publisher does, not knowing with any degree of certainty who is going to be the audience for that product," Hernández -Ramos says. "That, to me, is a critical difference that was very salient to the students. They expressed a lot more uncertainty about their writing because they didn't have a target audience and didn't have parameters as to what constituted good writing versus bad writing given that the audience was much more diffuse."

Student reaction to the ambiguity of the blog assignment varied. "The opportunity to do this without vetting by some authority was, for some, very disturbing. Some wanted very clear feedback about the quality of their writing before they felt comfortable publishing. Others understood the opportunity that they were able to engage in this conversation without having to ask permission, and they felt very liberated by that," Hernández -Ramos says.

By using these modes of communication in the course, Hernández -Ramos introduced his students to tools that could potentially open up new avenues of communication. "The quality of collegial interaction in most schools is quite poor, so it was encouraging to see how these kinds of technology-based tools can help [teachers] engage in meaningful conversations with peers, which is an idea, as surprising as it may seem, that a lot of people encounter a great resistance to in themselves. They say, 'No, I am to learn from a figure of authority. There is nothing I can learn from my peers.' Part of what I was saying was, 'Look, there's a wide variety of people with very rich experiences to learn from.'"

Hernández -Ramos did not collect data on how frequently people accessed these blogs. "I was more interested in having students engage in the practice of reflecting, not in the traditional sense of writing a paper or journal but in putting it out on the Web and having them experience that sense of exposing their ideas to the world," Hernández -Ramos says.

The threaded discussions and blogs also had the side benefit of providing valuable insights for the instructor. "It has given me the opportunity to read the

thoughts of people who hardly ever talked in class," Hernández -Ramos says. "Through the blogs and discussions you see a side of people that never comes out in class. That's been well-documented in the literature, but it's an incredibly valuable asset for instructors to get a sense of where students are in their thinking."

Hernández -Ramos is still experimenting with blogs and threaded discussions. In the future he says he would like to tie the blogs and the topics in the threaded discussions to more specific course goals. Rather than giving a single topic for the blog, he would give them topics each week. "That might be more indicative of students' actual acquisition of concepts, skills, or development of critical thinking than just giving them a quiz," Hernández -Ramos says.

Although Hernández -Ramos did not do any significant analysis of the content of the threaded discussions or blogs, this type of analysis could be critical depending on the design of the course, particularly if it is a totally online course. "I didn't think I had to rely on content analysis in order to get a good sense of where my students were because I was asking them to produce other things and also met with them face to face," Hernández -Ramos says.

One feature he would like to see is an auto-summarizer similar to the ones common in word processing products but within the blogging and discussion tools.

Contact Pedro Hernández -Ramos Pedro at [phernandezramos@scu.edu](mailto:phernandezramos@scu.edu).

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The above article is an excerpt from the newsletter *Online Classroom*. *Online Classroom* provides online instructors, course developers, and others involved in e-learning, with practical ideas about how to create, teach, and manage online courses. Subscribe today at [www.magnapubs.com](http://www.magnapubs.com) or call 1-800-433-0499.

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## **A Global Perspective on Responding to Student Writing**

*By Kathy Gehr, College of Charleston, SC*

[gehrk@cofc.edu](mailto:gehrk@cofc.edu)

Faculty who assign writing in their courses know that it enhances student learning, yet many do not require written assignments because they have learned that evaluating student work takes a lot of time. Even the most seasoned writing teachers often spend five minutes per page responding to student texts. With 20 students in a class and a three-page paper, that comes to five intense hours of grading per assignment. For teachers who have less experience responding to student writing, grading consumes even more time.

Too often conversations about efficient grading focus exclusively on the process of marking final drafts. Approaches such as minimal marking or grading sheets can reduce the amount of time involved in marking those drafts; however, they are not always effective. To make student writing a rich and enriching component of a course, it must be embedded in the course's design and classroom activities. We must think of designing assignments, working with drafts, and grading final drafts as an interconnected process. The following strategies make grading shortcuts on final drafts more likely to work for everyone:

### **Designing Assignments**

- *Sequence written assignments from less to more complex intellectual work.* Think of your assignments as guides to the kinds of thinking and writing that your discipline requires. If, for example, you want students in a psychology class to write a literature review of five recent studies on the effects of antidepressants on children, start with a short assignment that asks students to write a one-paragraph summary of one study and a one-paragraph analysis of that same study. When the student is asked to synthesize five studies, she will know how to begin. In fact, she will have already started.
- *Discuss sample responses to major written assignments.*

Sample papers should offer a clear fit with the assignment at hand, but should not be so successful that they intimidate students. Usually a solid "B" paper makes an effective sample draft. As for the content of sample papers, topics based on previous course material or on engaging examples from popular culture are much more effective than a direct hit on the assignment's topic.

- *Use grading criteria or rubrics to set a tone of encouragement rather than punishment.*

Define the terms that you use in these rubrics. If you ask for a "reasonably complex" thesis statement, provide an example of what one looks like. If you require secondary sources, list a few sources so that your students can distinguish them from primary sources. Format with hollow boxes instead of bullets, ask questions rather than giving commands, emphasize what an effective paper does rather than what a lousy paper does not do, and arrange criteria from most to least important.

### **Working with Drafts**

- *Personalize your responses to student work.*

Instead of automatically responding to every student's work, a process that often reinforces a tell-me-what-you-want mentality, require that students ask you two questions about their drafts. The more time and effort that they put into their questions, the more useful your feedback is likely to be. This sends the message that you respect the student's ownership of her ideas and want to provide feedback that makes her draft a better paper rather than a closer version of some perfect paper that exists in your own mind.

- *Emphasize your role as a reader rather than an evaluator.*

Rather than saying, "This essay lacks effective transitions." Say: "Sally, I was interested in the point that you make about Hamlet's insanity in paragraph two, but as a reader, I was confused about how this point is related to the quote from Claudius that you discuss in paragraph three. How does Claudius's language affect our reaction to Hamlet's behavior? This is the question that you need to answer at the beginning of paragraph three." This example offers a question that guides the student to the next step in the revision process.

- *Make writing a communal problem that everyone in the class is working together to solve.*

Encourage students to present revisions of paragraphs or sentences to the class as a whole. Schedule group writing conferences. Mention the conversations that you have had with students outside of class during class time: "That's a good question, Mark. This is the same problem that John was struggling with in his essay. He decided to integrate a different kind of source to define his terms. Would you mind telling us about that, John? How did you decide which definition would work best?"

- *Use familiar examples and storytelling to create a shorthand way of talking about common writing issues.*

In class I might say: "Good conclusions are more like buffets than plated dinners. An effective conclusion offers a clear focus—Chinese, Indian, or Italian—but doesn't force you to eat your moo-shu in a pancake." Later, when a student offers a conclusion with no clear controlling idea, I might say, "I feel like I'm being served beer at a breakfast buffet. You offer a lot of good ideas, but I don't understand the logic of how they are related to one another." Examples like this not only take the edge off the criticism, they also help students understand shorthand comments on final drafts—"Conclusion lacks focus and is too repetitive."

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The above is an excerpt from *The Teaching Professor*. *The Teaching Professor* offers a combination of concise information and inspiration to help faculty members in all disciplines teach more effectively. For more information and to subscribe go to [www.magnapubs.com](http://www.magnapubs.com) or call 1-800-433-0499.

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