The 2007 Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Development Retreat:

Writing to Learn/Learning to Write: Ways to Improve Student Writing and Critical Thinking

Monday, August 27
9:00-4:00
Sacramento State Alumni Center

Writing Across the Curriculum invites full and part-time faculty to attend a free workshop focused on improving student writing and critical thinking in any discipline. Join colleagues from across the curriculum for a day of sharing ideas and assignments in an interactive workshop.

Topics
- Writing-to-learn techniques
- Assignment design
- Responding effectively to student writing
- Using peer review

Workshop leader:
Dr. Christopher Thaiss
University Writing Program Director, UC Davis

Author of the Harcourt Brace Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum and coauthor of Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life

Breakfast and lunch will be served.
To register for the retreat, contact Dan Melzer at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925. Space is limited: please respond by June 1.
Understanding the Prevalence of Plagiarism in the College Classroom: A Survey of Students
Rachel Dodge, Janay Lovering, Sylvia Morales, and Tina Royer

As many instructors know, plagiarism is a serious concern when it comes to students performing academic work. We want students to learn the conventions of an academic discourse that encourages rigorous scholarship (often meaning research) at the same time that it applauds and rewards original ideas. For students, this task can seem overwhelming and, at times, even contradictory. How, then, can we make clear to students the kind of writing we expect them to do in our classes? Perhaps to answer this question, we must first answer the following:

• Do students understand what it means to plagiarize?
• Why is plagiarism a temptation for so many students?
• How can we teach students to avoid plagiarism?
• How can we design assignments that encourage individual writing (and discourage plagiarism)?

What Students Have to Say About Plagiarism

In the spring of 2005, we conducted an informal and anonymous survey of 350 community college and university students in the Sacramento area about their understanding of, feelings about, and experience with plagiarism. Although approximately 90 percent of those students surveyed admitted that they had learned about plagiarism in either high school or college, it was clear that there was a wide range of definitions, which can be broken into the following categories:

Using the exact words as the author
“Using someone else’s work (three or more words verbatim). . .”

Not giving credit to the source
“Copying someone else’s hard work and time and making it your own, and giving yourself all the credit”

Using other’s ideas
“If you use ideas or quotes from anyone else other than your own”

Clearly the varying definitions provide a dilemma for instructors who expect that students will know how to avoid plagiarism: if students do not understand what it means to plagiarize, how can we expect them to know how to avoid plagiarism in their academic work?

Of the 29 percent of students who admitted to having plagiarized, an overwhelming majority (90 percent) did so by using material from the Internet. And the two-thirds of respondents who admitted to having been tempted to plagiarize also indicated the Internet as the most likely source of material, although published books or articles, another student’s work, and even a purchased paper were other frequent responses. Perhaps it is no surprise that students are tempted by the prevalence of material and information available to them on the internet; still, although the internet also gives us instructors a tool for detecting such activities, it cannot answer the question of why students are tempted to plagiarize in the first place.

Why Students Are Tempted to Plagiarize

Most plagiarizers aren’t malicious. That is, they don’t set out to cheat, plotting ways to “get one over” on the professor. Really, students who plagiarize do so most often because they lack confidence in their own ability to produce strong writing.
Sixty percent of students in our survey say they plagiarize because “I don’t think my own work will earn me a passing grade, or I want to earn a better grade.” Contrary to what instructors might surmise, students just aren’t secure enough with their own writing to take risks when they aren’t confident they can express themselves clearly or when they aren’t sure what the instructor wants.

According to our survey, students most often cheat because they “Don’t know what to write” (76 percent). Certainly, there are students in this group who don’t know what to write because they haven’t paid attention or haven’t done their coursework, but some students attend class, pay close attention, and study—and still struggle to find an approach to writing assignments. Some students’ comments on the survey are telling. One student says he/she plagiarizes because “[I] don’t think my own work is ‘good’ enough for the assignment” or because “[I have] difficulty expressing/articulating thoughts.”

Another reason for plagiarizing which students gave is “The assignment is too hard” (68 percent). Again, there are certainly a few lazy students, ones who find the work too hard because they haven’t committed to the coursework, but others feel overwhelmed when they are confronted with a difficult topic. Once student complained, “the assignment[s] [are] not clear” in some classes. When students are uncertain about the topic, they are more likely to cheat.

Of course, there are students who plagiarize because they aren’t good students. Sixty percent of the students in our survey noted that they cheat because they are “too lazy to put in the work.” And there are students who cheat, at least according to one student in our survey, because they can’t help it.

Preventing & Discouraging Plagiarism

For strategies for preventing and discouraging plagiarism, including ideas for designing “plagiarism-proof” writing assignments, see WAC Newsletter #13 at http://www.csus.edu/wac/WAC_Newsletter13_F06F.pdf.

New Upper-Division Course on Social Science Writing

In Fall 2007, the English Department plans to offer a new course titled Writing in the Social Sciences (English 120S). This course will be taught by English department faculty with a social science background (primarily TESOL/applied linguistics) and is described as follows in the catalog:

ENGL 120S. Writing in the Social Sciences. Introduces principles of analyzing and composing texts appropriate for various social science disciplines. Provides practice in analyzing texts in social science journals and in writing abstracts, summaries, and literature reviews. Appropriate for upper-division undergraduate students and beginning graduate students in TESOL and in other social science programs (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication studies, etc.) 3 units.

For further information, contact Julian Heather at jheather@csus or 278-5394.
The Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) had the privilege of hosting the 14th annual Northern California Writing Centers Association Conference on March 3. This year’s theme, “Creativity and the Writing Center,” gave attendees from California and Nevada campuses and as far east as the University of Notre Dame an opportunity to share research and teaching/tutoring strategies, and to celebrate the creative role that writing centers play in promoting the growth of individual writers.

Keynote speaker, Dr. Sondra Perl, Professor of English and Urban Education at Lehman College, CUNY, spoke to more than 200 attendees about the many ways writing can transform lives. She shared a documentary and excerpts from her most recent contribution—a memoir titled *On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I was Taught to Hate*, and discussed her struggles and successes teaching in Austria. The focus of Dr. Perl’s keynote address was the dilemma of the teacher who must simultaneously make space for her own ethics while creating a space where all points of view are welcomed and explored in the classroom. Dr. Perl argued that educators need to have regard and respect for the contributions each individual brings to the classroom.

The presentations at this year’s conference reflected the interest writing center tutors have in building strategies while working with students across the disciplines. Following are highlights from just three of the more than 20 presentations offered:

- **“Reaching across Disciplines for Collaborative Tutoring Strategies”** offered insight into adapting group strategies from disciplines other than English. The presenters, from CSU Stanislaus, described group strategies and business working group techniques to give tutors the tools they need to lead and manage successful collaborative groups.

- One of our former graduate students and current English professor at Sacramento City College, Bob Stanley, discussed how leadership principles can create better creativity and performance for tutors while instilling focus for student writers.

- Students from UC Berkeley’s Student Learning Center shared a collaborative model of tutoring on three levels: among tutors, with college writing instructors, and with tutees. They discussed how the collaborative approach informs individual tutoring, tutor training seminars, and tutor-facilitated workshops.

As a result of the conference, Sac State students can look forward to creative and exciting tutoring from the Writing Center tutors and WAC tutors in any writing task they encounter.