

Revisions:

A Zine on Writing at Queens College

Special Issue: General Education at QC

Issue 4, Spring 2007

From the Editors

Since the turn of the most recent century, most of the institutions of higher education in the US have been engaged in a process of rethinking the nature, the role and the goals of liberal education. *Revisions* has therefore decided to contribute to the debate by devoting its current issue to the subject, partly because the role of writing is so central to the plan of reorganization of General Education at Queens College recently presented by the Task Force appointed by President James Muyskens in Spring 2003. Writing, the subject of this zine, is identified by Gen Ed Task Force's final report as one of the "critical abilities that permeates all aspects of the curriculum and characterizes an educated citizen."

With that in mind, we have solicited all the parties involved—administrators, faculty members, writing fellows and students—to participate in an open forum to express their views, suggestions and hopes. Besides the valuable uniqueness of each viewpoint, what emerges is the shared awareness of the urgent need of a deep change in the values, functions, and objectives of general education in response to the unparalleled social and cultural challenges posed by the twenty-first century. Substantially, all the contributors agree with the diagnosis advanced by the Gen Ed Task Force, which emphasizes the aim to provide graduates "with the intellectual abilities to negotiate an ever-changing world of information and knowledge and understand a complex, changing world and act in it as citizens of the city, state, nation and world."

This year's issue has kept the articulation of the contributions into two main sections: "Features" and "Shorts." In particular, the articles of the "Features" section focus on distinctive topics: a detailed report of the Institute for Writing and Thinking workshop series held last December at Bard College (Eileen Baker); a comparison between the Italian and American university curricula (Angelo R. Di-

cuonzo); the key role played by information literacy in the latest curricular reform at Queens College (Eva Fernández); CUNY's involvement with CASTL—the Academy for the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning of the Carnegie Foundation (Boone Gorges); the Spring 2006 Science Writing Conference organized and hosted by Queens College, and the "Writing and Teaching in the Sciences" conference held at the Graduate Center last October (Tsai-Shiou Hsieh); an interview with an innovative teacher (Roslyn Ko); the new collaboration between WAC—Writing Across the Curriculum—and CTL—the Center for Teaching and Learning (Noriko Matsumoto); an analytical discussion of

PLAS—Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences—courses (Steven Schwarz); and, finally, the challenge of the new Gen Ed curriculum at Queens College (Donald M. Scott).

The "Shorts" section voices students' personal experience with General Education courses that have had a long-lasting impact on their lives, along with reflections on the role and the meaning of general education by faculty

and staff who have been involved in the College's new Gen Ed curriculum. What seems clear is that, beyond one's specialization, liberal education can become an important part of personal and intellectual development—affecting how one thinks and how one lives.

We hope that our discussion will provide an opportunity for readers to reflect on liberal education and the purposes of university education at large for all. The perspectives collected here also intend to encourage and facilitate further dialogue among a wider audience. We invite readers not to miss the chance to visit the WAC website at <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Writing>, to find out about upcoming events, take advantage of, and contribute to our resources for students and faculty. —A.D. and N.M.



CUNY Writing Fellows (from left): Angelo Dicuonzo, Tsai-Shiou Hsieh, Boone Gorges, Noriko Matsumoto, Eileen Baker, Roslyn Ko.

ReVisions: shorts

Scott Cheshire

Student

My father is a minister. My oldest brother is a minister. My sister, and of course my mother, are both minister's wives, which in their own ways are equally demanding and imposing positions. To their surprise and constant disappointment, the love of The Book that they attempted to instill within me spawned the infinitely more powerful "love of books." However, the tension between the supposed discovery of a divine objective truth and the far more rewarding and eternal task of understanding human subjective truths, through fiction, proved to be increasingly irreconcilable with each passing year. At thirty, just before returning to school, I found myself and this nation fractured and crippled by a very similar polarization. At thirty-three, I now find myself, somewhat ironically, teetering on the numeric fence that holds significance for both opposing camps—human fiction and divine authorship—contemplating arbitration. How does one reduce the passing of twelve thousand days, contain within one's self all that we are, what we secretly wish we were not, and what we truly wish to be? How does one successfully merge the passing of two marriages, one divorce, four states, seven cars, nine jobs, countless one-room apartments, and find the definitive self?

It was in my first year, as an English major, that I decided my path must begin with logic, and so I registered for Modern Logic, one among many General Education courses. I found that I possessed an unexpected aptitude for the course work. An aptitude which I have since attributed, most likely, to Logic's dependence on language, because I often have trouble,

still, with simple arithmetic. Forget about fractions. Dr. Cordero led the class with a gloriously eccentric mad professor-like manner. His hair bounced back and forth across the top of his head, and his glasses slid down the bridge of his nose as he paced before the blackboard exclaiming syllogisms. On one particular day, after I'd insisted that the incomplete solution that I had just chalked on the blackboard was correct, Dr. Cordero explained, "The fact that it is correct is not beautiful at all, Mr. Cheshire." (He pronounced it Chesheeeeere, rhyming it with fear, and ending with the Spanish flourish of a rolling R.) "It is the proof," he continued, "that is beautiful." This statement, simple and powerful, lit up some gray corner in my brain. I had still not yet fully deciphered its meaning, or more accurately its meaning for me, by my second year, when I found myself at a student gathering at which President Muyskens spoke. He insisted that the students take up the following mission, and not only upon graduation, but immediately. His voice shook somewhat with ardor: "We must remind others, ladies and gentlemen, that conviction does not equal truth." Somewhere between these two statements I found a bridge.

My compulsion to read, combined with an unavoidably inculcated fundamentalist compulsion toward heuristic deconstruction of a text, eventually compelled me to write. By twenty I had purchased my first typewriter—a manual, mind you—probably the single most foolish act of faith one can commit in our computer age, under the romantic assumption that this would enable me to write. And by twenty-one I had written some very, very bad stories. Ten years later, I'd found myself back in school at Queens College, and I'd found myself,

thankfully, much better equipped to put together a story. Yet, I still had no real reason to write, no direction, no voice. No religion. At least until those two statements—one an off-handed comment in a General Education course which, incidentally, inspired me to minor in philosophy, and the other, not in class at all—came to form a bridge and directed me toward my mission. I took it up soberly.

I aim to write stories, stories that shake and radiate with "truth," while they simultaneously question the very concept. Meanwhile, all along, this is what good fiction is about anyway, and I had not discovered a thing. What I did gain was the process of discovering it for myself. The process, or the proof, as Dr. Cordero wisely pointed out, is what is beautiful. The mission itself might even be unrealizable, like

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convincing a broken nation that “truth” is more verb than noun, or perhaps like writing a truly great story. But I will try, and I’ll enjoy it.

Jason Tougaw

English / Director,
Writing Across the
Curriculum

The plan for Queens College’s new General Education curriculum—specifically the new Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences courses and the upper-level synthesis courses—was a significant draw for me when I was interviewing for and eventually accepted a position here two years ago. The Gen Ed Task Force’s overview of the curriculum indicated that this was a college on the brink of innovations that would bridge the larger curriculum and the individual classroom experiences of teachers and students. The courses are designed to make visible the crucial underpinnings of their disciplines for students: “to address how, in the discipline (or disciplines) of the course, data and evidence are construed and knowledge acquired.” Crucially, they also seek to show how such knowledge is valuable, by “position[ing] the discipline(s) in the liberal arts curriculum and the larger society.” Finally, they make students active in their own educations, “engag[ing] students in active inquiry” and “us[ing] primary documents and materials.”

If we can make the Task Force’s blueprint a reality, we will be offering our students a superior education, one that makes it clear how the process of academic inquiry, in its many forms, is vital for their professional and personal lives. We will also have articulated for ourselves what we value about education and have designed courses and classroom experiences that illustrate these values, but also, ideally, that will help us see our courses and goals anew and develop them in ways we haven’t yet quite imagined.

For this to happen, we need to think beyond simply recycling old courses with new numbers. We need to reconceive the courses we already offer and develop new ones, as part of a larger college conversation—already taking place—about what we mean by liberal education and what we want our students to gain from it.

**Alexandra de Luise and
Lisa Flanzraich**
Library

The new General Education curriculum describes information literacy as a critical ability that should be suffused throughout the curriculum. In fact, the Task Force states that students will obtain this critical ability, along with others mentioned, through the entire course of their undergraduate education. Students will not obtain this ability through one required course.

According to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, an information literate student is capable of:

- Establishing a research thesis question
- Knowing where to look for the most valid print or electronic evidence
- Analyzing key points from texts rather than repeating the cited source
- Citing material properly and developing a bibliography

As a teaching department, the Library communicates information literacy competencies in the credit courses that we offer, in the subject classes that elect to come in for a librarian-led session, one-on-one with students at the reference desk, and via tutorials and instructional pages that we provide on our Library web page.

During the course of instruction we guide our students to investigate their topics in a comprehensive, methodical, and thoughtful fashion. For instance,

an instruction session on researching the Lost Generation provides us with the opportunity to expose students to scholarly and authoritative resources, such as MLA Bibliography, Dictionary of Literary Biography and JSTOR, so that they will acknowledge that there are far more reliable sources than, for example, Wikipedia.

The reality is that information literacy is not just a library issue but a curriculum issue. From our vantage point, there is a multitude of ways to graduate information literate students. There are courses, tutorials, modes of instruction and guidelines that will provide a certain level of information seeking mastery. This is an undertaking not exclusive to Queens College but for higher education as a whole. Changes are on the horizon and we hope we can take collective responsibility to carry out this mission.

Lisa Vaia

M.A. Student / Office of
the Provost

I assist with freshman registration every summer, helping students to create their class schedules for their first semester of college. Interacting with the new Queens College students is always rewarding and fun for me, but it has also been illuminating. I have discovered that although most students are excited to be coming to college, many of them do not understand the reasons for and the value of a liberal arts education. Accordingly, they are often puzzled by the LASAR requirements (“If I want to be an accountant, why should I take Anthropology or Philosophy? Can’t I just take Accounting classes?”). In trying to explain to these students the benefits of a liberal education, I am often disappointed to discover that all they seem to hear is that they need to “get these courses out of the way” before they move on to their major courses. Though many faculty and staff

have made an effort to address this lack of understanding, there has been no systematic campus-wide approach to enculturate students in the ideology of a liberal education.

The new general education requirements are meant to expose students to a wide variety of courses that are meaningfully connected. I hope that with this comes a contextualized understanding of the importance of a liberal education—not just for the purposes of getting through college, but in shaping one’s way in life—so general education requirements do not continue to be for many students simply a series of items to be checked off a list.

Mindy Miller

Student

As an adult student, having returned to post-secondary education after a 17-year career spent working with various financial aspects of a major cancer hospital in Manhattan, I have a before-and-after, then-and-now personal experience perspective on undergraduate general education.

My first experience as an undergraduate student was over 20 years ago, when Queens College’s LASAR requirements were still relatively new. I was accepted by a land grant university some 1,500 miles west of Queens College, and after a few fits and starts, I settled on a General Business major. If asked how influential the required general education courses I took have been in my life since then, I would have said not very. But in retrospect, I remember those liberal arts electives—including Psych 101, an Anthropology course, and a course on Bible History—more clearly, more fondly than I do my core courses. Perhaps that says more about my choice of major, i.e., that it was not my passion. And in fact, more than 20 years later, I’m in the midst of a major change in my career, now training to

be a high school math teacher. So, perhaps I didn’t warm to my core courses because they didn’t resonate with me.

I was not a meta-cognitive student. I didn’t spend time thinking about learning or what I wanted to learn. I was in school kind of blindly—it was the thing I was supposed to do and it never occurred to me that other options existed. It was a necessary part of life. I recall pressure to choose a major, to settle on a course of studies. Advisors pushed. And so I settled.

My classroom experience was similarly uninspiring, largely because of what little I brought to it. I ducked out of the large, lecture hall classes. I tried to hide in the smaller classes, avoiding the discomfort of engaging in a dialogue. I disliked group projects and preferred to do my work in private and just submit it for a grade. I didn’t understand, nor was I even aware of, the main goal that I now believe an undergraduate education has: to introduce the student to the “Great Conversation,” to welcome him or her into the ongoing dialogue regarding what it means to be a human being.

Fast forward 20 years or so. A few weeks into my new life as a post-secondary education student, I found myself sitting cross-legged in the late summer sun on the grass of the QC campus quad, talking about existentialism with other students for a class assignment. I felt energized, stimulated, privileged to be a part of that moment, actively participating in it. Yes, finally, I was in the current of that great dialogue!

Sadly, the professor in that course assigned no more out-of-class group discussions. And my fellow students, mostly in their early twenties, didn’t seem interested in using their personal time on the assigned readings. Thus they brought seemingly closed minds and narrow perspectives to the class

discussions. They bridled at the lack of direction that the professor offered, and put forth little effort (beyond complaining) towards changing their experience.

The wonder of that late summer philosophy circle wasn’t the only such experience I’ve had in my coursework (now graduate level) here at QC, but those uninterested students were not the last I encountered. Maybe the Great Conversation is lost on the young—or at least on some of us? Was there any way undergraduate requirements could somehow have opened more doors in my mind that first time in college? Could the curriculum design somehow have ushered me into the light, invited me and convinced me to join in the Great Conversation? I don’t know. I was lost then for reasons perhaps beyond the reach of a well-developed curriculum. I do hope and trust that those fine folks who are at the table at Queens College reviewing the LASAR guidelines for undergraduate degree requirements and who are charged with the task of designing a new set of guidelines have this goal in mind.

June Bobb

Assistant Provost /
English

“To have loved one horizon is insularity; / it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience.” These words by poet and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott address precisely the movement away from a narrowly defined attachment to subject and field, toward an acknowledgment of the transforming possibilities of all knowledge. This transformation would be the achievement of the new Gen Ed curriculum.

As a member of the President’s Task Force on General Education, I remember meeting after meeting where members engaged the questions: What is a liberal education? What do we want our students to know?

What do we want our students to do? The College community grappled with these questions. The Gen Ed curriculum is the result of this collective effort. It is the recognition that there must be sufficient freedom in the relationship between teacher and student even to entertain the idea of a liberal education. We know that students are likely to succeed and graduate in environments that foster learning. When we create such environments where students see themselves as active participants in learning, interacting with each other and faculty committed to student-centered pedagogy, we will have succeeded in producing truly liberally educated students. Such students, we hope would be equally literate in landscapes of the practical and the imaginary. We would have prepared them to function with integrity and intelligence in this vastly unsettling world and to know who they are and who they are trying to be.

Hugh English English

Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* describes poetry as "calling something into existence that was not there before." Just as liberal education aims toward a rhetorical education in multiple genres, disciplines, methodologies and media—in how both reading and writing, both the reception and the production of textual forms are aspects of making knowledge—it ought also to aim toward what we might call a poetics of knowledge, the practice of "calling something into existence that was not there before," of discovery, of making writing in any genre or medium a space for the invention of a way of understanding a field of knowledge or experience.

When I am teaching poetry within both the English major and liberal education, I am not so much teaching monuments of beauty, although

certainly I have the aesthetic response of finding poetic uses of language beautiful, and I wouldn't want my students NOT to have such an experience. While I welcome aesthetic experiences—the "wow," the awe—as by-products of our reading together, I am more interested in opportunities for reading and writing in this historical and contemporary form of making meaning, of making something with language that has not existed, of human imaginative making of selves and worlds. I am more interested in how poems and poetics might link us to our species and our planet in all of its great variety.

So much of my undergraduate teaching, and poetry teaching especially, is about weaning students from misunderstandings about writing in general (e.g., geniuses write perfect first drafts!), but also, in this specific case, from their sense that meanings in poems are either symbolically, transcendentally above the poems—that version of "truth" as removed from our immediate world and experience—or "hidden," "deeper" meanings "between the lines." It's my role to guide them to stop being astronauts or miners, and to experience the poem that's there in front of them on the page—in the lines—as they read, or resonating in their throats as they render it in voice, or sounding in their ear's mechanisms as they hear it. All of these forms of experience also connect with our hearts, our cells, our memories, whether personal or historical or even perhaps shared species memory. Reading poems; learning about poetic craft, form and voice; and practicing the varied acts of composition involved in thinking about and writing about poems can all be understood as human meaning-making practices and, hence, at the heart of humanistic liberal education. Reading for voice, crafted in language and form, means balancing analytical understandings of aspects of poetry with the experience of poems, the pull of lines, their

directions and measure; it means attending to human voices. Teaching poems means teaching the complex acts of composition that we obscure under the gerund "close reading," and throwing myself into the uncertainty of experimenting with what that magical alchemy is that leads readers both to experience poems (to read carefully, to listen, to let the line and sound lead them, etc.) and to learn an analytical vocabulary and the concepts that that vocabulary makes available for us to think analytically about poems and poetics. And, then, it means—and this is the proverbial "rub"—coming back to an experience of a poem: to surrender to it, while still being able to think about it. What a pleasure and what a difficulty to be, once again, trying to imagine how this practice, this pleasure, this human (and, at its best, humane) experience can be opened up to the humans we call "students."

For liberal education, we don't need "Poetry," as a monument of culture, or to culture, but as a moment in human meaning making in which we participate as readers and as writers—a moment (Robert Frost describes a poem as "a momentary stay against confusion") in which we experience the poesis of new forms, new metaphors, new compositions of language. These potentials, these poetics of human life, of living as a human, make something new that hadn't yet existed. Poetry and poetics are part of a larger liberal and rhetorical education. With expansions of our pedagogical imaginations of what venues (academic, public, private), genres, and media can be occasions for knowledge-making, for world-making, our students can call into existence what was not there before.

ReVisions: features

Perspectives on PLAS Science Courses

Steven Schwarz, Physics

A notorious video (C-Span, 1/18/97) circulates through the physics academic community in which Trent Lott, then Senate Majority Leader, addresses an audience of high school and college students. A student asks how best to prepare for a job in Congress, and Lott responds:

“When I was in high school, if you were in the so-called pre-college curriculum, you had to take four years of science and four years of math: a waste of my time, a waste of the teacher’s time, and a waste of space. You know, I took physics ... for what?”

The Senator’s remark drew a rousing ovation, and gives voice to a prevailing attitude that is at the root of poor performance in science courses. The new Queens College general education requirements present an opportunity to attack this attitude head-on.

Beginning in Fall 2009, two science courses will be required for graduation, at least one of which must be a PLAS (Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences) course. PLAS courses will be designed to fulfill the mission of a general education curriculum. For the sciences specifically (<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/AcademicSenate/UCC/GenEd/>),

“... PLAS courses will:

1. Address how, in the discipline (or disciplines) of the course, data and evidence are construed and knowledge acquired; that is, how questions are asked and answered;
2. Position the discipline(s) in the liberal arts curriculum and the larger society; and
3. Address the goals defined in [. . . {see next column}]. Each PLAS course will also, where appropriate to its discipline and subject matter;
4. Be global or comparative in scope;
5. Consider diversity and the nature and construction of forms of difference;
6. Engage students in active inquiry;

7. Reveal the existence and importance of change over time; and

8. Use primary documents and materials.”

Point 3 directs the reader to specific goals in five key areas: a) reading literature; b) appreciating and participating in the arts; c) culture and values; d) analyzing social structures; and e) natural science. A portion of the latter section is quoted here:

“e. Natural Science (NS)

. . . The study of science teaches basic principles underlying the operation of the natural world, the methods by which scientists discern, assemble, and interpret data and formulate and test hypotheses, develops understanding of the place and operations of scientific knowledge in the contemporary world, and reveals how ideas about science have affected the past and shape the present. Courses that contribute to the goal of understanding the methods, content, and role of the natural sciences should include familiarity with a body of knowledge in the physical or biological sciences, successful study of the methods of science, including the use of observation, the formation of hypotheses and the testing of models, experience and awareness of the impact of science on modern society.”

Science departments may opt to create a number of new courses that conform to the PLAS requirements, but this could have the unfortunate effect of driving students away from the rigorous one year course sequences, or forcing them to take an additional science course if a requisite one year sequence isn’t PLAS certified. It seems advisable to modify at least the first semester of a one year sequence so that it qualifies as a PLAS course, but this presents obvious challenges. Current courses seem to have little room for additional material, and generally follow established national norms that allow for transferability between institutions. I would argue though that a rigorous PLAS course can cover the requisite technical material while both improving performance and better preparing students

for careers in or outside of the discipline – including, most especially, a career in Congress.

My sense is that departments will follow guidelines for a rigorous PLAS science course that resemble the following:

1. A PLAS course should be a showcase for the respective department. Instructors should be assigned accordingly.

2. PLAS related materials added to a science course should have significant impact on the grade assigned to the student. Students face strong time constraints and only naturally focus on tests and assignments.

3. PLAS related materials should tie in intimately with the standard course content, and thereby motivate students to excel in all aspects of coursework.

4. In an existing rigorous course, the workload of the student should not increase as a result of the course revision.

5. As PLAS courses will be reviewed at five year intervals, some form of assessment is required. Assessments should focus on long term gains consistent with the general education goals.

6. New courses should demonstrate state-of-the-art pedagogy. A substantial literature on college-level science pedagogy advocates for courses that resemble a PLAS course.

It may not be possible in a PLAS science course to cover all of the assigned materials in traditional lecture format, nor should this be attempted. The ineffectiveness of the “chalk and talk” approach in the science classroom is documented in Derek Bok’s fascinating new book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*. Bok, who twice has served as president of Harvard, notes that by one estimate, “the average student will be unable to recall most of the factual content of a typical lecture within fifteen minutes after the end of class.” He points to another study detailing

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how the typical student relies on rote memory to pass a physics course, while stubbornly hanging on to his or her preconceptions of physical processes. Many science courses at Queens are already employing novel pedagogies to help students digest difficult conceptual material. First

year chemistry classes, for example, use a cooperative learning model in which students form small groups to discuss problems in class. “Clicker” technology in these classes allows groups to report their results electronically and instantaneously, so the instructor can measure progress and discuss specific areas of concern. In such an approach, the instructor still has ample opportunity to discuss key concepts and present motivational material.

A cooperative learning setting can also support an increased emphasis on student writing in a PLAS science course. The utility of written work in a science classroom was illustrated to me when I visited, along with several QC colleagues, the University Park Campus School (UPCS) at Clark University, a public 7-12 school situated in a depressed area of Worcester, MA. UPCS far outperforms neighboring schools, boasting mathematics scores near the highest in the State. Their success is due in part to enthusiastic instructors and a vibrant student culture, but perhaps more important is the method of instruction. In mathematics, UPCS students are required to defend problem solutions both orally and in writing, thus making it difficult to solve problems by imitation. College science texts generally offer many conceptual questions that require a written response, but the size of first year classes makes it difficult for the instructor to assign or grade responses. New web grading systems allow these questions to be answered on-line, however, and graded quickly. The cooperative learning strategies described above can allow for careful consideration of such questions in class. Inclusion of written responses on exams also encourages students to examine concepts more closely.

If it is accepted that there is both time and need for PLAS related material in a first year science sequence, what additional materials can be added to address most, if not

all, of the eight PLAS standards? Here are three somewhat unusual suggestions:

Case Studies: Textbook problem statements are typically overly concise and unconnected with real world issues, and the solutions to problems in the more popular textbooks can, with depressing regularity, be found on the internet. Problems also tend to resemble methodical examples in the text that are designed to make the solution easy, when in fact a key goal of the course is to enable the student to struggle toward a solution in situations where the choice of method is not clear. Departments should consider developing case studies that can be examined from multiple perspectives and connected to real world issues. Associated problem sets can expand into full fledged projects that allow students to develop skills in Excel while exploring a process model, presenting results in graphical and tabular form, and testing the effect of model parameters against real world data. As an example, on January 31, 2008, over 1000 colleges will host special events and classroom activities devoted to the topics of global warming and sustainable development (www.focusthenation.org—Queens College contact: stephen.pekar@qc.cuny.edu). It has been suggested that booklets of readings and relevant exercises can be introduced into a number of courses in that academic year, to allow students to apply newfound quantitative skills to these key issues.

Oral Presentations: I have often required students to present two minute talks on a topic of their choice. The approved topic must cite recent literature that is

newsworthy, rather than encyclopedic. Students prepare a short abstract which appears in an abstract booklet, and participate in a mini-conference that occupies two recitation sessions. A timer buzzes loudly after two minutes to insure that students don't run overtime by more than 30 seconds. I encourage students to watch a televised news story to see how much information can be conveyed in such a short time. The exercise allows students to enhance their communication skills, and to connect the course material to topics of interest to them.

Speakers: Students benefit from seeing the connection of on-campus research to class topics. Faculty members could regularly give 20 minute talks in multiple classrooms to illustrate these connections. Talks could be coupled with a handout and short assignment. Courses could host one or two such talks per semester.

The new Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC) are together forging recommendations for PLAS course development. Pilot courses may be offered as soon as next year, and will provide information on which strategies prove most effective. I would be very interested in hearing from students and faculty about your ideas or concerns regarding PLAS science courses, and will be happy to summarize all of the comments I receive for the CTL and UCC (steven.schwarz@qc.cuny.edu).

A Change in Pedagogy: An Interview with David Gagné

Roslyn Ko, CUNY Writing Fellow

Associate Professor David Gagné specializes in and teaches music theory and analysis at the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, and CUNY Graduate Center. In the Fall of 2006 Professor Gagné joined the WAC program at Queens as one of our Faculty Partners.

The following interview with Professor Gagné was conducted by Roslyn Ko (Writing Fellow) on December 20th, 2006. The interview covers three topics: Professor Gagné's experience as a WAC Faculty Partner, his pedagogical change and experimentation since his engagement in WAC, and his reflections on the topic of General Education for our current issue of *Revisions*.

RK: "Faculty Partners" is a new initiative of the WAC program inaugurated in the Fall 2006 semester. We are honored and delighted to have you as one of our Faculty

Partners. Can you share with us your experience so far working as a FP (Faculty Partner)?

DG: Certainly. As you know, the Faculty Partners Program began this school year with a day-long workshop where a specialist from Yale University, Alfie Guy, gave us a presentation about a lot of new writing techniques that included everyone present doing some writing. The WAC program also gave us a wonderful book by John C. Bean entitled *Engaging Ideas* (2001). In the process of that workshop, I, for the first time, encountered a lot of new ways of thinking about writing that had never occurred to me before. My own education in writing was, I would say, rather traditional. My undergraduate education at Columbia University, based on the "Great Books" tradition for which Columbia College is well known, was excellent, but many of the innovative ways of thinking

about writing that WAC programs have introduced did not yet exist. That day of the WAC orientation workshop was an eye-opener for me. There were all kinds of new things—for example, the idea of steering away from focusing on student errors in writing and looking for ideas instead. That is a pedagogical approach to improving student writing—to helping students find ideas and learn to work with their ideas first (to identify what their ideas are that they are writing about), rather than just thinking of mistakes. Since the day of the workshop, in working with my students and as an application of what I have learned from WAC, I look for ideas first in the papers. Another example is the suggestion to put an X to indicate that there is a mistake and let the student correct it, so that students learn to identify their own mistakes and to become more skillful in editing their

own work. I applied this idea in a preliminary writing assignment that students did in preparation for a longer paper. The final papers showed great improvement. One of the most fascinating things is that, if you ask and allow students to read out loud their writing, students will often correct many of their mistakes without prompting from an instructor. The assumption we make—that students write badly because they are incompetent—is not necessarily correct.

RK: I've had a very similar experience. Asking students to read their work out loud assists them in becoming aware of the process of writing in relation to thinking. It is a process that engages students in continual processing and reprocessing thoughts, written and articulated.

DG: Exactly. Another revelation to me on the day of the workshop was that, very often when students hand in their papers and we say to ourselves, "This is badly written," what we don't realize is the fact that their papers represent first drafts and that students often don't fully understand the practice of writing, which may first include pre-writing and outlining, and, secondly, editing and revising their own work. So what the students need to learn to do is to go through all these steps; then, at the end, the results

of student writing are going to be much better. In other words, the students need to learn that there is a process to writing. That is a much more encouraging idea than simply to say, "our students don't know grammar"; "our students don't know how to spell"; or, "our students can't write." That is one of the biggest things the Faculty Partners Program has taught me right away: students are usually very capable of improving their own work if they

learn effective ways to do that.

RK: Very right. I think you would agree that, given student potential, we wouldn't want to view our students on the deficit model. What kind of new writing practice(s) have you experimented with? And how do students respond or rise up to this challenge of having writing implemented in, for instance, a Music Theory and Analysis



Roslyn Ko talks with David Gagné.

course?

DG: In an advanced undergraduate music analysis class, for example, I normally ask the students to prepare an analysis of a piece in their repertoire. They perform the work for the class, followed by an oral presentation of their analysis. Next they write a paper based on the presentation, incorporating the feedback their classmates and I have given them. This semester I changed the way I handled the writing assignment as a result of my work as a Faculty Partner for the WAC program. The first assignment was a low-stakes writing piece. Before my involvement with the WAC program, I had never heard of low-stakes writing. This, for me, was a revelation—the idea that not every writing assignment has to be graded and that writing can be done in stages, beginning with ungraded preliminary assignments and followed by graded ones. For the low-stakes writing assignment I asked them to do background research on the piece they would be presenting (e.g., the composer, period, and genre of the piece). I asked for two pages of writing, with citations and a bibliography that reflected the research that they had done. Undergraduate students often don't know much about citations and bibliography, so I gave them guidelines and told them this low-stakes assignment was not going

to be graded. (But if they didn't turn it in, of course, they would be in trouble.) That was the first step. Then they did the presentation and the paper. The other new thing I did was that, at the end, I introduced a process writing piece, an idea I learned from our weekend workshop at Bard College. I asked the students to write about their experience of writing the preliminary paper, performing the piece, hearing each other's comments, and writing the analysis—that is, of all the aspects of this project. And I got wonderful responses.

RK: Can you quote from some of their process writing assignments?

DG: Sure. “The two-page ungraded paper was useful for preparing the presentation and writing the paper. It gave me a good starting point, starting research on the piece and finding useful and related material from the textbook and other articles.” “The ungraded assignment kept the presentation and the paper on the right track. It helped to write the ungraded paper first, so we could get feedback on our writing styles and what we needed to change. We got a lot of work done beforehand so that we could concentrate on the analysis as much as we could.” “I think the process of writing the paper helped me clarify and order the presentation. The material that I researched became more real and concrete for me, connecting me to the composer, genre and times. In some way, I internalized the information so that it became more fluid in my presentation. I understood it as a step in preparation for any presentation and paper, basically to make sure that the thought and research had been done.” So, it is very clear that the students saw it as a step, part of the learning and writing process, rather than seeing it as a product they had to produce in one effort. It became an effort of stages, which was very effective.

RK: It also sounds clear to me that the students could really see and start to make connections between the research you required them to do and the analysis you asked them to hand in. It seems that, practicing writing in this incremental and sequential way, students themselves were able to discover and make sense of the relation between context and text, and between all the different yet interrelated parts and the whole of the learning and writing process. Best of all, the pressure of writing was reduced in the process.

DG: Exactly right. In the past, I had only asked the students to research before they performed and did the paper, but I didn't ask them to turn in their research in any written form. I was never sure how much research they actually did about their pieces. There wasn't any actual accountability, other than their own analysis of the piece.

In this new low-stakes way, students learned to see that they were accountable in their terms. It strengthened their sense of security and foundation for the work they were asked to produce. Bean also points out in his book that instructors are often very afraid or reluctant to ask students to write more because they see it as extra work. In fact, it didn't take a great deal of time because I didn't critique every word and correct every mistake. Instead, I went through the short assignments with Xs and comments in general areas that needed to be rethought by the students.

RK: Yes, and I think the significance here is also to help students initiate the writing-thinking process (to help them take the first step) and to keep them in the loop—of writing, thinking and learning as a whole. Is there any new writing practice or exercise you would like to try in the near future?

DG: In the future, I could give them process writing assignments earlier in the semester and along the way. I think this pedagogy could help and refine students' approach to the course and to their work—just getting them to think in terms of writing. I believe that it can happen in any course.

RK: As you know, the central concern of this issue of *Revisions* is about general education. How do you see the role of writing in students' procurement of Gen Ed? What role do you envision for WAC in support of the General Education curriculum here at Queens College?

DG: I am learning this year that there is so much to know about teaching writing that makes the process more interesting and stimulating both for the faculty and for the students. Rather than taking a negatively critical and juridical view of student writing, WAC is designed to introduce new and positive models for developing writing strategies and pedagogies. I think all faculty of this college—whether or not they teach W-courses—can really benefit from what WAC can offer them. WAC can play a vital role in introducing faculty to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Yet this is challenging because our faculty is very busy, not only with their own careers and teaching responsibilities, but also because this is New York City. Many people travel long distances. So, faculty members pressed for time often assume they know how to do this (that is, teaching writing or W courses) but do not realize that WAC can actually make it easier for them.

RK: If faculty and students can see writing as part and parcel of the college teaching and learning experience, then they will find that writing is right at the bottom of the foundation of General Education.

DG: As a member of the Faculty Partner committee, I think it is vital to interact with the faculty—to ask what their concerns are, how they experience their students’ writing, and what can be useful for them.

RK: Great. I’d like to wrap up our interview with a concluding question: how do you see the participation of the Music Department in the curriculum of Gen Ed here at Queens College?

DG: Well, this is something we are really thinking a lot about. Currently we offer a Gen Ed course called “Introduction to Music.” A lot of students like to learn more about music, how it works, and to be introduced to new kinds of music. But I think what is going to happen as a result of changes in the curriculum is that new kinds of music courses will be created. One possible course could be “Music and Sociology.” Such a course would be an opportunity to engage students in seeing the connection between music and culture. A course taught jointly by a professor from the History Department and a music historian, exploring different perspectives and connections in history, would be another example.

RK: Like the role of jazz in the American history.

DG: Exactly. We have a very active jazz program at Queens, and it would be a very logical thing to do. Also, “Music and Technology.” We are in a good position to teach students from the College as a whole about the interaction of technology and music.

RK: That is to say, you’d like to see more collaboration between music and other disciplines.

DG: That’s right. I think everybody can benefit from cross-cultural, interdisciplinary aspects of learning. In fact, I see this as the trend in higher education across the country. There’s more and more interdisciplinary teaching.

RK: I can hear that you are looking forward to increased bridging between Gen Ed and professional disciplines, as well as between writing and thinking. We will end here for now, and thank you very much for sharing all these inspiring thoughts and new pedagogical experiences with us.

Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Partners

Arts and Humanities

Eva Fernández, Linguistics and Communication Disorders
David Gagné, Aaron Copland School of Music

Education

David Gerwin, Secondary Education and Youth Services

Social Sciences

Alyson Cole, Political Science
Tarry Hum, Urban Studies
Mandana Limbert, Anthropology

Mathematics and Natural Sciences

Sarit Golub, Psychology
Robert Goldberg, Computer Science

WAC Faculty Partners work in division-based teams, with CUNY Writing Fellows who serve as research assistants, consultants to individual courses, and tutors for students. The teams will function in a variety of ways, depending on the discipline. In general, they:

- Identify the needs of departments and individual faculty offering W courses within their divisions.
- Work with department chairs to conceive discipline-specific writing goals and with the WAC Director to foster pedagogical innovations that will help faculty achieve these goals with their students.
- Host faculty workshops in the division.
- Devise methods for assessing the outcomes of W courses.
- Develop teaching resources to enhance W courses.
- Participate in an ongoing seminar on writing and learning with CUNY Writing Fellows, other Faculty Partners, and the WAC Director.

Please contact the Faculty Partners in your Division if you have questions about teaching writing.

See the WAC web site for more information: <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Writing/index.htm>. Contact Jason Tougaw (jason.tougaw@qc.cuny.edu), Director of WAC, if you are interested in becoming a Faculty Partner during future semesters.

General Education at Queens College: The Challenge

Donald M. Scott, History / Director, The Center for Teaching and Learning

Colleges and universities all over the country in recent years have undertaken the difficult, if not daunting, task of reviewing and reforming their general education programs, asking not only what courses but also what pedagogies are needed to provide students with the education they will need to confront a complex and continually changing global world. Queens College—indeed, all of CUNY—has been an important part of this national effort. For well over five years, the College has addressed the problem of general education. In 2003, President Muyskens appointed a Presidential Task Force on General Education. The Task Force met for three semesters, holding forums for faculty and students, setting up working groups to examine various facets of the problem, and, in the Fall of 2004, issued its final report, “Toward a Reorganization of General Education at Queens College.” The report provided a framework for a campus wide discussion for the entire 2004-2005 academic year. In the Fall of 2005, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee of the Academic Senate issued a formal proposal for the adoption of new “Areas of Knowledge Requirement” to replace the existing LASAR system. On April 6, 2006, after a year of intense and often heated debate, the Academic Senate voted overwhelmingly to adopt the new general education curriculum.

Why this new national attention to general/liberal education now? Partly perhaps it is a matter of educational cycles—most general education programs have been in place for a quarter of a century or more. (The Queens LASAR system was adopted nearly thirty years ago.) Mostly, however, it reflects a pervasive sense that, no matter what a particular college’s program of general education, it was no longer capable of providing students with the perspective and the intellectual tools they need to understand and operate in a vastly changed world of information and knowledge and an ever changing global society and world.

How and why were existing approaches to General Education failing? It is not because of a failure of vision—the basic definition of Liberal Education has remained

much the same for a century or more, namely, “to empower students, liberate their minds, and prepare them for citizenship.” Over the past decades, however, college and university curricula have had a scant relationship to this vision. Rarely, if at all, have college curricula coherently or consciously connected to these general goals. In part this failure has been the result of transformations in the nature and organization of knowledge itself. As Vartan Gregorian, former president of Brown University, put it, “the fragmentation of knowledge itself is the fundamental problem underlying the disjointed curriculum” of contemporary undergraduate education in which the

“A liberal education,” it declared, “expands the heart and mind, opening windows and presenting opportunities never before imagined. More than a mere accumulation of credits and subjects, it enables the individual to learn new methods of inquiry and modes of understanding the world and to actively prepare a place for oneself within family, community, nation and world.”

“curriculum’ is rarely more than a collection of courses, [largely] devoid of planning, context, and coherence” or much purpose beyond attaining “the degree needed to obtain decent employment.” However, the deepest source of the sorry state of general/liberal education is the way, for all the lip service paid to general education, it has been driven to the margins of contemporary higher education. At many if not most colleges, general education consists of a series of “distribution” requirements

which students fulfill by taking introductory courses in the various academic departments. Moreover, an increasingly specialized faculty defines itself increasingly in disciplinary terms, as, say, historians who teach almost solely in a history department, not as professors whose instructional tasks include teaching outside the department in a specifically designated general education program. For most students, the idea of a general/liberal education is often even more remote, a term invoked perhaps at freshman orientation, but rarely seen as much more than a burdensome set of requirements to be gotten out of the way as soon as possible.

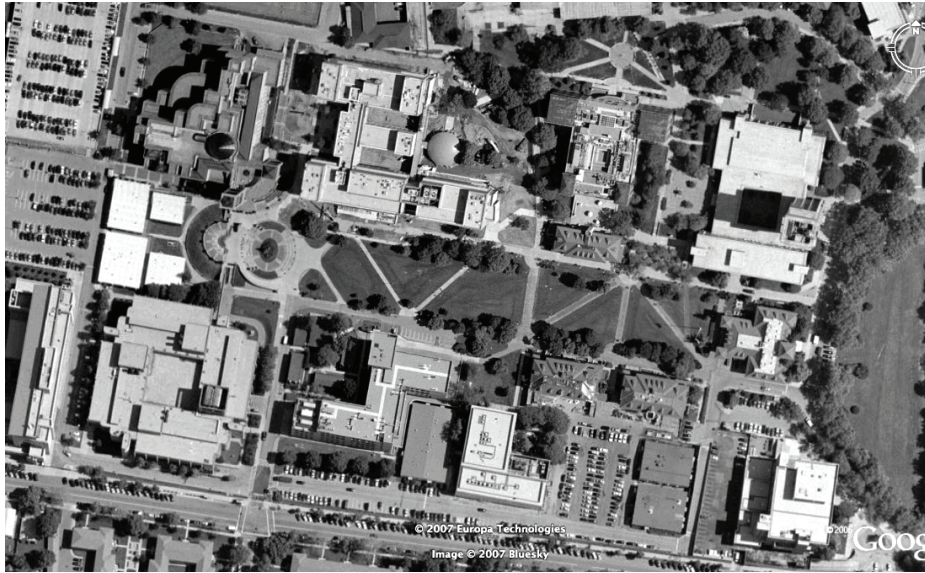
To what extent and in what ways does Queens College’s new general education program address these issues? First, the President’s Task Force provided what it considered a clear set of definitions and goals for General Education. “A liberal education,” it declared, “expands the heart and mind, opening windows and presenting opportunities never before imagined. More than a mere accumulation of credits and subjects, it enables the

individual to learn new methods of inquiry and modes of understanding the world and to actively prepare a place for oneself within family, community, nation and world.” A Queens College education, it concluded, “lies in a set of critical abilities that permeates all aspects of the curriculum and characterizes an educated citizen. This includes an understanding of the nature, operation and claims of different areas of knowledge and creativity as well as the ability to 1) understand and use effectively written, verbal, and visual communication; 2) obtain and evaluate information, including numerical and statistical data, derived from multiple sources, including the newer electronic media; 3) critically analyze hypotheses, knowledge claims, and advocacy arguments; and 4) perceive the ethical dimensions of individual and collective behavior.”

Secondly, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee translated these goals into the concrete proposal that the Academic Senate adopted. The key element of the proposal is its requirement of a set of specifically designed general education courses, named “Perspectives in the Liberal Arts,” or PLAS courses, in five Areas of Knowledge: 1) Reading Literature; 2) Appreciating and Participating in the Arts; 3) Cultures and Values; 4) Analyzing Social Structures; and 5) Natural Sciences. The UCC made a crucial decision about where to place the courses and how to develop them. They will be placed within departments and taught by departmental faculty. However, they will not be designed as departmental courses fulfilling requirements for the major. Instead, the PLAS courses must be specially designated general education courses, expressly designed to meet clearly stated general education goals. The PLAS program thus directly addresses the tension between general education and the specialization that marks much of American general education by starting from the disciplinary structures within which faculty are trained and then moving outward to liberal education issues and questions. The PLAS system clearly places responsibility for general education on the departments and their faculty, partly, it is

hoped, militating against the separation between research and teaching, and, perhaps most importantly, involving a shift in faculty culture in which faculty members see general education as an essential part of their professional identities and responsibilities.

Formal adoption of a new general education curriculum is only the first if absolutely necessary step toward deep reform. What it provides is a framework for change.



Queens College, from Google Earth

The nature and extent of the change depends upon how the new curriculum is developed and implemented. Whether Queens College’s new general education program involves significant change or whether it adds up to little more than tinkering around the edges, and changing a few courses, but nothing more fundamental,

will depend on what happens over the next two or three years. The proposal adopted by the Academic Senate has the potential to go either way. It is certainly possible that departments and divisions may take a minimalist approach. But the PLAS proposal contains an important conceptual opening for a much more far-reaching reform of general education. All PLAS courses are expected to have in common the same set of general learning goals. A PLAS course must be designed to introduce students to how a particular discipline creates knowledge and understanding and to show them how this knowledge is part of the larger whole, called liberal education, and, finally, how this knowledge addresses what William James called “living” questions (how it connects to the students’ lives and the worlds they do and will inhabit). The PLAS system does not provide a “core” curriculum but it can constitute a “common” general education, one that in all its “areas of knowledge” addresses similar epistemological, intellectual, and moral questions.

In short, what could emerge out of the development and implementation process is not simply a collection of commonly designated courses, but a coherent and connected general education curriculum that is recognized and embraced as such by faculty and students as significant, meaningful, and essential. It is a large challenge. Let us hope we have the wherewithal to meet it.

Toward an Enlightened Use of Technology at Queens

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Queens College is at the threshold of a new era, as we transform our undergraduate curriculum, guided by the recommendations of the President's Task Force on General Education. Among other aspects of curricular reform, this work involves envisioning a sound role for technology, a problem which I explore here from the perspective I know best: that of faculty.

Information literacy is one of four critical abilities the new curriculum is to foment, the other three being oral and written expression, numeracy, and research skills (Ahmed et al., 2004). Linking technology and information literacy is straightforward, but I'd like to argue that technology permeates teaching and learning contexts that involve the other three abilities. Indeed, I forget the last time I prepared a lecture or a paper without interfacing with computers; I calculate means and standard deviations for my students' exam scores using computers; every dimension of my research—from experimental design to data collection to data analysis—depends on, yet again, computers. I suspect the experience is similar for my students. So technology is to be everywhere?

A responsible answer to that question is a reluctant affirmative: technology in higher education is everywhere, and whether you embrace it or shun it, technology is here to stay. *Sapere aude*, advised Kant (1784); we might say, in more modern terms, get a grip.

English speakers have been uttering the word technology for hundreds of years, with the first documented uses in the early 1600s (so reports the Oxford English Dictionary, which, of course, I have consulted online). But the meaning of the word undergoes a massive transformation in the 1960s and 1970s, the dawn of the digital revolution. The language begins to distinguish between high and low technology, technology is shortened to tech, and the term techie is born. Technology paired with information comes to refer to a field “concerned with the dissemination, processing, and storage of information”—which sounds very much like the work of an institution of higher

education. The definition, though, adds an important proviso: “especially by means of computers.”

Think back, if you can, twenty years ago, when technology in this new computer-linked sense was in its infancy. In the classrooms, chalk was king, and class notes were taken with the latest exciting tool: the roller ball pen (Lindblom, 2006). Other tools used in instruction included vinyl records, audio and video cassettes, transparencies, 35mm slides. Computer labs were off limits, except to those working on computer science projects. So typing papers required a typewriter, though a lucky few might have had access to a beige Apple II box connected to a dot-matrix printer.

A fast-forward to the beginning of the 21st century brings us to the era of “smart” classrooms, course management software, electronic ink, and ubiquitous computers in all colors, shapes, and sizes. A mere mouse-click grants us access to enormous collections of full-text journals, e-book repositories, image databases, music archives, interactive maps. The Internet serves up constantly evolving and (gasp!) publicly authored weblogs, wikis, podcasts, webcasts, videocasts (Richardson, 2006), to support virtual learning, whatever that might be. Our students have ample access to the computers that mediate these resources, and they are avid users

of an array of techno-gadgets that facilitate e-mailing and instant-messaging, downloading and playing music and videos, gaming and social networking, even perhaps composing their own new media with text-, audio-, or video-editing tools (Salaway et al., 2006). It is only natural that such students welcome the use of technology for class; interestingly, many (64%, according to a nationwide survey) even think technology improves learning outcomes (Salaway et al., 2006). (My own informal surveys of Queens undergraduate students concur with all of these observations.)

But consider the daunting view from the podium, where the instructor faces a snarl of tools that she was never trained for, tools that are still quite under development

and that will require an experimental deployment (Noble, 1998). Is the instructor to neglect the course content as she looks into a new technology with little or no technical support and with an unknown track record? Though understandably cautious (Noble, 1998), faculty outlooks on using technology tend to be optimistic (Lukaweski, 2007), because computers are by design exquisite facilitators of student-centered approaches to learning (Nelson, 1974), and that is a respectable objective.

Lofty goals aside, even I—an incorrigible technophile—often wonder: why use technology? But this is a misguided question, because eventually we will all have to, in some guise or another. Take the new electronic system for submitting attendance information and grades, now required for all instructors at the College. Or consider the fact that a thorough search of library resources these days is only possible via search engines that retrieve records from electronic databases. The right question to ask, then, is how to go about using technology, in teaching and learning contexts, in ways that will improve the four critical abilities of the new curriculum. I offer two very different pieces of advice in this respect:

On the one hand, we must not be afraid to exploit technology for precisely what it is: a mere tool, which facilitates or automates tedious tasks, and which permits the development of tasks that were impossible before the digital age. We can and probably should enjoy using “just right” tools—say, software that administers and grades assignments automatically, e-mail systems that streamline communication with our students, networking services that keep us connected to our information while away from our desks, and so on. And there is great satisfaction to be derived from using slideware in class to help students visualize a particularly difficult concept, or from showcasing how discipline-specific technologies are used to collect or examine data.

On the other hand, we face the challenge of taking on the responsibility of shaping the future of technology in higher education: its features, its design, its implementation (Haas & Neuwirth, 1994). We must not tolerate tools that dumb down the content, or tools that consume time that should really be devoted to course preparation or to the evaluation of student work. We must not allow technology to impede our direct interactions with students, but we need to understand that technology can open up otherwise unavailable avenues for communication. We must become informed participants in technology-driven change that has consequences for the academy, as new models emerge for the dissemination of knowledge (e.g., the Open Access Initiative, <http://www.openarchives.org/>) and as established notions, like those of literacy and authorship,

are redefined by new media (Yancey, 2004). We can achieve these objectives, not by teaching (or learning) skills linked to specific technologies, but rather by learning (and teaching) how to adapt to new technologies while critically evaluating them and helping them evolve, which is the way I have always understood the term information literacy. Remember that the particular technologies with which you might have come of age (the Apple II, or the Canon Typewriter, or the Smith Corona Coronamatic 8000) are now obsolete. And be aware that the technologies our current students will interact with, twenty or thirty years from now, will be totally unlike anything we can anticipate today. What we know won't change (and this is worth noting) is the cognitive architecture that supports the range of behaviors humans engage in as they interact with tools. Arguably, this is where things get really interesting, as we figure out how to engage students (and ourselves) in a productive rapport with technology in teaching and learning contexts. Kant's advice sounds appropriate, as the digital revolution beckons us to break away from self-imposed immaturity.

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Working in academia one dons two hats: that of the scholar and that of the teacher. There has always been a relationship between the two, of course. One's research influences one's teaching, when appropriate; he who publishes on Aristotle is likely to teach Aristotle as well. Influence in the other direction, from teaching to scholarship, while traditionally far less emphasized in the academy, is increasingly the subject of focus. CUNY's recent emphasis on general education, for instance, implies greater emphasis on the undergraduate classrooms where general education takes place and, by extension, the teaching that makes it possible. The way that students learn, and the way that faculty teach, is slowly becoming a more legitimate field of scholarship. But this scholarship of teaching and learning is still in its birthing pains: the discipline's boundaries, fundamental questions, research methods, and standards for evaluation are very much under development. This development is not helped by the fact that institutional rewards like tenure are slow to recognize the importance of this new scholarship. Overcoming these difficulties requires ideological devotion, not to mention a concerted effort.

It is with a view toward fostering the development of this new discipline that the Carnegie Foundation established the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning (CASTL). A ten-year initiative launched in 1998, CASTL's purpose is "fostering inquiry and leadership for the improvement of student learning; developing and synthesizing knowledge about learning and teaching; and promoting institutional change in support of a scholarship of teaching and learning" (CASTL Leadership Program call for proposals). CASTL's efforts toward such goals have come in several waves. The first stage saw the appointment of 140 Carnegie Scholars, individual faculty from a variety of schools who were asked to produce a piece of original research related to pedagogy or student learning. At the second stage, the focus was on entire campuses and the ways to promote and nurture these kinds of projects on a campus-wide scale. CUNY's participation is at CASTL's third stage, where the scope is broadened from individual colleges to multi-campus university systems.

The way that students learn, and the way that faculty teach, is slowly becoming a more legitimate field of scholarship.

The WAC/WID program and the Centers for Teaching and Learning, to consider a few such projects, are both explicitly concerned with the study, support, and dissemination of innovative teaching methods.

CASTL's 2005 call for proposals for this third stage appeared at an opportune moment for CUNY. Various projects already underway across the system demonstrated CUNY's genuine investment in goals parallel to those of CASTL. The WAC/WID program and the Centers for Teaching and Learning, to consider a few such projects, are both explicitly concerned with the study, support, and dissemination of innovative teaching methods. The University's commitment to the development of a scholarship of teaching and learning could also be seen at a broader, more administrative level. In 2003, the Coordinated Undergraduate Education (CUE) project was launched, designed to "consolidate the academic and academic support programs at each of the Colleges" (<http://www1.cuny.edu/academics/oa/uei/cue.html>). CUE's purview includes the General Education Project, which "aims to strengthen the distinctiveness of each college's general education mission at the same time that the colleges come together to define the common ground of liberal education at CUNY," a mission that culminates each year in the General Education Conference (CUNY proposal for

CASTL Leadership Program). In these ways, CUNY was somewhat of a natural fit for CASTL's goals; the system was admitted into CASTL's third stage in 2006.

In what way does involvement in CASTL enhance CUNY's extant commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning? Membership in a network of similar-minded institutions is

CASTL's most conspicuous benefit. CUNY is grouped with four other university systems from around the country: the University of Colorado, the University of North Carolina, Miami Dade College, and the University of Wisconsin. These schools are all charged with the same goal of system-wide collaboration, and CASTL facilitates, through yearly meetings and ongoing web resources, communication on the goal. As the universities in this group are quite diverse—they vary greatly not only in size, location, and composition, but also in terms of the extent to which they have already initiated a discussion of teaching and learning—they each face challenges that can be drastically different. Geographical

separation, for instance, poses a significant obstacle for a school like the University of Wisconsin; when campuses are sometimes hundreds of miles from each other, intercampus collaboration is far more challenging than at a more centralized institution like CUNY. Yet common ideological goals of these systems ensure that they will have many obstacles in common. The hope is that each institution will benefit from the group's collective experience; CASTL both initiates and provides a framework for this kind of communication.

Another benefit of the CASTL program is the opportunity to convert skeptics. The scholarship of teaching and learning is in its infancy, and it does not enjoy the same sort of universal respect that other, more developed academic disciplines do. CASTL, as a nexus of the nascent movement, provides connections to other scholars engaged in the serious study of pedagogy, as well as the specialized journals devoted to this study. These connections, as endorsed by the prestigious Carnegie Foundation, have the potential to woo scholars who might otherwise fail to give the field its due consideration. The same sort of effect is intended at the department- and

university-wide level, too, as CASTL aims to amend the accepted notion of scholarship—and its associated reward scheme—to include the scholarship of teaching and learning. The goal is for research and publications on teaching and learning to receive the same sort of support and respect from the institution, i.e., as steps toward promotion and tenure, and CUNY's membership in CASTL goes some way toward establishing this as a realistic goal.

CASTL also provides a stage for CUNY to showcase its leadership in the study of teaching and learning. As the largest public urban university in the nation, CUNY's influence on the academic landscape is potentially huge.

Involvement with CASTL allows the University to make its commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning very public. This sort of publicity garners respect both for CUNY—as an institution on the forefront of a burgeoning, worldwide movement—and the movement itself.

CASTL aims to amend the accepted notion of scholarship—and its associated reward scheme—to include the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Higher Education in the U.S. and Italy

Angelo R. Dicuonzo, CUNY Writing Fellow

I will attempt a comparative analysis of the Italian and American higher education systems. This is not an easy task to perform in a few lines, mainly because of their profound difference. Yet comparisons are always feasible, provided that one is able to identify a distinctive trait in the light of which assessing their terms is not totally arbitrary. Although the comparison in question may appear as a desperate undertaking because of the cultural distance between the Italian and American systems, we will encounter common premises and poignant parallels.

Let me briefly illustrate the curriculum of an Italian student. In Italy, the university has been reformed starting in 1999, after it had remained unchanged and centralized for more than seventy years.

The purpose of the ongoing overhaul, which has aroused heated controversies and disputes, is to bring Italian students in line with their European colleagues. In other words, in order to conform to the educational systems of the other industrialized European countries, Italy has adopted measures aimed at fostering orientation, innovative pedagogies, tutoring, professional qualifications and internationalization; increasing student enrollments; reducing drop out rates; eliminating the gap between legal and real duration of university courses; and improving geographical distribution, social spread, student support and welfare services. What has made the curricular reform indispensable is the awareness of the challenges posed by the frantic pace of the changes in the Italian and European society, and the subsequent

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and urgent need to solve problems of competitiveness, unemployment and marginalization (CIMEA, 2003).

The traditional organization has been replaced by a three-year first cycle of studies (*corso di laurea*) and a two-year second cycle (*corso di laurea specialistica*), both characterized by the introduction of a system of credits which complies with the European Credit Transfer System.

The objective of the first cycle studies is to provide students with adequate knowledge of general scientific principles and mastery of methods as well as specific professional skills, whereas the goal of the second cycle studies consists in providing students with advanced education and training for highly qualified professions in specific sectors (MIUR, 2006).

This said, if we expected that the new Italian education equals in its structure the American one, we would be disappointed. As a matter of fact, in the curriculum of an undergraduate Italian student general education

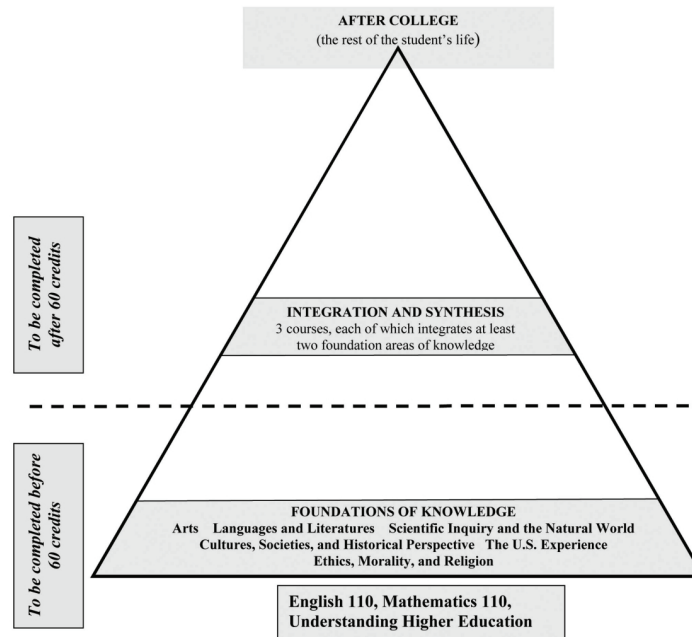
plays no role, since even the first-cycle studies have kept a quite high degree of specialization. Once at the university, an Italian student chooses his major in the exact moment he opts for a *corso di laurea*, and from the beginning of his career attends only classes more or less directly related to the subject of the *corso* in which he has enrolled. In concrete terms, a student who decides to study modern literature and registers for the literary-philological curriculum will have the opportunity to study foreign languages and literatures, Roman history, philosophy of science, aesthetics and comparative literature, but not mathematics, physics or geology.

What is, then, the common denominator that could allow us to compare higher education systems that look so different, and critically enlighten the final report presented by the Queens College Task Force? It is significant that both Italy and the United States have acknowledged the obsolescence and inadequacy of their traditional curricula. This acknowledgement represents the unavoidable response to the social, cultural, and anthropological transformation that is reshaping our contemporary

societies, radically questioning the role played by the academia. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has recently written, “with virtually all orthodox grounds and justifications of their once elevated position either gone or considerably weakened, universities [...] face the need to rethink and articulate anew their role in a world that has no use for their traditional services” (Bauman 134). Why is this happening? Bauman lists multiple reasons, which find

their most effective epitome in the advent of postmodernity, whose most peculiar features are identified in an intrinsic precariousness, ambivalence and fragmentariness that, besides randomly “liquidizing” frames and patterns of any kind (personal, public and cognitive), call for what Bauman defines in Gregory Bateson’s terms as “tertiary learning”: “learning how to break the regularity, how to get free from habits and prevent habitualization, how to rearrange fragmentary experience

Figure 3. The Two-tiered Areas of Knowledge Requirements



From the Gen Ed Task Force’s Report

into heretofore unfamiliar patterns while treating all patterns as acceptable solely ‘until further notice’” (125). In such circumstances, reforms of higher education, in so far as they aim at obtaining long term and stable outcomes, must be prepared to face the high risk of being illusory and miss their target.

Both the Italian reform and the Queens College plan of reorganization openly recognize the situation described by Bauman, who advances as a remedy the proposal to take into account the value of the “plurality and multivocality of the present-day collection of ‘gatherings for the sake of the pursuit of higher learning’ which jar with the legislators’ love of cohesion and harmony” (137). In Bauman’s view quantity might generate quality: the more universities we have, the more chances we are given to win the postmodern challenges. Maybe. I am not convinced, especially when higher education is becoming more and more expensive, too expensive to be accessible to everyone, and is more and more managed by private agencies.

A more persuasive solution offered by the Queens College plan meets with my agreement and, compared with Bauman's proposal, leaves me less perplexed. The final report of the President's Task Force on General Education is certainly right to place a strong emphasis on the importance of cross-disciplinarity: "In an academic world in which knowledge is both increasingly fragmented, specialized, and professionalized, a central task of general education is to enable students to make connections across course and disciplinary boundaries and between their undergraduate education and the changing world they will inhabit" (5). Undeniable. But my consent is not unconditional, since what strikes me is the Task Force's genuine faith in the capacity of the curricular diversification to stimulate by itself interdisciplinary links. In other words, the Task Force too seems to inflect in its own way the idea that quantity may produce quality: the more diversified the curriculum is, the more chances a student is granted to acquire a wide range of skills. Moreover, the Task Force too seems to be driven by "love of cohesion and harmony"—by the belief in the feasibility of a humanistic "integration and synthesis" of knowledge. In short: *E pluribus unum*.¹ It is not accidental that, on page 14 of the report, the curriculum is represented as a pyramid, which figuratively betrays an aspiration to cohesiveness and consistency denied by our times.² Of course, the issue under scrutiny is not the value of the Task Force's job, but the attempt to read it in the light of its plausible interrelations with the scope of our current cultural situation.

I am tempted to say that, after years in the United States, my personal preference goes to the more specialized Italian model, which—at least in theory—avoids the chance to shift the student's attention away from his main disciplinary interests, and promises a higher degree of competence in a distinctive area. Naturally, my greater appreciation of the Italian model does not imply that the American university should import it, for such an

¹ Under this respect, the title of an article by Vartan Gregorian is surely symptomatic: "Colleges Must Reconstruct the Unity of Knowledge."

² I also disagree with other, more specific aspects of the Gen Ed Task Force's plan, such as the exclusion of foreign languages (at Queens only 31% of the undergraduates are native speakers), and the priority granted to ethics, morality, and religion (whose content is not further specified) over clearly stated philosophical approaches.

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unrealistic and unhistorical stand would only overlook the deep differences between the two education philosophies in question. I simply believe that the undergraduate American curriculum risks losing cross-disciplinary connections to empty juxtapositions of various courses.

My preference, however, is not without reservations, and is linked to the fulfillment of a fundamental requirement: in a world that reveals itself as an entangled web of relations, where no cognitive area can be viewed and cultivated idealistically in its isolated purity, substantive inter-disciplinarity constitutes a key solution, probably the solution. I would like to put forward a proposal, on the basis of the recognition of the common urgency and the respective biases of the Italian and American educational reforms. I suggest that, where an excessive specialization (Italy) and an extensively diversified curriculum (United States) could limit the effectiveness of the scholarship offered by a *cursus studiorum*, cross-disciplinarity be brought within the boundaries of each of the disciplines of which a curriculum is comprised, while stressing at the same time the distinctiveness of a given field. An intensive cross-disciplinarity—so to speak—would not only lead to formal plans of reorganization, but also would underline the role of the teacher's ethical and intellectual guidance in the learning process. It is noticeable that CUNY institutions have successfully experimented with collaborative teaching, a pedagogical formula that—beyond making inter-disciplinarity immediately and concretely visible and functional—may significantly contribute to create, foster and spread a sense of community and shared values among both teachers and learners.

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Science Writing at Queens and Beyond

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CUNY Writing Fellow

Science writing is often stereotyped as technical, dry, and full of jargon that only scientists can understand. This belief can cloud the real reasons some scientific writings are so difficult to read. Too often people are intimidated by unfamiliar terms and blame themselves as bad readers, rather than challenge the clarity of the writing itself. When science writing comes to the classroom setting, it is worth thinking about what makes good scientific writing, and how the quality of science writing relates to effective scientific teaching and learning. Two recent events of science writing and pedagogy opened up conversations among faculty and students, both inside and outside the scientific field.

In the spring of 2006, Professor Robert Cowen (Math) and Professor Jason Tougaw (WAC Director & English) co-coordinated the Science Writing Conference at Queens College. This one-day event created a forum for faculty and students to share their experiences in writing and stimulated a vibrant discussion about writing pedagogy. The featured guest, Judith Swan (Assistant Director of Scientific and Technical Writing, Princeton University), conducted an interactive seminar with students and faculty in the morning. Dr. Swan presented the elements of good writing from readers' perspective, and further clarified some issues of confusing sentences by using real examples. She further emphasized the connections between the structure of the prose and the structure of the scientific argument. As she pointed out in an *American Scientist* article, co-authored with George Gopen, writers can control their readers' interpretive process more effectively by making them conscious of the clues derived from the writing structures: "the [writing] principles simultaneously offer the writer a fresh re-entry

to the thought process that produced the science" (Gopen & Swan, 1999).

The seminar was followed by a faculty roundtable. Faculty from a variety of departments in the sciences shared their creative teaching strategies, including peer review, weblogs, science journalism, and essays on the history or philosophy of science. The roundtable was truly exciting

for many Queens College faculty and students, familiarizing them with various approaches in teaching and learning about effective science writing.

During lunch, selected faculty and students presented their projects in the Poster Session. It showcased excellent student work and innovative pedagogies in science writing. The Poster Session provided an opportunity for everyone to converse with the poster authors and to exchange ideas with other conference participants.



Judith Swan, at the CUNY Graduate Center

Extending the morning seminar to allow more time for audience discussion, Dr. Swan conducted a faculty workshop on writing pedagogy in the afternoon. She focused on the practical uses of the writing principles mentioned earlier in the classroom setting. Participating faculty members and Writing Fellows also discussed various issues in science writing from their own experiences, including collaborative writing, relationships between good scientific writing and effective scientific learning, writing and oral presentation....etc.

The conference was well-received among Queens College faculty and students. As a result, we invited Judith Swan back to address an even broader audience in a CUNY-wide WAC symposium in October 2006. Dr. Swan paralleled

the process of writing with scientific experiments; for example, the process that scientists use to modify hypotheses in the lab is just like the process that we use to revise our writing. This argument contrasts the common preconception that science and writing are split. She explained that just like writing, science is about progress, argument, and revision. Her talk inspired participating WAC coordinators and Writing Fellows to make the connections between writing and scientific thinking.

After Dr. Swan's interactive seminar, there was a faculty roundtable conducted by five professors from different CUNY campuses, including Brooklyn College, Borough of Manhattan Community College, Queensborough Community College, and Queens College. Facilitated by Dr. Swan, participating faculty presented their teaching practices and shared sample assignments from different disciplines within Mathematics and Natural Sciences. The conversation centered on the uses of various pedagogical strategies to reach teaching goals in science writing. For instance, Professor Susan Croll (Psychology, Queens College) encouraged students to verbalize the scientific thoughts and read the writing aloud to their non-scientist friends and family members. Professor Robert Cowen (Mathematics, Queens College) used peer review methods to help students write professional comments.

The two events successfully initiated discussions among faculty, students, and the WAC community at CUNY about science writing. As a Writing Fellow supporting the Science Division, I often detect a presumption from both faculty and students that doing science is one thing,

and writing about science is another. When students come to me with worries mainly in grammatical errors, and when professors express concern about students' English abilities without even mentioning their thinking and reasoning abilities, it is a sign that lab-learning experiences do not melt into writing naturally. Dr. Swan's argument has provided an entry point for people to connect the research activities—science or not—with the writing practices.

Like all other forms of writing, writing in the sciences is about communicating with the audience, conveying the authors' thinking, and transferring their knowledge from research to text. The influence of these events goes beyond writing in the sciences itself: now that faculty and students are encouraged to link their lab experiences with the writing processes, the ongoing reflections will hopefully develop into more creative practices on teaching and writing.

Writing Across the Curriculum and the Center for Teaching and Learning will offer a workshop on "Writing to Read Scientific Texts" during the upcoming June Institute on General Education. This workshop will be run by Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking Associates Valeri Thomson (Biology) and Ric Campbell (Director, Master of Arts in Teaching). They will use "writing to read" methods and collaborative learning practices to help faculty develop effective ways of bringing scientific texts into the classroom.

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The New Collaboration between Writing Across the Curriculum and the Center for Teaching and Learning

Noriko Matsumoto, CUNY Writing Fellow

Since the fall semester of 2006, the Writing Across the Curriculum program (WAC) has been coordinating its activities with the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The mission of the newly launched CTL is to promote, sustain, and recognize ways of improving the quality

of teaching and student learning at Queens. CTL will take the initiative in promoting and encouraging discussion regarding teaching and learning, campus wide. The primary goal for the next few years will be to assist in the implementation of new general education requirements at the College: in particular, CTL will help faculty develop pedagogies required by the new curriculum.

WAC and CTL are directly charged with curricular

concerns in complementary and integrated ways: while WAC primarily oversees Writing Intensive courses, CTL is the main force in implementing the new General Education curriculum.

In a recent interview, Professor Don Scott (Director of CTL) and Professor Jason Tougaw (Director of WAC) spoke about their aims in developing the collaboration. Scott and Tougaw emphasized that one of their goals is to

create an active, welcoming, and inspiring site for faculty seeking both ideas and resources regarding teaching at large. The aim will be to provide space for discussion among faculty on course development and pedagogies for the Gen Ed curriculum.

Both Scott and Tougaw, however, remarked that there are challenges, most notably stemming from the fact that Queens, as a commuter college, has had difficulties creating a sense of community among faculty and students. WAC and CTL are making attempts to overcome such challenges; this includes the creation of as many online resources on teaching as possible. There will also be invitations to outside speakers and facilitators from other colleges; one example being the hosting of the “June Institute on General Education” by CTL. The Institute will offer a three-day workshop where faculty will develop courses and materials for the College’s new PLAS [Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences] courses. The workshop will be run by instructors from Bard College. This initiative follows the Bard Weekend Workshop held in December 2006, and is part of an ongoing collaboration with outside institutions. Such projects are being organized in the hope that faculty will feel that they are part of the larger, national conversation about teaching and learning. Tougaw describes WAC and CTL as currently in the initial phases of “creating momentum” and actively engaged in seeking participation from a broad spectrum of interested

faculty.

WAC and CTL will play a central role in the College’s efforts in shaping the new Gen Ed curriculum, although specific tasks differ for each program. To achieve program goals in the most productive way, however, collective

“In order for the action of WAC and CTL to be meaningful, to ensure that the faculty’s teaching is effective, we need to get people thinking critically, reflectively, and imaginatively about their teaching. . .”

endeavors beyond the programs themselves will be necessary. “In order for the action of WAC and CTL to be meaningful, to ensure that the faculty’s teaching is effective, we need to get people thinking critically, reflectively, and imaginatively about their

teaching,” says Tougaw. The roles of WAC and CTL in the formation of the new Gen Ed curriculum, according to Scott, ultimately relate to the establishing of effective foundations for teaching, “changing and developing courses to deepen and enhance a teaching culture among faculty.”

The institutional collaboration of WAC, CTL, and the Educational Technologies Laboratory (based on the third floor of Razran) will provide a critical forum for the exchange of views and practices on teaching, with regard to further reinforcing college-wide goals for writing and learning among Queens students. WAC and CTL welcome faculty participation—and the Directors invite faculty members to contact them with ideas for projects and programs that will serve the needs of faculty and students.

The Bard Experience

Eileen Baker, CUNY Writing Fellow

The W&T experience was tremendous. I don’t think I have participated in such a transformational faculty development activity “ever.” Now that I have experienced student-centered learning, and now that I’ve been reminded of the power of freewriting, I am not only writing better but also making significant changes in how I approach aspects of my teaching... Most insightful was learning through doing, rather than learning through lectures. There was no lecturing in our workshop, and the discussions were far more engaging than I have seen in a long time, perhaps because we got to think and write before we were allowed to speak. —Eva Fernández, Linguistics & Communication Disorders

From December 8 to December 10, 2006 members of Queens College Writing Across the Curriculum and other

interested college faculty attended a weekend workshop at Bard College (located, if you haven’t been there, in a beautiful part of the Hudson Valley on the Hudson River). We attended a weekend workshop in the teaching of writing and thinking for high school and college teachers at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking. The Institute encourages teachers to examine and experiment with their own writing processes and teaching methods, so that they may better direct and inspire their students’ efforts.

During the weekend retreat teachers reflected on the way they teach writing and were introduced to the Institute’s fundamental techniques. The Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking seeks to improve students’ writing abilities through challenging, engaging and effective teacher development programs that focus on the role of writing in

teaching and learning. We met in groups of 12 to 15 for a series of seven 90 and 120 minute sessions in which we explored our values and concerns as writers and teachers. The sessions focused on such topics as intervention strategies, coaching the writing process, and revision. The six workshops were: “Fictions: Memory and Imagination”; “Poetry: Reading, Writing, Teaching”; “Reading Human Rights”; “Writing to Learn”; “Teaching the Academic Paper”; and “Writing and Thinking”. Each workshop was communal and collaborative.

Three of the workshops focused on general principles. “Teaching the Academic Paper” explored how best to teach thoughtful writing, in specific fields and across the board. The workshop redefined academic writing, and offered methods for teaching students how to use sources, pose key questions, and make personal connections with a specific topic or text. The “Writing to Learn” workshop presented inventive writing strategies to help students gain a better understanding of complex ideas, historical documents, literary texts, and mathematical problems. This workshop supported close reading of documents and literary texts and was geared to allow students to make personal connections to people, places, and events they study; and to encourage students to learn from one another. In the “Writing and Thinking” workshop teachers wrote together, exchanged ideas and responded to one another’s works. Through these activities they became more aware of the composing process and of their students’ struggles to acquire the ability to produce expressive, well developed, and engaged writing.

Three of the workshops illustrated the writing process through specific topics. “Fictions: Memory and Imagination” explored the connections among memoir, autobiography, and fiction and sought to develop an appreciation of the stories we write about our lives, and the fictions we construct from the “facts” of our lives. “Poetry: Reading, Writing, Teaching” focused on writers and readers experiencing poetic language. The aim was to learn how to make poetry a vital part of a teacher’s professional

and personal life. Participants experienced the precision, liveliness, and imaginative scope of poetic language and learned to incorporate these qualities into their own work. “Reading Human Rights” considered literature that enriches our understanding of human rights and explored ways to incorporate readings that invoke humanitarian issues into our curriculums and classrooms.



Bard College seminar room, with evidence that writing and thinking have occurred.

One of the participants at the Institute for Writing and Thinking workshop series had this to say about the weekend. Agnes Cardoni (Wilkes University, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania), wrote:

I came up to Bard on December 8 for the workshop on “The Academic Paper.” I wasn’t after a tidy definition. I am the WAC coordinator for my university,

so I already know there’s no such thing. I entered the Bard Bubble—my term for the aura that surrounds the Institute’s practices. With relief, I fell into the rhythm of the practice—freewrite, focused freewrite, text rendering, more writing, reflection, more writing, more reflection. I love the rhythm of it, the quiet of it, and the listening. Listening

to the texts, to the silence and scribbling, and to the still, small voice within.

I have been doing the Institute strategies since 1983. So my return this year was more a retreat, a chance to dive more deeply into theory and practice, a chance to have someone else run the class. That diving deeper into theory and practice was essential to me, because I had been feeling spiritless in both teaching and writing in the past few weeks.



The Bard campus.

The weekend renewed my practices and returned me to a consideration of the underlying integrity of the whole idea. I also came away with a vigorous revision of my ideas for “Medicine and Literature,” a course about illness in body, culture and theory.

For more information about The Bard Institute for Writing & Thinking, visit <http://www.bard.edu/iwt/>.

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