

Mens Sana in Corpore Sano (A Sound Mind in a Sound Body): Implementing and Evaluating Writing Across the Curriculum Strategies in Physical Education

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Abstract

During the spring semester of 2006 the Department of Physical Education (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) and a writing fellow, an English doctoral candidate (CUNY Graduate Center), began working together, with the goal of creating a new writing assignment for an integral course at the college. PED 103, Personal Physical Fitness and Dynamic Health, is typically offered in 15-18 different sections and taught by a large number of adjuncts. Typical enrollment per semester is about 650 students, so our course of action affected a significant number of students each year. Our goal was to create a standard writing curriculum that would improve student writing, yet not stray from the objectives of the course. As we are duly aware that similar Writing Across the Curriculum work (albeit perhaps not always in physical education) is taking place at academic institutions across the country, and indeed beyond, we decided to chronicle our collaboration in order to contribute to the critical conversation regarding the work of WAC. Ultimately, surrounded by the fruits of student and instructor effort alike in implementing the new writing curriculum, we concluded that the endeavor was successful. However, there are several revisions of the project that we plan to execute this coming semester. The results of the project, as well as potential changes to its design, are discussed in our article.

During the spring semester of 2006 the Department of Physical Education (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) and a writing fellow, an English doctoral candidate (CUNY Graduate Center), began working together, with the goal of creating a new writing assignment for an integral course at the college. PED 103, Personal Physical Fitness and Dynamic Health, is typically offered in 15-18 different sections and taught by a large number of adjuncts. Typical enrollment per semester is about 650 students, so our course of action affected a significant number of students each year. Our goal was to create a standard writing curriculum that would improve student writing, yet not stray from the objectives of the course. As we are duly aware that similar Writing Across the Curriculum work (albeit perhaps not always in physical education) is taking place at academic institutions across the country, and indeed beyond, we decided to chronicle our collaboration in order to contribute to the critical conversation regarding the work of WAC.

Much of the scholarship on writing across the curriculum neglects physical education altogether, while the few existent works on the subject of integrating writing into physical education tend to concern elementary or secondary education rather than college. Alternatively, authors argue that physical education merits a significantly different approach to writing instruction. Wilson and Cameron (1996) are proponents of low-stakes

writing in physical education courses, focusing on journal writing rather than critical engagement of secondary sources. In "Writing in the Physical Education class: Writing Assignments in Physical Education", Behrman (2004) notes that students are challenged with different forms of literacy in each subject area. Though this idea is already accepted with regard to subjects outside of English, such as mathematics or science, it also pertains to subjects sometimes (mistakenly) considered outside the realm of academia, such as physical education.

In addition, one of the paramount goals of writing across the curriculum is writing fluency across disciplines, rather than the presence of writing in some courses and its absence in others, yet existent literature on this topic demonstrates a different view of writing inclusion in Physical Education. In "Integrating the Craft of Writing into Physical Education", Raffone writes, "The main goal of this curriculum is to show students a very different approach to writing from the regular classroom instructional environment" (Raffone, 2005, para. 15). This, too, emphasizes difference rather than similarity in approaches to writing instruction. Though each discipline is unique and contains specialized vernacular, we propose a writing curriculum framework that simultaneously includes serious engagement with the discipline and serious engagement with writing, grounded in a traditionally academic approach to critical thinking.

Before we designed a new writing curriculum, we conducted a syllabi review to ascertain the nature of existent writing assignments. The writing fellow found that the length of assignments ranged from 0 pages (i.e. no writing assigned) to 10 pages. In addition, there was variety with regard to how much the writing assignment was worth. In some sections it was worth only 10% of the final grade, while in some sections it was worth 25% of the final grade. Furthermore, in the majority of the sections, the final writing project was due at the end of the semester, leaving no time for comments from the

instructor to be returned to the student. Finally the syllabi did not contain clear explanations of the assignments with due dates. After reviewing the complete report, the next step was to develop the assignment and to share the new assignment with the instructors, which occurred in numerous workshops between the writing fellow and PED 103 instructors.

The workshop agendas included the writing fellow explaining her role and listening to feedback from the instructors regarding the structure of the course, as well as their thoughts on writing in physical education classes. The writing fellow took copious notes regarding the instructors' responses to the current physical education curriculum, resistance to the incorporation of writing, and contentions that multiple choice tests would benefit the student more than a research project. Finally, the writing fellow presented the new assignment and listened to comments and concerns.

The New Regimen: Designing a Healthy Assignment

After reviewing and discussing the comments of the instructors, we made some minor revisions. The final assignment, based on philosophies of writing-to-learn, is outlined in Appendix A.

The instructors were given due dates for each assignment so that the amount of time a student might need between each assignment was not left to guesswork. (Of course, instructors included exact dates on their own syllabi.) There was a point deduction system for late assignments, including the caveat that any assignment not received one week after the due date would not be accepted. In addition to the actual assignment, instructors and students received a grading rubric for the final paper, enumerated in Appendix B. At the workshops the instructors also requested grading guidelines for each individual step. This was distributed to each instructor, but was not given to the students. It can be found in Appendix C.

The guidelines given to instructors gave the necessary assistance to help them with improving

student writing from one step to the next and illustrated Harvey's comments, "But even a teacher who articulates what he or she wants to see happening in a paper and who has designed assignments that allow it to happen needs to answer a final question, by imagining backward from the desired result: How can you help students get there?" (Harvey, 1997, p. 109). At this point the instructors felt knowledgeable on how to administer and grade the new writing assignments. There were ready to embark on this new process in the fall of 2006.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the outcome of the collaboration between the Department of Physical Education at John Jay College of the City University of New York, and a writing fellow, an English doctoral candidate at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. The collaboration yielded the creation a new writing assignment for an integral course at the college, PED 103, Personal Physical Fitness and Dynamic Health, which educates students about mental and physical wellness. The study chronicled the effort to create a standard writing curriculum that would improve student writing, yet not stray from the focus of the course. The study evaluated the success of the writing curriculum revision by asking whether the assignment, in its finished form, was relevant to the course material; whether student writing improved incrementally in terms of content, organization, and facility with language; and whether the assignment implemented Writing Across the Curriculum productively.

Practice Makes Perfect: Evaluating the Efficacy of the Revised Writing Curriculum

Methods

Subjects.

A total of twenty-seven undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory physical education

course volunteered to participate in this study. These students were chosen at random by their instructors and were asked to participate. In order to get a cross-sampling from each section, each professor was asked to get two students per section. Eighty percent of the instructors teaching this course agreed to take part in this study. (One professor declined to participate and the researcher did not include her own students in the study.) In accordance with Institutional Research Board procedures, they were asked to complete a statement of informed consent prior to their participation.

Procedure.

The study was approved by the Institutional Research Board. Then the students were selected at random by each instructor. They were asked to submit to their instructor an additional copy of each step of the writing assignment which would then be given to the researchers. Each student was assigned a code that was attached to each piece of writing they submitted to ensure that the writing remained anonymous. The students were also given a qualitative questionnaire. In addition the instructors were asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire.

Data Analyses.

From the gestation of this project, we knew it would be extremely helpful, and even necessary, to assess its outcome at the end of the semester. The study was designed to be qualitative in nature. In order to achieve data triangulation, we collected three forms of data. First, we asked volunteer student participants to submit a portfolio of their work. In evaluating the success of our writing curriculum revision, we asked the following questions: Was the assignment, in its finished form, relevant to the course? Did student writing improve from step to step in terms of content, organization, and facility with language? In order to answer these questions the researchers independently rated each paper on a scale of 1-5 with regard to these questions. Then they

compared their results to see if there were any discrepancies. There were none.

In addition, we surveyed both students and instructors to obtain qualitative feedback in order to guide course enhancement. As this assignment is very similar to what is being conceived in other departments, it is a true example of Writing Across the Curriculum. As such, it was important to test its efficacy and hear feedback from the students and the instructors on the triumphs and travails of the work. Our study can aid other departments in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary environments as they try to implement WAC requirements.

The Weigh-In: Results of the New Routine

Findings

Student responses to the research project ranged widely, reflecting the diverse student population at John Jay College. Students praised the assignment for its focus on independent learning and its inquiry-based nature. They noted that it helped incoming freshmen, in particular, to learn the APA style of citation. Students attested that there was an equal amount of writing and exercise in the Personal Health and Physical Fitness class, and that the equivalence seemed appropriate. In responding to which step of the assignment was most difficult, class members' responses varied across the board. Some found formulating a thesis difficult, while others found the letter, outline, or rough draft to be challenging. As one student responded, "I had trouble coming up with the investigative question. I've always had trouble with thesis statements, and I guess this was similar. But setting up my argument as the answer to that question helped focus my ideas." Still others found it problematic to determine which research to include in the paper. Students expressed resistance to the scaffolding aspect of the project, saying that it would have been much easier to simply write the final paper. In general, however, participants enjoyed the work and articulated surprise that

their research and organization skills improved in the painless process. The varied nature of the responses indicated the point of the scaffolding; each student struggled with a different aspect of the work, so it was effective to break down each step. The efficacy of the assignment came foremost in its focus on writing-as-process and individual-based inquiry.

It was interesting to note that while the student feedback regarding the project was generally positive, the majority of the instructor feedback was not entirely positive. Some professors thought that there was too much time spent grading and correcting drafts, and suggested that parts of the assignment be combined to result in less grading. Others thought the mix of low-stakes and high-stakes writing was confusing for the students. Acknowledging the additional workload that the assignment entails in all of its iterations—it is more than simply collecting a final draft—instructor resistance to the new writing project seemed natural. Yet when asked to suggest alternative directions for the writing curriculum that might better served the students, professors expressed praise for the current assignment. One professor responded, "This approach enabled the students to focus on each segment of the paper and the professor was able to correct mistakes as the process went along. It also helped curb plagiarism. It is more work for the professor, but I am happy that the students are doing better through this process." While instructors articulated reservations about the amount of grading, the majority of them concluded that student writing improved over the course of the semester and that the scaffolding was beneficial.

The samples of student writing we collected reflected the varied nature of difficulty with different aspects of the assignment that the students themselves noted in their surveys. Several things came to light: first, that the quality of work on the final paper was generally predictable, judging by the success or difficulty with the first two steps of the assignment—the letter and investigative question. Second, students

seemed to struggle with the works cited, investigative question, and outline steps the most. Third, few students revised their rough drafts at all for the final paper.

What is interesting, yet not surprising, is that it was possible to predict the quality of the final paper from step number one, the letter to the imaginary doctor. Some students performed well on the project and their high level of comprehension was apparent from the start. Their letters were well organized and indicated concern about a health issue, possible course of action or remedy for that issue, and the underlying question(s) for the doctor. The subsequent investigative question, therefore, arose naturally and organically from the letter, as did resulting research. The students who successfully outlined a health problem in the letter and composed the investigative question succinctly and thoughtfully were able to carry this level of organization through to the final paper. A student who penned a letter regarding the obesity and associated labored breathing of her cousin was able to ask in her investigative inquiry what sorts of problems stem from being overweight, as well as what causes obesity. Her paper addressed each of these questions, and contended that several factors, some within an individual's control and some not, contributed to obesity. This approach to her inquiry was helpful as it enabled her to address some of the sometimes ambiguous or amorphous sociological factors that contribute to the disease. Each step of the assignment indicated an appropriate amount of time and work, probably the amount necessary for a humanities class with similar required writing assignments. In contrast, letters that were disorganized and investigative questions that were factually, rather than hypothetically, oriented resulted in poor final papers. One student whose investigative question was "How is HIV contracted?" turned in a final paper that contained no argument or investigation but merely a review of already-known facts. The student would have benefited from reworking the investigative question to include sociological

factors that reach beyond hard science. These findings suggested that students who have difficulty with the first two steps should be directed to the writing center or for help from the instructor. They might be required to turn in a revised letter or investigative question (see suggestions at the end of the paper).

The fact that students had difficulty with designing an investigative question, composing a bibliography in APA style, and constructing an outline indicated their lack of experience with research papers and reinforced the idea that writing must take place across the curriculum to ensure academic progress. Some students failed to include academic or appropriate sources in their projects, while others cited such work but neglected to format it correctly for the bibliography. This was one step that should be attainable, and the confusion suggests that an APA template is necessary for the future. It is not startling or unexpected, however, that students found the investigative question and outline formation challenging. While constructing a thesis and developing a coherent argument with ample support from secondary sources is central to academic work in general and college work in particular, this ability is learned through trial and error over the course of time. The most common problem with the investigative question was that students did not pose an inquiry that necessitated an argument; for example, one student wrote about her experience with pre-menstrual cramping, rather than what causes the problem or what treatments can be used. Most of the outlines were acceptable, but could have been improved by the consistent inclusion of the thesis statement and its development, which in turn would have led to superior organization of the paper.

Finally, in the samples we collected, few students revised their rough drafts for the final paper, and simply turned in another copy of the rough draft. This development indicated that the scaffolding of the project was not regarded in high esteem. It also spoke to student responses on the survey, in which several expressed doubt that the

writing-as-process approach to the project was worthwhile. What was the point, they asked, of turning in both a rough draft and final draft? Were the two papers not the same? In continuing to develop this assignment, it seems that instructors should require revision of the rough draft before students turn in the final paper.

The Lessons Learned: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

While these were some of the aspects of student performance that we hope to troubleshoot and improve, the positive role of the project could not be questioned. Students were writing more than before, being introduced to the necessity of scaffolding a piece of writing in order for it to be successful, learning about the APA style, and gleaned important information about health in the process. When professors within a given content area, especially one that is not traditionally aligned with writing, incorporate it in all areas of the curriculum, students have a better understanding of content, students engage in an exercise which benefits long-term retention, and students improve their writing skills. (Walker, 1988; Kurfiss, 1985) Reading the students' papers, it was apparent that they chose topics in which they were invested, and even if organization and format were problematic, the content was not. Several students performed well throughout, from the first step to the last, while others improved their writing over the course of the semester and seemed to better understand the objective of the assignment once the rough draft was begun. As Sorenson (1991) writes in "Encouraging Writing Achievement: Writing across the Curriculum," "Across-the-curriculum writing finds its merit in removing students from their passivity. Active learners are active thinkers, and one cannot write without thinking" (Sorenson, 1991, p.2). In other words, *mens sana in corpore sano*. The assignment fit in well with the goals of the course, personal health and

physical fitness, and engendered close examination of such issues.

Surrounded by the fruits of student and instructor effort alike in implementing the new writing curriculum, we concluded that the endeavor was successful. However, there are several revisions of the project that we plan to execute this coming semester.

- 1.) The instructor should dedicate class time to explain each step of the assignment. The optimal time for explication is several weeks before the assignment is due. In addition, samples of each step of the process should be presented to the students. Instructors should not give exact samples of this assignment. Rather, they should show them a sample from another field. An instructor does not want to read 25 papers on the same topic!
- 2.) The instructor should keep a log of what research question each student is investigating (based on step #2). It is not uncommon for students to change topics, once they begin researching. If they choose to do this, permission from the instructor is required.
- 3.) Since the second step, formulating a research question, is fundamental to the quality of the final paper, it is advised that students who do not submit an adequate research question re-submit the question before beginning the paper.
- 4.) In order to motivate students to make changes between the draft and the final, instructors should return drafts to students with comments in the form of a checklist. They should keep a copy of this checklist for their files. A student who does not make an effort to make the changes (i.e. turning in the draft with no changes) should be penalized on the final paper by losing 10 points.
- 5.) Students will be unable to submit a final paper without submitting a draft. Since the draft is so vital to the quality of the

final paper, it is necessary that each student submit the draft and receive comments before attempting the final paper.

- 6.) APA format is always a struggle for students in 100 level courses. In order to facilitate this, students will receive a sample APA bibliography. It is recommended that a separate grade be given on step #3 for APA format to encourage adherence.
- 7.) We found that many students chose the same topic. While freedom to choose a topic is an important aspect of this assignment, students should work on a topic that interests them and express this in the investigative letter (step #1). If they cannot find something that interests them, they should consult the instructor for assistance.

Our objective is that this assignment will enable health and physical educators to do their part in improving student writing. Instructors will no longer struggle when given a “WAC” mandate; students will expect and enjoy writing in physical education; and professors will no longer hear the dreaded, “You want me to write a paper in physical education class?” each semester.

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Appendix A

PED 103 Research Project

Each assignment is due during class on the day listed on the syllabus. Any assignment turned in late will have points deducted. Any assignment not received one week after the due date will not be accepted. The student shall receive a zero for that assignment. The best possible score is 100 points and counts for 25% of the final grade.

Step 1 (15 points): Write a letter to an imaginary doctor that describes an ailment or health issue. The ailment may be a disease or something more abstract, such as a problem with weight or pain in one's knee, a serious food allergy, etc. You may describe a personal health issue, or one that a friend or family member is affected by; regardless, anonymity can be preserved if you wish to keep this information private. It is important to describe the ailment in full detail so that there is ample material on which you can build a research project. **Due Date: Week 3**

1 point will be deducted for each day this is late.

Step 2 (5 pts): Identify one investigative question regarding the health issue within the letter. Examples of investigative questions include how the ailment occurs, why it happens, how to treat it, what populations it affects, the demographics of the disease, how common it is, problems with treatment, and relevant aspects of the healthcare system. The investigative question should ask clearly and concisely what you wish to explore. It can be phrased interrogatively or declaratively—as a question or as a statement. An example is: Discuss screening and treatment options available for breast cancer victims. **Due Date: Week 4**

½ point will be deducted for each day this is late.

Step 3 (10 pts): Use this investigative question to further research the topic and build a bibliography in APA format. The breadth and variety of sources is essential; interviewing a patient or doctor, attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, visiting a cancer center or hospital, and standard library research are examples of possible secondary sources. Be sure to consult an APA style guide to ensure your bibliography is properly formatted.

Due Date: Week 6

¾ point will be deducted for each day it is late.

Step 4 (30 pts): 1) ½-1 page *outline* of the research paper (10 pts) **Due Date: Week 8**
2) 4-5 page *rough draft* with correct APA citations (20 pts)

Due Date: Week 10

2 points will be deducted for each day it is late.

Step 5 (40 pts for final draft): Revise your rough draft to produce your final draft (4-5 pages) with bibliography. Below is the evaluation for your final draft; please consider these requirements as you complete your project. **Due Date: Week 12**

3 points will be deducted for each day it is late.

Appendix B
Final Paper Evaluation

Name:

Total: /40

Introduction (5)

Disease and investigative question clearly introduced (2) _____

Cogent and provocative thesis statement (3) _____

Body (20)

Each body paragraph helps prove thesis statement (6) _____

Body par. are cogent, coherent (well-organized) (6) _____

Evidence (quotes, examples) backs up claims being made (6) _____

Each body paragraph has a topic sentence (2) _____

Conclusion (5)

Argument is summarized for reader in new language (1) _____

Conclusion presents what has been learned through
process of writing paper (4) _____*Use of Secondary Sources (10)*

Correct APA format citations (4) _____

Bibliography (4) _____

Appropriate academic sources (2)

Appendix C

Research Project for PED 103

Step 1 Evaluation: The most important aspect of the letter is that the students describe the ailment in full detail so that there is ample material on which the students can build a research project. If the letter is difficult to read (very disorganized, poor grammar), return it to the student ASAP with the requirement that s/he meet with you and/or make an appointment with the writing or ESL center to review it.

Step 2 Evaluation: The investigative question should ask clearly and concisely what the student wishes to explore. It can be phrased interrogatively or declaratively—as a question or as a statement. You may also want to ask students to address why this question is important in considering this particular health condition.

Step 3 Evaluation: You may ask students to cite a minimum of three secondary sources in their research paper. The breadth and variety of sources should be stressed; interviewing a patient or doctor, attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, visiting a cancer center or hospital, and standard library research are examples of possible secondary sources. Requiring breadth of secondary sources reduces likelihood of plagiarism in this arena. Bibliography should be in proper APA format; encourage students to consult an APA style guide.

Step 4 Evaluation: Outline—You may ask students to turn in a formal or informal outline. Whatever the format, the student should articulate the paper's thesis statement and the main point for each paragraph. You may also ask students to include a direct quote or paraphrasing (with citation) for each paragraph. Outline should be ½-1 page.

Rough Draft—You need not read the entire rough draft to assess whether the student receives full credit. Take a holistic approach. Look for a thesis statement at the end of the introduction and skim each paragraph to see whether the thesis statement is developed and supported with evidence, cogently and coherently. If the paper is difficult to read, return it to the student ASAP and mandate an appointment with you, and/or the writing center or ESL center appointment to review the paper. Before returning the draft, choose one or two specific problems in the student's paper (e.g. organization, unclear thesis/argument, subject-verb disagreement or incorrect tense) for the student to work on in the revision. Rough draft should be 4-5 pages, the same length as the final draft.

Step 5 Students turn in final draft (evaluation listed on the reverse side)