
Building a Better Tool-Kit: The Origins and Construction of a Writing-Intensive Web Site

Anne O'Meara
William D. Dyer

“Building a Better Tool-Kit: The Origins and Construction of a Writing-Intensive Web Site” is a paper about the ongoing construction of a web-site to support instructors at our university who want to improve the writing of students in their courses and to support students to improve the writing they do in their writing-intensive classes or in classes across their course load. Many factors led to the conclusion that such a web site was needed at our institution. It was a long and winding road; readers interested in the journey can read the essay from start to finish. Those who are especially interested in certain stops on the way can follow the links of their choice:

- I. Introduction** in which the scenario is laid out
- II. The Existing “W” Requirement** in which the wobbly hurdle is set
- III. The GECCIG Report on “W” Courses** in which a dire, vexacious problem is posed
- IV. The IPSEL Grant** in which a hero extends a possible leg up
- V. The Valley Writing Project** in which co-conspirators are identified
- VI. The VWP “Writing-Intensive” Website** in which help is espied, though some has yet to materialize
- VII. Conclusions** in which it is found that although truth and

beauty are all you need to know, it is hard to write in ways in which they may be recognized

I. Introduction

Imagine the following scenario. You are an instructor, among many other instructors, at a community college or university whose institution has installed a “writing-intensive” requirement for all of its students. By fall of next year, students at your school must complete two “writing-intensive” courses offered by all departments across the university. As a concerned observer of student writing over a number of years, you believe fervently in the merits of such an initiative. A single course in composition hasn’t been nearly enough, you observe, for students to become truly proficient as writers. Furthermore, you may even have considered that your institution’s commitment to “writing-intensive” falls short of addressing what’s truly needed, noting correctly that students’ ability to read critically and analytically (or, even, to read accurately what lies on the page in front of them) has degraded substantially over recent years. Nonetheless, despite your reservations, you heartily exclaim, “bring it on, in spades.”

The requirement goes into effect. The courses are taught, and several years later you find yourself on a committee charged with assessing the writing-intensive requirement. Just as we did.

As English professors with some fifty years of experience between us, teaching college composition, literature, and humanities at a four year state university we joined five other professors from different disciplines who also taught writing-intensive courses; the committee (mellifluously called GECCIG)¹ was to assess the quality of writing of all students enrolled in “writing-intensive” courses at our institution over the past year, about eight years after the “writing-intensive” requirement had been implemented and five years since the first assessment of the Writing Intensive requirement. Our committee found that

1 General Education Category Course Instructor Group

students' writing skills (in organization; in their use and management of sources; in the basic skills of writing; in the acts of writing and reading analytically) had, in fact, degraded in relation to the report completed five years earlier.

II. The Existing “W” Requirement

A small portion of ground needs to be cleared before proceeding. Although we have spoken about the outlines of the “Writing-Intensive” policy at our university, the policy deserves a bit more definition. The goals of “W” courses as described in the university catalogue indicate that students will emerge from these courses equipped to “use writing to explore and gain a basic familiarity with the questions, values, and analytical or critical thinking methods used in the discipline” and be able to “locate, analyze, evaluate, and use source material or data in their writing in a manner appropriate to intended audiences.” But what makes a writing-intensive course different from any other course at our institution is the “revision” component. And a very muddily-defined component that has turned out to be. Presently, “W” instructors must require a minimum of twenty pages of writing from their students, any ten of which need to undergo a second revised draft under the supervision of the instructor. Not much, you say? Indeed. Over a sixteen-week semester, that translates to a page and a quarter per week.

Beyond the statement of goals and the simple numbers, no standards have yet been articulated concerning those twenty one-draft and ten two-draft pages. They could be, literally, anything. The assumption that “W” instructors generally operate on is that students will be engaging texts in at least some of their papers, but an instructor could assign a series of one-page assignments incorporating no sources. And “revision” has come to mean a variety of things: from two drafts of the same paper with comments in between by faculty to repeated similar assignments, such as responses to readings, with comments on the first assignment being seen as revision comments for the second similar assignment on different readings. Furthermore, several “W” instructors have assumed that the papers they assign ought

to be “argument-driven” and include a certain number of primary and secondary sources. But no firm published advertised standard exists for defining the genre(s) or content or revision of these papers, so there is no clear standard.

To be fair, much of the marginalization of hands-on teaching of writing in “W” courses has occurred because of the numbers—too many students. Enrollments in “W” classes are now generally capped at 25, but there are crazy exceptions (in the sciences) that drive the number much higher. And even 25 is far too high to be able to offer students significant time with their writing and re-writing.

So, if reasons existed for us to try to effect a helpful intervention for those currently teaching ‘writing-intensive’ courses as well as those new faculty looking for some clear direction, we’d found some important ones. But more significant reasons related to the flawed design of our university’s “W” requirement loomed larger within the GECCIG report after the assessment.

III. The GECCIG Report on “W” Courses

Eighty sections of “W” courses from sixteen departments of the university had been taught during Fall 2006. By the end of that semester, instructors had sent 104 ungraded and unidentified papers from their sections, which were chosen randomly for assessment. About a third of the papers came from Biology; another third from English and Humanities; and a final third from a mix of courses from other Arts and Humanities disciplines, Allied Health and Nursing, Education, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. Scores for each essay were compiled; each essay was assessed on the writer’s skills in organization and development of information, use of supporting evidence, and overall writing skills. An essay could receive from one to four points on each of the three Writing Areas, and therefore a possible 12 points in all. A score of “4” indicated “exemplary” skills, “3” that the writer was “accomplished,” “2” that she was performing on a “developing” level, equipped with some skills but lacking some essential ones, and “1” that a writer was “beginning” and lacked the requisite skills. The average total score, obtained by adding

the individual scores on all three assessment areas, was 6.4 .The average ratings of the three individual assessment areas were:

Table 1: Average Scores of Writing Sampled

Writing Area Assessed	Mean	S.D.
Organization and Development	2.14	0.79
Supporting Evidence	2.01	0.79
Writing Skills	2.33	0.70
Average	2.15	0.79

In all cases, the scores for these general education writing students place them in the “developing” range. In terms of organization and development of ideas, the mean score was 2.14. Forty-five percent of student papers contained a sufficiently specific organizing thesis with well developed supporting points that addressed questions and values or demonstrated methods of critical thinking or analysis related to the field. Regarding their demonstrable abilities at using supportive evidence, students’ mean score was 2.01 (just barely above the cut-off point for the “1s”, indicating no skills at all). Only thirty-one percent of student papers demonstrated college-level skills in selecting and using evidence to support their points. In papers with lower scores on this measure, the relationship of evidence that was offered to the point it supported was not clear, or the evidence was not sufficiently analyzed, explained, or applied. In the area of basic writing skills, students’ mean score was 2.33. After adjusting for the change from a 3-point measurement scale used five years earlier and the committee’s new 4-point scale, it was determined that students assessed during the 2006-07 academic year actually scored lower than the students assessed in 2001-02.

Our assessment certainly demonstrated multiple problems—in definition of the requirement as well as in performance by students. Some of these problems (the definition of the requirement, for instance) can be handled through faculty agreement and subsequent action. But the committee outlined additional problems in the way the requirement was being handled

administratively: The writing intensive requirement had been implemented (1) without any training for faculty from disciplines charged with fielding such “writing-intensive” courses; (2) nor any incentives for recruiting the very faculty most eager and equipped to teach such courses; (3) nor sufficient organizational support mechanisms such as a well-staffed writing center trained to aid students in their struggles; (4) nor any definite requirement that students signing up for these “writing-intensive” courses would have completed a Composition course beforehand. And, finally, this new institutional “writing-intensive” initiative required students to complete their two “W” courses at the “General Education” level as a graduation requirement rather than including one “writing-intensive” course as part of their major field of study, where theoretically teachers and students would have more discipline-specific knowledge and methods to share. Many of these problems center around faculty training and incentives, so the specific recommendations made by the committee on these matters may be worth reading. Although these and other recommendations were thoroughly discussed with administration, no action has yet been taken.

If it accomplished nothing else, our engagement in this frustrating process with the administration was to make us angry. But “angry” is useless. Latching on to the GECCIG committee recommendations to recruit, provide training, and provide incentives for faculty interested in teaching “W” classes”, we chose training as the focus for continued action. With no resources or university mandate to train faculty directly, we determined to develop a “writing-intensive web site” with resources for faculty and students.

IV. The IPSEL Grant

Some six months after we’d emerged from the GECCIG “1c” assessment procedure and shared the results with every department chair across the campus, an opportunity to create something to help both teachers and students with their struggles in writing-intensive courses presented itself: THE IPESL (Initiative to Promote Excellence in Student Learning) GRANT. It

was deep into November. Just as we and the rest of our Valley Writing Workshop team, which presents faculty development workshops on teaching writing and faculty's own writing, were scurrying to pull together the pieces of our three-day December workshop on "faculty writing," an announcement of a "call for grant proposals" appeared on e-mail. MnSCU would be offering through our university's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) a group of small grants to faculty members or teams of faculty who would use the funding to incorporate critical thinking in their classes. More specifically, successful proposals would have to demonstrate a clear plan to develop, implement, and assess "new instructional or curriculum materials" or "new support mechanisms." We had four days from the time we learned about these grants to the application deadline to develop an idea, write it up, and mail it in. We just made it.

This grant, literally, had our name on it. Why? Because we'd been entertaining the idea of just such a "support mechanism" for "W" courses since our GECCIG frustrations. We'd used a number of WID and WAC web sites that contained wonderful materials and we'd recommended them to our students, but many of these seemed so huge, so distant from our circumstances, so layered, and, sometimes, so difficult to navigate. Perhaps we could engineer a web site tailored to support *our* "W" courses, *our* fellow teachers who'd be struggling to deliver them with no training or resources, and *our* students who could use all the transparency we could muster concerning the kinds of assignments they'd be expected to respond to and some supportive materials that would help them to succeed in them. In short, our goal was a functional, all-purpose tool kit for faculty and students.

And that's how we defined our purpose on the grant application: "The intention of this project is to develop and maintain a web site to provide continuing support to all teachers confronting the challenge of designing, teaching, and assessing writing-intensive (1c) courses in their disciplines as well as assisting students to succeed in them." We foresaw the prospect of great collaboration among those teaching "W" courses, in sharing not

only “best practices” of those teaching such courses but also their best assignments as well as their students’ best responses to those assignments. The affected student population of such a full-access project could well be all undergraduates faced with the prospect of completing the 1c requirement at our university.

Since the grant insisted that successful grants should prioritize critical thinking skills, we needed to show how our projected web site would engage critical thinking. Our university’s 2006-2007 Undergraduate Bulletin defines critical thinking as “(a) gather[ing] and analyz[ing] information in ways useful for solving problems; (b) weigh[ing] evidence for and against hypotheses; (c) recogniz[ing], construct[ing], and evaluat[ing] arguments; (d) apply[ing] appropriate critical and evaluative principles to texts, documents, or works—one’s own or others’—in oral, visual, or written mediums.” Obviously, these skills are directly targeted in “W” courses. And, since writing *is* another kind of thinking, we had no difficulty making the case that the needs of critical thinking would be served in every aspect of this “support-based” web site project.

Of course, there was the issue of “technology” to negotiate in the grant application. How would a couple of marginally technically literate instructors develop the expertise and (more significantly) free up some time to create and manage a web site that, by definition, would need to keep on growing and responding to the needs of the dual audience it meant to serve? In the grant proposal, we were able to claim legitimate access to support: a G.A. working in English Department publications with the technological skills to build the site according to our specifications. Through continuing interactions between the web site manager and the grant applicants, a methodology for organizing materials to be uploaded to the web site would evolve, we promised. Those materials would be funneled to specific categories, not restricted to: (1) types of writing assignments for stretching students’ abilities at critical thinking; (2) methods of assessing student writing; (3) strategies for assisting student research; (4) strategies for assisting students in re-writing and editing; (5) access to established web sites that support writing and critical

thinking; (6) methods for engaging students in peer review of drafts; (7) rubrics for evaluating student writing; (8) examples of assignments developed by our collaborating “W” instructors in specific courses, complete with outcomes and objectives, “tool boxes” of supportive materials for students, and assessment mechanisms. The web site would, we indicated, eventually provide an interactive feature to facilitate communication with 1c instructors, seek input concerning their needs, and request them to use “D2L” (i.e., “Desire to Learn,” our campus’ current electronic platform for launching online courses and supplemental materials) to upload materials from their classes that would be useful to other “W” instructors. The web site would also include materials implemented in our own “W” courses to be taught during spring semester 2008, materials developed by the presenters of the Valley Writing Workshop team for the December 2007 “Writing Intensively” workshop, and postings of faculty projects from that workshop for their “W” courses across the curriculum, we promised. Thus, the web site was meant to represent a continually-updated and growing resource.

And we got the grant.

V. The Valley Writing Project

To fully convey our sense of the importance of what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, we need to develop one more organic connection to the “W” web site project: the on-going work and workshops of the Valley Writing Project (VWP). From its creation with a big Bush grant back in 1979 to the present moment, VWP has become an institution at our institution. Simply put, VWP was built to engage our faculty in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum activities (our organization is the last one still operating out of all the faculty-driven WAC groups begun under the same grant at all of the State University campuses). Driven by a five-person presentation team, VWP has typically recruited twenty faculty per year from all corners of the campus for its annual three-day December workshop.

Regardless of our fields of expertise (besides the two of us from English and Humanities, we’re represented by a soci-

ologist, a chemist, and a social worker), we're all *writers* and *writing instructors*. Our presentation approach has been largely inductive—we've found that these workshops go best when our participants are *writing* and talking to each other about their writing. And we customarily use frequent, short cued writing prompts as a means to move participants toward brief, focused presentations on a variety of topics (using peer groups; developing new writing assignments; sharpening their understanding about the importance of "audience" in their and their students' writing; the use of faculty writing in their classes; and, in our current workshop on "faculty writing", engaging participants in discovering the ways that faculty writing might positively impact upon student writing) while leading them toward the realization that *all* of us are writing teachers, regardless of discipline or formal training.

Since 2001, our presentation team has recalibrated our mission to include two types of workshops: (1) "faculty writing" workshops that help faculty develop and prioritize and build schedules for their own professional writing, with the introduction of time management strategies and the formation of faculty writing groups that will keep them on task and make them more productive writers (complete with signs with "Writer at Work—Do Not Disturb" and their names printed on them, along with a manila envelope for sending their work out); and (2) "Writing-Intensively" workshops that facilitate the building of "W" assignments to be implemented into faculty's classes, along with the creation of a "tool kit" of supportive classroom activities, rubrics, scaffolding mechanisms, research strategies, approaches to revision, and assessment tools that are meant to help students successfully respond to their assignments.

The key to both of these workshops is the April "reunion" where participants convene once again to share reports on what they've done, how the writing has gone, and to what degree they've met the goals they set for themselves during the workshop. The outcome for all of us, regardless of whether we're focusing on faculty or student writing, is that presenters and participants will have posted the materials they've devel-

oped on the VWP D2L site so that, where appropriate, we can share these resources with other interested faculty.

With no other means on campus for preparing faculty charged with teaching “W” courses, VWP has gained a little traction in this area. More importantly, though, our VWP web site becomes the means for sharing what others have been doing in their “W” courses, and archiving what we’ve done in our workshops in an on-going way. We’ve always understood as an organization that “W” is all about developing one assignment and one assignment package at a time, with an emphasis on the entire reflexive “tool kit” that keeps the assignment running smoothly.

VI. The VWP “Writing-Intensive” Website

Our “W” web site project (<http://english.mnsu.edu/vwp/index.htm>) posed a significant “audience” problem for us. Before we began collecting materials, we agreed upon the necessity of building something that would be ours, that would reflect what we and other “W” instructors at our institution do, and that would personalize what we’re doing. We continue to see ourselves creating materials that are meant to carry on a conversation with instructors and students of these courses. We expect the site to be responsive to what they tell us about it, what they need and how they need it.

Once we had settled upon MSU “W” teachers and students as our audience, we knew that much of what we wanted to refer our students and instructors to had already been created, and that it would be much more efficient to link to some of those materials—materials from other online writing labs—than to re-create them. But we were also able to identify areas that we could and should construct ourselves, ones that hone in on the assignments that our “W” instructors most often expect their students to respond to. We also understood that our opportunity to use our site to establish a reflexive relationship between “W” instructors and their students originated directly from the idiosyncrasies of our institution’s under-supported “writing-intensive” requirement and our attempts to address those gaps. Thus,

knowing the immediate needs of our students and faculty in “W” courses would be the first step in our efforts to represent them on the web site.

To find out what our local audience needed, we scheduled a series of meetings to ask them. We arranged to have ourselves placed on the agenda of the respective department meetings of the English, Philosophy, and Biology departments (the departments that fielded, by far, the greatest number of “W” courses in the General Education curriculum), gaining their permission to share with them our intentions for the web site, our desire to collect specific information from each group about the writing assignments their faculty customarily assigned in their “W” classes, what they intended to accomplish with those assignments, and how they managed issues like revision. At the end of our first meetings with those departments, we requested that individual faculty from those units send us materials of the following types:

1. the expectations an instructor would hold about a specific kind of assignment (e.g., in a literary analysis paper, the necessity of reading a work of literature very closely, perhaps several times, to become acquainted with the constituent elements, and then to focus specifically on the details related to one element for analysis, such as character)
2. the methods of thesis development and organization appropriate for it (e.g., what might constitute a good, arguable thesis in a single sentence, and what wouldn’t, with examples)
3. the methods and types of evidence related to it (e.g., in a literary analysis paper, the need to incorporate quotes and paraphrases from the primary text carefully and clearly, and similar materials from secondary sources if required)
4. the things that an instructor would most highly value, or least value, in a response to that assignment (e.g., for a literary analysis paper, the value placed on a strong

position taken and a framing introduction, as opposed to what would be inappropriate—providing merely a plot summary of a work or conducting an analysis without using any specific details or quotations from the work in question)

After we'd gathered those materials, we divided the task of creating descriptive and explanatory materials for those specific assignment, had our tech support person load them onto a template we had developed together (complete with VWP logo), and brought what we had created back to teachers in English, Philosophy, and Biology for their scrutiny. We then used their critiques to add, delete, correct, and polish those materials for a second faculty review.

Once we'd gained their approval, we solicited excellent examples of student responses to the assignments they were using. This last item continues to be problematic. A few faculty continue to be hesitant about furnishing student work, perhaps out of fear that responses to a current assignment might be compromised. In other cases, it may not be convenient, during a particularly busy period, to identify and send those papers to us, or it may be difficult to access papers that have already been returned to students. And, of course, students need to be consulted and give their permission for the use of their work, and that work must be used with confidentiality. So, our collection of student writing continues to lag behind our collection of other materials related to "W" assignments.

Once we had some significant assignments and materials to explain and support them, we attended to the design of the site and the clustering of those materials. With the trained eye and technical skill of two graduate students to guide us, we spent most of our energies on the layout of the site's "Welcome" page. We wanted that page to direct our audience of students and instructors to materials that would be most immediately helpful to them, but we didn't want to exclude either audience from access to anything. That intention required the development of a conversational tone and level of language that was transparent, friendly, low on jargon, identified our objective of providing

“W” support, and invited both audiences in. We needed to avoid overwhelming either audience with text. Also, the links we’d be directing our dual audience to click on had to be brief, directive, and logically sequenced—lots of open space, easy contact between the eye of the viewer and useful points of destination.

Website Section: Valley Writing Project

And, consequently, we designed our **Welcome** page with the following components. In the upper left-hand margin we installed a menu containing several links. The **Valley Writing Project** link takes the visitor to the **Mission Statement** of VWP and introduces the current staff (**About Us**). Two additional links take the viewer to descriptions of VWP’s two types of workshops—teaching writing-intensive (**VWP Workshop 2007**) and faculty writing (**VWP Workshop 2006**). A fourth link provides the viewer with a description of our institution’s writing-intensive requirement and an executive summary of the 2006 **Writing Intensive Assessment Report**, along with the rubric our committee used to arrive at our assessment. A fifth link will eventually carry the visitor to a series of **Archives** of materials that VWP has used over the several years of its existence, once they’ve been gathered.

Website Section: Resources for Writing

Following the Valley Writing Project section is another set of four links that direct students and instructors to the site’s “W”-related resources. The first of these links, **Resources for Writing**, opens into a second-level series of menus: **Reading into Writing**, **Writing Process Tool Kit**, and **Writing in the Disciplines**. Much of this portion of the site remains under construction; we spent most of our time on the **Writing in the Disciplines** (WID) section, which is currently further divided into “Biology,” “English,” and “Philosophy.” These sections are where we included the information about assignments that we gathered at the departmental meetings described above. The “Biology” section contains information about writing Scientific Papers (for the uninitiated, these are similar to lab reports we

may have written in the past). This section includes information on the usual sections of the paper and advice for what to include, what style to use, and what shortcuts experienced writers take. As with all the papers described in the WID section of the website, this section ends with what is valued and what is not in these types of papers.

The “English” section of the WID portion of the website includes similar information (expectations for assignments, types of evidence, how to cite evidence, and what’s valued and what’s not) for several common English assignments: Response, Analysis, Comparison/Contrast, Essay Exams, Research Papers, Annotated Bibliography, and Review. “The Philosophy” subsection contains a link to a site on “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” and specific information on several common Philosophy assignments: Response/Discussion Papers, Argument/Position Papers, In-Class Essay Exams, Critical/Analytical Essays, and At-Home Assignments. Though some of these assignments are called the same things as English assignments, the expectations are quite different. What constitutes an argument or evidence varies a great deal in these two disciplines and those different expectations and values are clearly addressed in these sections.

The other two parts of the **Resources for Writing** section, as we said, are under construction. **The Writing Process Tool Kit**, like the **Writing in the Disciplines** section described above, is intended to offer advice that could be used by student writers or by teachers as they introduce and discuss assignments. The toolkit is more general than the discipline-specific conventions and expectations discussed above; the toolkit will eventually contain information on “College Writing,” “Planning,” “Writing a Draft,” “Getting a Second Opinion,” “Revising & Editing,” “Finalizing the Paper,” “Analysis,” and “Links” to other toolkit-like sites. The Analysis section, the only complete one to date, has been given special attention. In this case, the term “analysis” pertains to one of the most overlooked and difficult-to-perform aspects of building an effective argument—introducing, integrating, and moving quotes and paraphrased in-

formation in support of a position. This page clearly defines this kind of analysis as the process of interpreting and understanding the quotes in question according to how and why they support a writer's position. Additionally, the page provides portions of real student papers, an opportunity for students to participate in the process of grasping how "analysis" works when it works, and when it doesn't. We've tested this page on our students; they've been able to implement their understanding of what's on the page as they do their own writing. The final "Links" on the **Writing Process Tool Kit** menu takes visitors to two excellent writing centers—Purdue's OWL and the George Mason University Writing Center; each site contains multiple handouts on writing, writing problems, and writing in the disciplines.

In our 2006 assessment of students writing, we felt that one major difficulty was in the reading-writing connection. The **Reading Into Writing** portion of the **Resources for Writing** section is meant to provide support here. Chemistry professor Marie Pomije (a member of the VWP team) has loaded on a useful Power-Point presentation on effective note-taking ("did you know that we forget 47% of what we hear in twenty minutes, and 62% in one day?") in the sub-section labeled "Note Taking."

Website section: Resources for Teaching

By far, we've been able to fill the **Resources for Teaching** area, the third of the four sub-divisions of the site, with the richest amounts of materials. The divisions in this area include: **About College Writing** (making, we believe, an important distinction between high-school writing and college-level writing), **Designing Assignments, Teaching Thinking, Teaching Reading, Teaching Writing, Using Peer Groups, Responding to Student Writing, Assessing Writing** and **Online Resources** (while you are on the menu where "About College Writing" is situated, you might take a few moments to navigate around and within these areas—they contain lots of material). These sections, aimed at teachers of writing-intensive courses, usually contain information taken from our own experience as well as specialized materials and activities from a variety of well-es-

lished web sites such as those at M.I.T., Dartmouth, Marquette, UWisconsin-Madison, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Penn State, the WAC Clearing House at Colorado State, and more. Perhaps the most important information keyed to this link is located in the “Designing Assignments” area. We delineate the process for creating assignments that grow from the goals and objectives of a course and are tied to an instructor’s specific rubric for evaluating them. Visitors are directed toward other online sources to supplement what we’ve provided.

Website section: Sample Student Papers

Sample Student Papers is the last link on our site. It’s crucial, we believe, to provide students as well as faculty with a reality check on what a good paper looks like, on what is possible. There’s no reason to look at anything but good ones. We want our students to be directing their efforts to “the possible,” knowing that their peers have already realized success. And instructors who are new to “W” courses, particularly those who haven’t even remotely thought of themselves as writing instructors and haven’t the experience at evaluating papers outside of their disciplines, might find these papers useful. So far, within the **English** segment of this container, we have examples of a “Researched Argument” paper that was assigned within a Humanities 282W course on Latin American Traditions. The section includes a full explanation of “The Assignment” (and the four options attached to it); a section called “Understanding the Assignment,” which provides information to students about developing theses for this paper, preliminary tasks used to put students in touch with some basic knowledge of the culture in question (some information about the history, religion, geography, topography, politics, and Amerindian aspects of Salvadoran culture), possible research materials to use, and ways to use personal experience in the paper; and finally two staged drafts of four separate student papers (complete with a full set of electronic marginal and end comments for each staged draft)

We’ve placed several sample papers for several Philosophy assignments within the “Philosophy” segment. Each

paper is keyed to an assignment list, also included. In the coming months, we'll solicit papers for the "Biology" segment (certainly lab reports) along with papers representing "Other Disciplines."

Web-site Connections

Finally, two more points about the layout require mention. Returning to the VWP Homepage, you will notice that the last item in left-hand menu reads "English." We aren't entirely happy about the fact that hitting that link takes the visitor to the English Department "Home Page" because it seems to support the idea that writing is an English-Department-only activity. But providing our site with a temporary home while it is still in the "experimental" stage and until the site is ready to become independent enabled us to make it available for others at the university to see and use. Since both of us teach out of the English Department, the "English connection" has been convenient. The site is now viewable beyond the university and, in the next few months, we'll seek wider exposure by attaching the site to the "Academic Affairs" portion of the university web site. Secondly, a short menu on the right-hand side of the "Welcome" page indicates "Quick Links." These are navigational links, not new information. They're meant to direct new and interested "W" instructors quickly to materials that will best and immediately serve them: "About College Writing;" "Designing Assignments;" and "Commenting on Papers." We want them to experience no confusion or delay.

If things work as they have been these last few months, faculty from across the university will continue to help us construct parts of the web site, in specialized ways. They'll determine how it must evolve according to their needs and the needs of their students. And that's what justifies the creation of *our* web site—if we continue to do it correctly, it will reflect what we and our students are doing and the unique demands of our courses, as we continue to teach and change them.

And we all have a stake in what we create.

VII. Conclusions

Although we have, with technical help, built a web site, we recognize the enormity of the project. We've barely poured the foundation, raised and braced the walls of it. And, what's more, it will never reach anything approximating completeness. No "model home complete with furniture and accessories" here! But we are both comfortable with that reality. It's the process that matters most to us—ours as well as our collaborating colleagues who teach and students who write. Working on the site continues to be humbling; it caused us to know what other larger reputable sites look like, what their strengths and weaknesses are (enabling us to better direct our students to other excellent sites beyond Purdue's OWL) and that even these are constantly under construction. We've become familiar with what others, also struggling to teach their "W" courses, are doing, and how they are doing it. That on-going reciprocal pedagogical conversation has to be a good thing. We have, as a consequence of building the web site, subjected our own practices in our "W" courses to close scrutiny.

The result?—we've made ourselves more accountable as "W" instructors, taken pains to explain more fully what we want our students to write; shared our evaluative rubrics with students on our syllabi; described the process by which we scaffold their assignments and engage them in in-class "responding" activities; used electronic commenting as true and sympathetic editors would in encouraging at least one additional draft; explained how we would use the first draft for comments but only grade the second draft; and foregrounded issues of plagiarism, correct documentation, evaluation of sources, and the true meaning of "analysis." In other words, the creation of this web site has caused us to make our "W" courses "Comp" classes. And they *are*.

Finally, we've re-discovered that students appreciate seeing the really good work of their peers. And they particularly appreciate being asked if their work can be shared with other students if they are certain that it will be used respectfully and constructively. We'll continue to add their papers to the web

site as we attempt to include them in the continuing conversation with those who teach the “W” courses about the writing enterprise—a community of writers. And that’s our hope for the VWP “W” web site—a continuing, truly reciprocal conversation about writing

Recommendation 2. There should be training and incentives (including course cap of 15 and a load-multiplier) for teachers of writing-intensive courses.

Training: Teachers of writing-intensive courses should go through training such as Valley Writing or programs in CETL [existing faculty development opportunities on campus]. Training should include at a minimum discussion of: the objectives, the assessment rubric, and the writing-intensive requirement itself, including what constitutes revision and how to encourage it effectively. Ongoing university-wide support should be instituted in such forms as a Writing Intensive website of course materials and meetings of writing-intensive instructors, sometimes jointly with English 101 instructors and on occasions such as Faculty Development Day. The scoring rubric for writing intensive assessment should be discussed among the writing intensive faculty and amended if necessary. A Director of Writing Intensive courses who trained, oversaw, and ran assessment would be a good hire.

Incentives:

--Course size in Writing Intensive classes should be capped. In discussing class size for writing classes in English, ADE (Association of Departments of English) guidelines say that “The number of students in each section should be fifteen or fewer, with no more than twenty students in any case.” They further remark that no teacher of writing should have more than three writing sections (60 students) per term.

--A **load-multiplier**, like the one attached to graduate courses (4 hours load credit for a three hour course), should be applied. Rationale: These two incentives may draw more teachers into the teaching of writing across the disciplines and allow teachers the time necessary to plan, guide, and respond productively to student writing. As ADE explains in discussing class size:

“The process of learning to write clearly and effectively is not a simple matter of acquiring information or memorizing rules. It requires a parallel and simultaneous process of learning to read with more sophistication. Because reading and writing are related activities, learning to write entails a complex interaction between writer and reader. Students write; teachers respond. But a teacher’s response must be more than “correcting” and more than perfunctory grading. Evaluations must involve a detailed reaction, often in conference with the student, to each piece of writing. Good teachers want to teach as many students as they can teach well. But if teachers are forced to respond to the writing of more than sixty students weekly, they will necessarily oversimplify their responses. Their students will not learn that the basic ingredient of good writing and good reading is the ready and vigorous ability to understand, to formulate, and to express ideas. Students will regard their own writing as a mere exercise, unworthy of careful attention or serious thought.”

It is worth emphasizing that the teaching of writing is also the teaching of reading. The GECCIG commented on their teaching experience that students’ inability to read complex arguments went hand in hand with their inability to formulate and support good arguments in their papers. Faculty need the time that it takes to work with students on both reading and writing across the disciplines.

Although clearly more practice might help students, feedback is the key for developing writers. As Derek Bok remarks in his book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*,

Even students who have many papers to write may make limited progress unless their instructors give them ample, timely feedback, not only on the substance of the papers but also on the quality of the writing.Adequate feedback will rarely come about through exhortation from on high. More substantial

efforts are needed to engage faculty members from a variety of disciplines in reading and critiquing student papers. *As a practical matter, few professors will accept this added responsibility for very long or perform it conscientiously and well unless they have adequate training and receive appropriate rewards in the form of extra salary or added teaching credit.* Since competent writing is so important. The investment seems well worth the cost. (emphasis ours. Bok, 99).

Note: If you are a glutton for punishment and want to read the whole assessment report, it is **here**.