

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Teaching Writing-Integrated Courses

*"I have gained an appreciation of the need ... to conceive of writing assignments, grading/
response, and teaching in class as mutually reinforcing parts of a whole."*

(Participant in 2004 Faculty Workshops on Writing-Integrated Courses)

WHAT ARE WRITING INTEGRATED COURSES

A writing-integrated class "integrates" into its design a variety of writing exercises to increase student learning while at the same time preparing students to write better term papers or exams.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES WRITING INTEGRATED COURSES

Writing assignments in traditional classes are often assigned as supplements to the course proper—a paper or project completed outside class that extends students' classroom learning. Such projects can be effective for some students, particularly in advanced classes, but in many courses students may not yet know enough about the disciplines they are studying to complete these assignments well.

Writing-integrated classes, by contrast, recognize that sophisticated college-level writing requires disciplinarily-defined critical thinking skills as well as a good grasp of style and grammar. A writing-integrated class uses informal writing to give students practice with underlying concepts before asking them to take on more formal written work.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING INTEGRATED COURSES

- Writing-Integrated Courses center their assignments on concepts central, not supplemental, to the course.
- Writing-Integrated Courses demonstrate discipline-specific critical thinking skills students will need if they are to write well.
- Writing-Integrated Courses offer students a series of writing occasions in order that they can "write their ways into" the course's major project.

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING INTEGRATED COURSES

- *Provide opportunities for low-stakes writing.* Because students write best when they have had frequent trial runs, asking them to write informally throughout the quarter builds skills

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they need for more formal writing at the same time it encourages active learning of course materials.

- *Link exercises to course learning goals.* Students engage most effectively with writing when they understand clearly how such writing can increase their understanding of key course concepts.
- *Sequence Writing Exercises.* Because complicated skills are often best developed in steps, writing-integrated courses analyze such skills into component sub-skills to create a sequence of exercises as a “scaffold” with which to build complex understanding.

HANDLING THE PAPERS

Asking students to write more frequently creates more papers, but this doesn't have to mean more work than is required for a traditional class in which students write.

- *Instructors need not read and comment on everything students write.* For low-stakes writing it is appropriate to provide only brief comments, or to have students give each other feedback, or even to read only representative selections from a whole set and to use these as the basis for oral comment in class.
- *Students can only handle so much feedback anyway.* Research has shown that many of the comments written on student papers never get read, and a primary reason for this is simple overload. Comments are most effective when they target a few key features.
- *Marking sentence-level errors requires much time while helping students very little.* Studies have consistently shown that time spent correcting grammar is largely wasted. A sentence of praise for what does work, followed by a question or two that can prompt revision, takes less time and produces better results.

“The consistently positive feedback from students in their ‘self-reflective essays’ – not to mention the enthusiastic emails thanking me for the course – has made this one of my most (if not, the most) rewarding teaching experiences at the UW.”

(Participant in 2004 Faculty Workshops on Writing-Integrated Courses)

This issue of the Bulletin was developed by John Webster, Director of College Writing, and Amy Vidali, doctoral candidate in English at UW.

In 2004-05, faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences participated in the 4x4 Writing Initiative, a program in which they developed writing-integrated courses. Here is some of what they said about their experience:

“The cross-disciplinary nature of this has been invaluable. Seeing others’ work and hearing their concerns helps me analyze my own needs.

“[The workshop] has given me ... an idea of how we (in my department) could do things differently.”

For more information about the 4x4 Writing Initiative, contact John Webster at cicero@u.washington.edu, or 543-6203.



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

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