Challenges

I leave MU grateful for my time as Campus Writing Program Director. I have learned so much from my colleagues from across campus about teaching. I have learned about field writing in Forestry, the teaching of narrative in Human Development and Family Studies, group projects in Animal Science, writing with video in Nursing, and so much more. As an English professor, I know too well that the bias for the essay as a standard of writing is a mythology. Across our campus, writing is taught in a variety of ways, and students write in a variety of genres. Our time is a hybrid time; new media and print, the oral and the written, the visual and the textual. We should be endorsing and supporting hybridist in our teaching, moving beyond the desire to standardize, and encouraging students to write in the ways and genres they will write in when they graduate. Exciting times await the CWP in its future. I wish this program all the best.

CWP Workshops

Every semester, the CWP hosts a number of events and workshops for faculty. Please visit https://etapps.missouri.edu/cwp/event for updated information on events.
Some of us favor the essay over other genres. Few of our students, however, will write essays when they graduate. The essay is not a dominant genre outside of the university. So why do we think it is so important?

When I was on the English faculty at Wayne State University, I taught the teaching practicum every semester. One semester, a student insisted that he could only teach a standard argumentative essay because that would be the genre students would write for the rest of their college careers. “Really?” I asked. “Have you read any syllabi from other courses across the curriculum?” “No,” he answered. Despite this contradiction in reasoning, his confidence was hardly shaken. He was going to teach an argumentative essay no matter what.

The CWP collects syllabi and writing assignments from faculty each semester. Out of the 300 WI courses offered each semester, only a small percentage ask students to write essays. Many require group writing projects, case studies, reviews, lab reports, and other types of writing. The essay is one form of media. It is not the only one.

When Montaigne invented the essay in the 16th century, he was engaging with the new media principle of response. With the rise of print culture, people could not only read, but re-read, and with that re-reading came the desire to respond to what one had read. The essay was meant as a type of response, or as Paul Heilker notes in his book The Essay, “a manifestation of the spirit of discovery at work in an uncertain universe.” The essay was not meant to codify an established position or even to argue for a position; it was meant as a way to explore positions through response.

Of course, genres can change, and for a variety of reasons (many economical and ideological) the essay became institutionalized as a means of assessment in late 19th and early 20th century pedagogy. There does not exist, however, a mandate from above regarding teaching the essay, and those of us who are still committed to its continuation might benefit by questioning its role in the contemporary curriculum and what else we might teach when we teach writing.

Instead of worrying over whether an individual can form
an argument or write a single sentence that expresses an idea (i.e., a topic sentence), we are better off focusing on principles that are generalizable and likely to be needed later in one’s professional and personal life. There does not exist a codified list of what such items might be, but we can begin by focusing on a few:

- Ability to make connections
- Ability to identify patterns
- Ability to aggregate and navigate information
- Ability to respond
- Ability to choose an appropriate medium for delivering one’s ideas
- Ability to arrange those ideas in a manner that fits the medium and one’s goals

None of these items, we can say, are outrageous. And none of these goals, we can also say, are bound to the format of the essay. One could, of course, write an essay that meets such outcomes, but one can also do this work elsewhere: on a website, in a proposal, in a digital movie, on a Prezi presentation, in a case study, and so on.

The Web provides teachers with vast potential to teach toward such outcomes without being dependent on the essay. Handheld devices provide other types of opportunities. Penn State has experimented teaching with iPads, for instance (http://live.psu.edu/story/50757).

as has Seton Hill (http://www.ipadonthehill.com/). The website iPad Girl offers many ideas regarding what one can do with an iPad (http://inkygirl.com/ipadgirl/). There is much we don’t yet understand about such tools.

What we write on a handheld or portable device might not be the same that we write on our desktop computer. For instance, medical professionals might find the phone’s interface as an appropriate space for researching, saving, annotating, and communicating medical issues. Students writing ethnographies or field studies in Animal Science, Folklore, or Nursing might benefit from having an iPad and Flip camera to record and write initial thoughts and ideas. One app, Speakwrite, allows the iPad to record interviews.

Or imagine the first year experience. For too long, many disciplines have deemed the first year of study as one of absorbing needed technical content that can later be used for writing course work in the major. For this reason, we see few Writing Intensive courses at the 1000 level. Yet, there are many ways students could be both writing and learning foundations of the discipline in the first year.

Students could be building glossaries of keywords in a wiki, writing beginner guidebooks to the profession, or writing handbooks of a course’s subject matter on a weblog or wiki.

Or take Facebook as example. The social networking tool has almost half a billion members. What is it that these members do? They write. What they write and how they write we don’t typically value. We probably don’t want updates of riding the bus or feeling tired as examples of the writing we do in coursework or the profession.

But what if we turned the logic (and not the content) of Facebook into a heuristic? Instead of quizzes to test student learning (an outdated assessment practice that seldom re-enforces the study habit behavior it is meant to), we can ask students to do updates. The update is the principle feature of Facebook. It is a short statement, no more than 420 characters. It is to the point. It is usually focused on a single point. It is brief. And many updates respond to other updates. They also feature comments and likes or dislikes. Instead of a quiz, a dead end document that is as quickly forgotten as it is assignment, a series of written updates that are interactive with other students in the class would produce discourse about the readings or subject at hand.

It would also prompt participation.
Our academic understandings of technology and invention have yet to filter down to the pedagogies we practice, particularly in regards to the idea of response. If a good idea is, indeed, a network, then we should be building and fostering a variety of networks across our pedagogies. On one level, that might involve the more difficult task of networking across disciplines. In one such scenario, we might find, for instance, three courses approaching a given problem, researching that problem, identifying a pattern among their three different, disciplinary perspectives, and proposing the found pattern as the basis for a networked (and thus, inventive) response. For example,

Nursing
Engineering
Sociology

might combine on a question regarding health care facility design. Or,

Nursing
English
Rural Sociology

Might combine to form a response to the problem of creating and disseminating PSAs to communities in the Ozarks.

We live in a highly participatory culture. Yet our pedagogies often discourage participation beyond raising hands or speaking in class. Interaction among students is often frowned upon as is interaction with writing going on outside the classroom, including the spaces we write in outside of the classroom (no one uses Blackboard outside of the university). We are suspicious of popular software or applications and dismiss anything successful outside of the university as a fad or corporate scheme. And, in turn, we fail to learn the major lessons regarding writing and invention.

Let’s return to the idea of response. If the essay’s intent was to provide a space for response, it is now mostly used as a fixed genre (intro, supports, conclusion) or as a way to assess student learning in an allotted time period (the essay exam). In these writing situations, students might be responding to a text or a prompt, but the response is limited to one moment, one idea, one way interaction. The other part of response that is important is being responded to. As Steven Johnson writes in his recent book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, this process of responding to, being responded to, responding to again, and so on is the process of invention. Invention, I would like to think, is at the heart of all the work we do. We want students to think. We want students to process what they are learning, to synthesize what they are learning, to build off what they are learning, and to contribute to the conversations and ideas they are learning from. That process is called invention. “A good idea is a network,” Johnson argues. A network, as the philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour tells us, is a series of responses that are forever changing perception, ideas, meaning, and, of course, invention practices.
Each example poses writing across the disciplines as a networked practice. Good ideas are networks. In general, we can employ the model of building a network so that a response can be generated, and so that students learning to do such complex work will also be able to respond to the positions and perspectives formed outside of their disciplinary way of thinking.

And if the cross-curriculum model is too difficult to do (there are institutional obstacles to such work), then we can shift the focus internally to one’s own discipline. A given discipline generates multiple perspectives and ideas and responses that can be responded to. For example, an Agricultural Journalism course that asks students to write about a commodity they need to sell and to persuade others is good might network ideas from:

1. Agricultural Journalism (the writing one does to report on and promote the profession’s work with commodities)
2. Technology studies (readings of RSS feeds of sites such as Mashable, for instance, to read about social media’s influence on sales and how to promote ideas and products)
3. Marketing (reading from general texts such as Made to Stick or What’s Mine is Yours; The Rise of Collaborative Consumption to professional articles from marketing journals)
4. Rhetorical persuasion (readings in how to persuade)

And we suddenly see a network of ideas emerge that can shape a series of complex responses until a finalized one is realized. We see the potential for student writing being a network of good ideas.

An exercise:

Take four disciplines.


Research key terms, ideas, or points from each.

Find a moment of overlap where all four might be responding to an issue or series of issues differently.

Formulate a response to that overlap that proposes a new approach, an approach that no one has yet devised because no one is networking all four disciplinary approaches.
I typically hear from a few faculty members every semester asking about the approval status of courses they sent to us several weeks or a month previously. A few queries a semester (infrequent enough that I haven’t been keeping a tally) isn’t a deluge, but along with a faculty member’s concern about our course-processing time at a campus committee meeting, it’s made me curious as to how long it takes the Campus Writing Program to process a course from receipt to WI approval and how our turn-around time compares to similar approval-processes at MU.

Campus Writing Program Course-Processing
The Campus Writing Board meets three times every semester and has an Advisory Group which meets once during Winter and Summer breaks. Each full Board meeting of the regular semester is preceded by subcommittee meetings, such that the faculty Writing Board members commit to six Board-related meetings per semester for their three-year appointments. The Board’s Advisory Group, comprised of the subcommittee chairs, Board chair and program director, uses a single-session (rather than a two-part) electronic-meeting format.

I examined course-processing for the Spring 2011 semester, beginning in late 2009 and extending through the February 7th, 2011 Writing Board meeting (see table below). Across the 175 courses approved (a few are usually withdrawn later, as teaching appointments change), CWP had an average processing time of 25.1 days from receipt to approval. Specifically, we averaged 21.8 days’ processing time during the semester, when Writing Board meetings averaged 42 days apart, and 24 days’ processing time between semesters, when Board meetings averages 52.8 days apart. In addition, CWP had approved almost 75% of our final total of Spring 2011 courses before early registration. Courses approved as WI after early registration may include courses which the instructor forgot or was unable to submit for the WI earlier and courses which didn’t yet have an assigned instructor of record.

It was difficult for me to decide which other approval processes to compare to the Campus Writing Program’s. I’ve been under the impression that there are several regular application- and notification-style processes which faculty do in preparation for offering a course, but that may not be the case. Though I’m sure it varies quite a bit by department, the course assignment process within a department can be fairly informal, with faculty volunteering or being assigned to teach courses for a future semester, and changes are certainly possible up until the semester starts.

CWP poses the added wrinkle of being beyond the faculty member’s own department. As much as we’d like to be close to the top of everyone’s checklist, we’re probably not. I decided to compare our approval process to those of the Honors College courses, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Registrar’s Schedule of Courses, the MU Research Board Grants Office, and the Bookstore’s textbook order process.

Honors College Course-Processing
Honors College courses are similar to WI courses in several ways. Honors courses must meet course-design criteria beyond disciplinary content coverage: greater (than non-Honors courses’) use of primary source material, a class format which promotes active learning and critical thinking, increased student interaction with faculty, and greater engagement with course content. Faculty members need to submit a proposal to have the course approved as Honors, in which they describe the course, its format, and how the assignments meet the criteria for Honors courses. Courses must be proposed by faculty and approved by the Honors Council in a submission and approval process similar to the WI approval process. The Honors College offered approximately 180 Honors sections of courses, serving approximately 2500 Honors students in Fall 2010 – approximately the same course-count and half the student enrollment as WI courses and sections for the same semester, respectively.
Approval time for the Honors courses may vary from a week to a couple of weeks. Courses must be approved by the Honors Council, which historically met once a semester, but more recently has reviewed courses by email 2-3 times a semester and occasionally during Winter intercession but not during Summer. Similar to the WI approval process, faculty need to send course materials, in the case of the Honors courses – a syllabus – every time a course is taught as Honors. Different from the WI process, Honors courses are formally reviewed and approved every three years.

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Project Review**
The MU Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) operates under the oversight of the Federal Office of Human Subject Research Protection and reviews biomedical, behavioral, and social science research that involves human subjects. The IRB divides proposed projects into three categories, depending on the specific nature of each project involving human subjects: exempt, expedited, and full-board. Regardless of category, projects must be renewed annually, may not be started until approved, and must be ceased (within a 6-month grace period) if the approval expires and is not renewed.
The Campus IRB office (not including the separate Health Sciences IRB office) includes 4 compliance specialists, 1 compliance officer, 1 assistant, and 15-16 board members. The campus office (again not including Health Sciences applications) receives approximately 20-30 exempt proposals per month with a processing time of approximately 1 day, 30+ expedited proposals per month with a 10-15 business-day processing-time, and 3-10 full-board proposals per month with an approximately one-month turn-around time. The IRB application requires detailed discussion of the purpose and methods of any given project, and exact copies of the instruments (e.g. surveys, interview scripts, etc.) to be used.

Registrar’s Schedule of Courses
The Registrar’s Office develops each semester’s schedule of courses from a copy of the previous year’s same-semester schedule, such that the Fall 2011 schedule was built on a copy of the Fall 2010 schedule. The Registrar’s Office begins constructing each course schedule nearly a year in advance. Departments have two opportunities to make changes to the proposed schedule – the first approximately a year out and the second approximately 9 months out. For the Fall 2011 schedule these windows were approximately 30-day periods in September – October 2010 and December 2010 - January 2011. Although the Registrar’s Office prefers to receive most changes to the prospective schedule three weeks before early registration, it is possible for departments to email corrections after the review windows have closed. It is also possible for a department’s future schedule to be published without any changes from the previous model-schedule.

The Registrar’s Office has four personnel who prepare the schedule of courses, with additional assistance from the Student Information Systems office, and each academic department has an individual who inputs departmental changes during the review windows. Departments provide the course number and title; the name of the instructor is preferred, but not required in order to list the course. Likewise, the days and time for the course are needed to have a room assigned, but aren’t required in order for the course to be listed in the schedule.

Grants Office, MU Research Board
For the 2010-2011 academic year, the UM-System Research Board had two approval-cycles: application deadlines of October 4th, 2010 and February 14th, 2011 for Research Board meetings in December 2010 and May 2011 – yielding a 3-month turn-around time. Research grants are typically for a one-year period, and unlike the WI approvals, are not renewable. Also, primary applicants can submit only one application per review cycle, and being listed as a co-applicant on another proposal in the same cycle may negatively impact the review outcome. Primary applicants must wait a year from the end-date of an awarded project before applying for a new project. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are eligible to apply for research grants; ranked non-tenure-track faculty must be approved as eligible before they can apply for funding, or may be co-applicants. In comparison, faculty may apply to teach more than one WI course in an academic year, and the fractions of tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track WI faculty approximately match those of the campus faculty population.

The MU campus office of the System Research Board received 95 applications for the February 2011 deadline, received through an online submission system during January and early February 2011, and processed by a single office staff-person. The application window for the October 2010 competition opened in approximately late June. Applications are revised to comply with stated guidelines in an iterative process, similar to CWP’s, before the final submission. Revision and resubmission of research grant applications after the Research Board review is allowed but discouraged, while the WI approval process continues to be iterative with increasing probability of approval in cases where a WI proposal is revised after being returned by the Writing Board.
Bookstore textbook ordering
The Campus Bookstore supplies texts for virtually all of MU’s campus courses, plus Extension courses. Their staff of 7-9 full-time personnel and 10-15 student staff, not including the 20+ additional staff hired for the back-to-school rush, handle the acquisition of approximately 10,000 individual book titles per year. The Bookstore’s turn-around time from receiving a book request to having the book available on the shelf is highly dependent on the publisher and the nature of the individual text. The deadline for Fall 2011 textbook requests is March 31st, 2011 – providing an approximately 4-month processing time to search for used copies, determine if new editions are available, arrange for any custom editions or custom publishing packets with copyright permissions, and to acquire sufficient quantities for course needs.

Responses to Calls for Courses
One issue that I think may be related to concerns over WI approval turn-around time is course submissions done shortly before the instructor or department needs the course to be flagged as WI in MyZou. The largest number of course submissions for the WI flag come into our office after CWP staff send personal requests to individual WI faculty, and the largest number of courses are approved at the first meeting after those personal requests are sent (see graph above).

The Campus Writing Program has been working to meet the Registrar’s early deadlines for course submission, and is, I believe, at the outer limit for predicting future WI course offerings beyond which both courses and teaching assignments are as-yet undetermined.

Overall, the Campus Writing Program’s WI course approval process seems in keeping with similar approval processes on campus. We have a three- to four-week turn around time on approvals, an almost 75% complete list of approved courses in time for Early Registration, and an over 90% complete list of courses by the first day of class (see table above). We are continually working to improve those figures and work closely with faculty on time-sensitive WI approvals and other special circumstances.

Of the 43 courses which were approved as WI after Early Registration began, 33 (77%) were at the 4000-level and possibly the WI flag was not a critical factor in ensuring sufficient enrollment. Twenty-five of the 43 courses (58%), including 18 at the 4000-level, have a long history of being offered as WI, and due to that long history may have been under less pressure to ensure that the course was flagged before Early Registration. Seven of the 43 courses (16%), all at the 4000-level, were single-student courses offered by special arrangement, which would not necessarily need to be flagged in time for Registration so long as both student and instructor planned that the course would eventually carry the WI flag.
CWP’s ability to approve WI courses before Early Registration is in many ways dependent on individual departments’ timetables for deciding teaching assignments, how many Writing Board meetings we are able schedule before Early Registration, and faculty notifying us of their intentions to teach a course as WI. We work with advisors and individual departmental personnel regarding courses expected to be WI in future semesters, but I believe a certain level of uncertainty due to unforeseen circumstances is inevitable. Given the Writing Board’s current commitment of six meetings per semester, I believe additional meetings in the weeks before Early Registration would constitute an undue burden. Finally, CWP works to remain as flexible as possible regarding the timelines for approving WI courses. We have strongly avoided immutable bureaucratic deadlines which would prevent a course submitted late as being identified as WI even if it met the WI Guidelines. CWP’s lack of bureaucratic ‘punishments’ for short-notice WI proposals may reduce the impetus to ensure that courses are sent in time for processing before Early Registration. I believe our current practice helps maintain congenial and productive relationships with faculty and advisors, and best supports our mission of supporting student learning and faculty teaching.

Acknowledgements
My sincere thanks to the personnel of the Honors College, Campus IRB, Registrar’s Office, MU Campus Research Office, and Bookstore for providing me with information on their processes and average time-tables.
This spring, the CWP is offering a series of seminars on writing. Hosted by established WI faculty and WI staff, the series will address various issues relevant to writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines.

Follow the CWP on Facebook or on its website for further information and announcements.

Writing Online/Writing All The Time

On February 21, *The New York Times* (“Blogs Wane as the Young Drift to Sites Like Twitter”) proclaimed that blogs are dying as young writers move to other social media sites in order to express themselves. The claim is hyperbolic to a large extent. Still, we can look at some spaces people are writing to outside of the university so that we might appropriate such spaces for our own teaching.

**Evernote** (http://www.evernote.com): Evernote is a note taking tool that helps writers collect ideas, images, and even entire webpages for their research. It can be synced with portable devices like an iPad so that students can do research when away from their desktop.

**Diigo** (http://www.diigo.com): Diigo is an online social bookmarking system. Whereas a browser’s bookmarks can only be viewed or made on the computer the browser is installed on, social bookmarking can be done anywhere and from any computer. Bookmarks can be used for research in given projects. Groups can be setup, and bookmarks can be tagged so that research can be done and shared collectively.

**Wordpress** (http://www.wordpress.com or http://www.wordpress.org). The most powerful of the blogging platforms, Wordpress can provide classes with a private or public online writing space where students can work collaboratively, share work, respond to each other, brainstorm, and make connections between class work, each other’s work, and writings found elsewhere online.

**Prezi** (http://www.prezi.com): Prezi is presentation software that works with a unique premise. Unlike PowerPoint, which is comprised of slides, a Prezi is a big, giant space that can be divided up and manipulated via zooms in and out of the space, embedded video and image, and pre-designed paths that can direct readers and viewers in specific ways.
One of the most controversial topics we deal with in the CWP is plagiarism. Plagiarism is controversial because many instructors feel that students do it all the time, and because few instructors want to hear that pedagogy is often at fault. In fact, while it is easy to blame students, we do a poor job explaining better teaching that will lead to better student work. We can look at the University’s own Guidelines on Preventing Academic Dishonesty and see some of these problems at play:

http://osrr.missouri.edu/guidelines/prevention.html

A few things we can notice:

1. The emphasis on the exam as a principle mode of assessment. While exams can be easy ways to assess student learning, they are not the only way nor necessarily the best way to assess what a student learns in a given semester. Exams are, however, a default option for most courses.


These directives do not show teachers how to “do” something; they offer instead ambiguous directions, directions often repeated in student assignments as well.

At no point in the Guidelines are instructors given innovative teaching examples or shown how to teach the process of developing ideas and expressing them in given media. Nor is citation, and why or how we do it, mentioned or explained.

Let’s look at a specific example from the Guidelines regarding assigning paper topics:

“Do not use paper topics semester after semester. Change topics often. Provide students a list of possible topics to choose from. Require that students gain your approval for topics not on your list. Topics should be specific and unique enough that students are not able to easily find a paper on the topic.”

The advice, on one level, makes sense. One should not ask students each semester to do the same thing. Such pedagogy lends itself to cheating since papers will quickly be circulated and copied. And the repetition of a commonplace topic does not encourage innovative thinking on the students’ part. But notice the ambiguous language offered as alternative:

1. Ask students to be unique
2. Ask students to be specific
3. Approve everything first

What does a unique and specific topic look like? The idea of a “topic” or “prompt,” after all, is not a unique or specific pedagogy. These blanket statements, however, do serve as the basis of the generic “Writing on a topic of your choosing” assignment, an assignment that offers no direction, no exigence for writing in the first place, and no context for the writing itself. The generic assignment typically leads to generic responses.

Whatever, then, unique or specific may mean, we need to spell that out for students. Often, such spelling out occurs when we model assignments after actual writings students are reading in their professional discourse.
Pedagogically, we are confused. We want innovative and original work, but we assign generic “topic of your choosing” assignments. We want to discourage cheating, but to do so, we repeat generic (and thus, uncited replications) of directives that offer little guidance regarding how to do so.

When we spend time in our CWP workshops explaining alternatives to this generic pedagogy, we offer up specifics regarding:

1. The pacing of student writing over a 16 week period. Few of us, if any, write major works in 4-5 weeks. We can’t expect undergraduates to do so either. One long, detailed, paced project over a period of time will teach students about the process of developing an idea. The Guidelines hint at this, but they don’t offer specifics.

We might imagine, as a specific example we can generalize from, that a Biology class reads a series of articles about contemporary issues surrounding infectious diseases. Their overall task is to design a public service document (website, pamphlet, video) that teaches the public about such a disease. They will do this over 16 weeks. Such a project has a specific pacing in mind.

2. The pacing of student writing via small assignments.

While the Guidelines propose “steps,” it is not clear what such steps might be. Let’s keep with the current example. Because we don’t need to infantilize students, and because we are encouraging students to learn process, these steps are graded as all or nothing. Doing it earns full credit and knowledge needed for doing the final project. Not doing it earns 0 credit and puts the student behind in his/her work.

Step 1. Research

A small project that asks students to read 4-5 articles on infectious diseases and to annotate them.

Step 2. Synthesis

A short project that asks students to identify the patterns in their annotated research: where are writers speaking about issues in the same or different ways, where are ideas or terms being repeated? What do these patterns show me, the writer, about the problem or issue that I didn’t already know or that an audience for my work might not know?

Step 3 Proposal

A proposal that details what the writer will do in the public document, what new ideas the writer has learned from the first two assignments, what medium the document will be done in and why (pamphlet, video, etc).

Step 4 Presentation

A presentation on the project in progress. Students show their work so far in either oral or video presentations. They receive feedback from each other. Presentations are professional moments in which we solicit feedback and show our work to date.

Step 4 The Draft

A complete draft that can be reviewed, revised, and eventually completed.

Each of these four steps can be accompanied by feedback moments – from peers and the instructor. Each of these steps slowly takes the writer through a major project. Each of these steps can be accompanied by in class work on content or on models from the field so that students are exposed to stylistic gestures and other ideas.

This is just a basic model, and it can be extended or amended for a variety of purposes. The point is that we must be more specific regarding pedagogy and what we want to accomplish. It is time to end generic advice if we do not want generic or copied work.
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