COLLABORATION ACROSS DISCIPLINES: IMPLEMENTATION IN CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT DEVELOPMENT

Mary Slavkin, Young Harris College
Mary Phillips, Lehman College, CUNY

In the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014, Mary Phillips—an assistant professor of Black Studies (referred to in this article as MP)—participated in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Lehman College where Mary Slavkin (MS)—then a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center, CUNY and currently an assistant professor of art history at Young Harris College—served as her fellow. WAC, a teaching pedagogy and program, uses writing as a way for students to articulate their ideas, think critically, and understand course content. WAC engages “writing as a tool for learning rather than a test of that learning.”\(^{1}\) Social workers, Jessica M. Kahn and Richard Holody point out that WAC promotes a “participatory, inclusive, and transparent environment; a culture of collegiality; and support of reflexivity in both teaching and learning.”\(^{2}\) WAC programs developed in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on using writing as an instructional mode and pushing for professors outside of English departments to teach and assign writing. In the 1980s, WID (Writing in the Disciplines) theories arose, generally focusing on more discipline-specific goals.\(^{3}\) Since then, WAC has developed a varied range of philosophies and structures, and institutional WAC programs vary widely, including both small developing programs and major university-wide initiatives.\(^{4}\) At Lehman College, the program included monthly meetings of all the participating faculty and fellows, bi-weekly meetings of the fellows, and several seminars over the course of the year. Throughout this process, the faculty and fellows cooperated to integrate more writing into their classrooms, using low-stakes writing, scaffolded assignments, and other techniques to engage students and get them to learn by writing. These types of assignments push students to use writing to engage with a wide range of subjects, showing them that rather than only helping them in composition classes, writing can play a powerful role in learning across campus and beyond the university setting. In principle, low-stakes writing (including assignments such as journaling, reflection papers, freewriting, outlines, clustering, and summaries) maintains that students “must engage the material seriously but still get to risk and explore.”\(^{5}\) These assignments can be folded over into scaffolded assignments, in which case, each assignment builds on the other for a stronger and more concise final writing assignment.

\(^{1}\) Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon, “Clearing the Air: Myths and Realities,” *College English* 62, no. 5 (2005): 579.


For both of us, the seminars, meetings, and discussions proved fruitful, improving our teaching throughout the year and leading us to explore new methods and ideas, on which we will continue to build. In particular, our partnership helped both of us, because it forced us to work outside our disciplines, considering the ways in which our methods and assignments could be applied in other fields and addressing how our students learned in their other courses. Neither of us expected that there would be much overlap between classes on the Black Panther Party (BPP) and art history. While we expected to share broad educational strategies and philosophies, we made no plans to share specific assignments. However, over the course of the year, we discovered that collaborative assignment development can become more innovative and creative when it occurs across disciplines—throughout the spring semester, we developed specific assignments together, which resulted in a more engaging series of papers, blog posts, and other activities. Our structure in this essay will reflect the process by which we discovered these bridges between our disciplines through our weekly discussions of the details of our courses and assignments. Specifically, in order to show how this experience impacted both of our courses, this article switches between the perspectives of MP and MS, considering the ways in which each of us approached the same types of assignments and issues. We include detailed descriptions of three types of assignments that we developed in collaboration in order to facilitate in the establishment of similar collaborations or to allow readers to develop and create their own related writing assignments. Our goal is to share not just our specific assignments and course plans, but also, to reveal the impact that this sort of cross-disciplinary work can have on both broad pedagogical strategies and specific assignment development.

THE THEORY

While our case study focuses on this collaborative process and the assignments we created, a variety of large studies and research reviews have shown the impact and importance of WAC, revealing how the programs have increased writing and diversified the types of writing that students engage in. David Russell reviews over 100 earlier studies in his “Where Do the Naturalistic Studies of WAC/WID Point? A Research Review,” noting the prevalence of qualitative studies over quantitative work. These earlier studies suggest that the type of writing plays an important role in improving learning outcomes—specifically, students must find the genre of writing challenging and motivating. Russell identifies four major factors that impact student learning through writing: the students’ professional motives and goals; the student’s identity as a writer; the tools supplied by the faculty; and student writing processes. Specifically, he argues that writing which is clearly tied to personal or disciplinary goals and objectives can increase motivation and that writing can give students a voice and identity which multiple choice exams do not. Additionally, especially in terms of de-mystifying specific genres, faculty-provided tools and models play a key role, and while engaging students in the writing process is highly-effective, it is significant that writing processes do vary widely across disciplines.

In addition to the broader range of qualitative work, there has also been some recent quantitative research. For example, Dan Melzer conducted a nation-wide study of college-level writing assignments,
looking at the types, audiences, and genres of 2,100 writing assignments.\textsuperscript{11} He found that many of the assignments are transactional ones that are aimed at the professor as the sole audience, especially in terms of exam answers. However, he did note a recent positive increase in exploratory writing, writing in drafts, and professors and peers responding to drafts. The author noted that these types of assignments are especially common in classes tied to WAC programs, writing that: "Students also encounter more writing assignments in these WAC courses. The average number of assignments per course in the study is 5.25, but the average number of assignments per WAC course is 8.7."\textsuperscript{12} He concluded that: "the results of my research are an argument for the importance and influence of the WAC movement and the need to continue to support WAC efforts as the most powerful antidote to the limited uses of writing I found in so many of the courses in my study."\textsuperscript{13}

THE CLASSES

MP: In the spring 2014 semester, I taught a new course entitled Special Topics in African American History and Culture: The Black Panther Party. This was a 300-level course which met once a week and which eighteen students completed. This class was designed as a reading- and writing-intensive course and used writing to promote critical thinking and engage students in discussing complex ideas. The course provided an overview of the history of the Black Panther Party from 1966 to 1982. It dispelled myths and media distortions of the BPP, as well as addressing: the BPP’s theoretical influences; community survival programs; women and gender politics; the political theories of key leaders; political prisoners; protest art, music, and poetry; and political repression and the FBI’s Cointelpro Program.

I nourish an interest in using writing to promote critical thinking. The class called for students to think critically about the readings. I wanted students to connect the readings, to think between the lines of an author’s argument, and to make direct connections between the past and the present. We used writing in every course session. Frequently, students wrote about a particular topic in class, reflected or responded to a series of questions based on readings and films we watched in class, or engaged in a writing activity using the course readings. For example, in the first class session, instead of just reading the syllabus out loud, students responded in writing to various questions about the syllabus. This gave students an opportunity to examine the syllabus in depth, taking note of important aspects of the course, and developing a plan to prepare adequately for class assignments and readings.

I use writing in all of my courses to create what I call “active learning assignments” which allow students to think critically and engage the reading material in exciting and unique ways. These types of assignments vary with each class and may include a political autobiography, a social justice proposal, or a film analysis. In my course on the BPP these writing assignments included low-stakes reading prompts and online discussion posts. The reading prompts allowed students to answer questions on the reading material before class as a way to help guide their reading. When teaching this class in the future, I plan to require students to complete the reading prompts in class, which would allow them an opportunity to actively engage with the readings during class. The blackboard discussion questions offered students the opportunity to continue class discussions and reflect on the course material. However, in-class writing and group work proved most beneficial in assisting students with their writing. The high stakes assignments


\textsuperscript{12} Melzer, W258.

\textsuperscript{13} Melzer, W259.
included a 3-5-page media analysis, a newspaper analysis, a 4-6 page book review, and a letter to a political prisoner. This assignment required them to select the political prisoner who most resonated with them, and then write and mail the prisoner a letter highlighting their knowledge of the BPP and discussing the importance of community involvement. On several occasions students shared with me that their political prisoner wrote back and they were able to develop a pen pal relationship with them.

MS: The Integrative Seminar 2 was a new research and writing class that was connected with a studio art course at Parsons The New School in spring 2014. I taught the Seminar while another faculty member taught the studio class. These classes shared several assignments and topics, showing the students how research and design processes can overlap. The class focused on teaching research and writing skills to prepare students for the written components of their bachelors program. My class was required for all first-year students and built on the Integrative Seminar and Studio courses they took the previous semester. Different versions of the class focused on topics like fashion design and the built environment—my session was devoted to the subject of community engagement. Specifically, the course addressed issues of how to research the needs of specific communities and how to relate design projects to the community.

I designed the class around a research paper, which the students focused on throughout the semester, completing a variety of assignments that built up to the final paper. Each student chose his or her own topic and explored a related question or issue in the studio course that was tied to my research class. Topics varied widely—one student researched the role of protest art in apartheid era South Africa while another explored different water bottle designs, addressing how consumers responded to material, design, and size. Other topics included the relationship between Young Adult novels and the political situation in Venezuela, how visitors interacted with different spaces in Prospect Park, the exhibition design of several spaces at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the differences between Japanese and American interpretations of the same facial expressions, and the use of social media in branding and advertising for Michael Kors.

My class included a variety of low and high stakes writing assignments, including in-class writing, blog posts, reading responses, and several papers that helped them build up to the final research paper. In each class period, my students wrote on a topic for 3-5 minutes as a warm-up activity and at the end of class they completed an in-class writing assignment devoted to that day’s topic for ten minutes. Students also replied to weekly blog posts that built on the class sessions.14 These blog posts often served as the first chance for students to brainstorm and address topics and issues that were addressed in higher-stakes assignments later in the semester. For example, a few weeks into the semester they posted lists of possible paper topics, including bullet points addressing what aspects of each issue they found interesting. Every week, students turned in a one-page reading response, addressing one of the week’s readings by including a two-sentence summary, a quote they found interesting, and a question or response to the article. These papers were useful at ensuring that the students completed the readings and were able to discuss them in class. These assignments were also an effective method of teaching the students to use proper citations, since the repetitive act of citing articles every week led to significant improvement.

Students turned in a variety of assignments building up to their final project, including: a mind map—which laid out their topics and issues visually; an initial bibliography; a media analysis report; a research proposal—which included an outline, a bibliography, and a plan for the rest of the semester; an annotated bibliography; an archival source report; a rough draft; a five-minute PowerPoint presentation; and the

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14 The class blog is located at: integrativeseminar2.tumblr.com.
final eight-page paper. The formats of these assignments varied—for example, I included both a visual mind map and a traditional outline—so students were able to explore different ways of developing and writing papers. At the same time, including various written reports and papers allowed them to develop a range of arguments throughout the course of the semester.

Student grades were heavily weighted toward participation and low-stakes assignments—attendance and participation comprised 20% of the grade, while short assignments (like blog posts) and in-class exercises made up another 15%. The assignments building up to the final project—including the bibliography, media analysis report, archival report, and other assignments totaled 30% of their final grades. Their final papers and presentations added up to 35% of the grades. Since the course was focused on writing, research, and critical thinking skills, we did not have any tests or quizzes.

SHARED ASSIGNMENTS

This section includes specific examples of assignments that we developed in collaboration. These detailed discussions of our own assignments can serve as fodder for future assignments, collaborations, and developments. The assignments highlighted include sentence starters, a media analysis paper, and a primary source analysis paper.

SENTENCE STARTERS

A handout that Marcie Wolfe developed on Sentence Starters is organized into categories like “Asking Questions,” “Predicting,” “Forming Interpretations,” and “Revising Meaning.” Within these sections, sample statements include: “I wonder why...,” “If ____, then...,” “What this means to me is...,” and “At first I thought ____, but now I...”15

MS: I had heard about sentence starters before on several occasions and had thought about using them myself—but despite my high level of interest, I did not work to develop a way to integrate them into my own class. While presentations and discussions of specific assignments can be helpful, it is often more difficult for me to take the next step to try out the assignment and actually integrate it into a class. For this reason, the weekly meetings with my faculty partner were extremely helpful, since we pushed each other to actually use the ideas from WAC presentations and discussions. In particular, one week, I pushed MP to use sentence starters in her class—even though I had never actually used them myself! MP used them to get students to discuss the topic sentences of a difficult reading in groups. The students were so engaged that I used them in my class for the first time the very next day!

For the rest of the semester, every week, I started reading discussions by having students meet in groups to develop five sentence starters in ten minutes. Participating in this activity made the whole class more active. Even students who never talked to the entire class spoke in their groups, so everyone was able to have a voice. Additionally, when the groups shared their sentences with the class, everyone was prepared to discuss the article and they had developed stronger opinions about the topic, so they were much more engaged in class discussion. If the article was particularly dense, I required the groups to each focus on a

15 This handout is available on the Lehman College website at: www.lehman.edu/lehman/wac/PDF/SentenceStarters.pdf
specific section in developing their sentence starters. With difficult articles, I generally also had them write a one-sentence summary of the section after completing their sentences.

MP: One of my most effective in-class writing activities included using sentence starters for difficult readings. MS recommended that I use sentence starters in class to help students process difficult readings. During week two, students were introduced to sentence starters. In groups, students completed one sentence starter for each of the first three paragraphs, shared their responses with the class, and discussed the major points of the paragraphs. After completing this assignment, students mentioned how helpful they found this activity. It allowed them to be in conversation with the author, affirm information they already knew, and explore new ideas. As a result, class discussions were lively and often triggered a thought or an idea for students in which they were able to go back and read with greater clarity. Many of the students stated that they planned to post the sentence starter sheet at home to use in other classes.

MEDIA ANALYSIS PAPER

MS: In my own classes, I have always included scaffolded research papers—requiring students to do in-class and journal writing assignments on their topics and to turn in bibliographies, annotated bibliographies, outlines, and rough drafts before their final papers are due. I include the instructions for all of these assignments in a single handout given at the beginning of the semester, so that students can easily see how each assignment builds on the previous ones. In her class in the spring, MP likewise gave students a handout in the beginning of the semester detailing all of the assignments. However, I discovered that her list of assignments was far more varied than mine and included papers that were related to the topic, but explored it from different perspectives. Whereas I usually assigned papers that specifically built up to and would become part of the final assignment, these papers addressed similar topics, but focused on different issues—like media portrayals and archival sources—and would not become part of the final paper. I had never considered the importance of scaffolding in assignments that made students explore their topic in such radically varied ways. Instead, I had focused on the very clear goal of getting them to improve their paper by researching and writing it in a series of steps. Yet, I realized that making them think about their research paper from different perspectives would clearly improve their final product, so I began incorporating similar assignments into my own syllabus.

MP: One of the two major assignments that MS responded to in creating more varied types of papers in her class was my media analysis paper. This paper called for students to select a political cartoon by Emory Douglass, a photograph by Stephen Shames, or any artwork in the Black Panther Party newspaper and write an analysis of the image. I went over this assignment in class prior to the due date to give students an idea of the key areas they should include in their analysis. As a classroom activity students were given a series of questions. They met in small groups to discuss artwork, music, and poetry and answer questions. The groups shared their responses to each of the works with the class and discussed the various ways in which the BPP utilized each of the art forms. After the group work on the visual artwork, students wrote a paragraph on which work resonated with them the most. After the group work on poems, each student wrote a response to one of the poems and considered how Ericka Huggins’ poem “Niantic” critiqued the prison industrial complex.

In their papers, students were required to engage with one or more of the readings and address the following questions: What is the artist trying to convey? What is your eye drawn to first? How does the image serve as a counter message to the mainstream media’s representation of the BPP? What message does it send to members of the BPP? What message does it send to members of the larger community? How did your newspaper analysis inform your media analysis assignment? The required page length was
3-5 pages with all sources cited in MLA style. During the class discussion I was able to guide them in their analysis; however, only a handful of students provided a complex argument in their papers. I intend to provide more instruction for each writing assignment in the future.

MS: Based on MP’s media analysis assignment, I developed my own in order to ensure students practiced writing in different genres, approaching the same topic from a range of perspectives. In the Community Engagement class, students turned in a “Media Analysis Paper” early in the semester, focusing on their research topics—or on themes closely related to their topics. Since Parsons is a design school, I wanted them to focus not just on the different perspectives and messages expressed in each image, but also, on exactly how the designer conveyed these messages.

Even though the students focused on advertisements related to their topics, for most of them, the media analysis paper was only loosely related to their final argument. Other scaffolded assignments—like the outline and bibliography—clearly built up to the final research paper. Compared to those assignments, this paper forced them to take a wider view of their arguments, considering them in an entirely different way, in order to force them to realize how many arguments, perspectives, and positions are possible with any research topic.

Students were given the following directions:

Steps to complete before turning in the Media Analysis Report:
- Choose three-five advertisements related to your preferred topic. These can all be recent or can be from a variety of different time periods.
- Brainstorm how messages, perspectives, goals, cultural constructs and other issues are tied to the text and images of these advertisements.
- Write a two-page analysis of these media representations—have a clear argument summing up or comparing these attitudes/issues.
- This assignment should be two pages long, addressing 3-5 advertisements. Please include images of the advertisements at the end.

Student papers varied widely with this assignment. Since the paper was only their second typed short paper for my class, several papers suffered from a lack of a clear, persuasive thesis statement. One of the reasons these short papers are so important in a lower level class is that it means writing problems can be addressed and discussed at an early stage in the semester—so for these students, the assignment was very helpful at this point, since the feedback they received addressed not just content, but also structural concerns regarding thesis statements and organization. Almost all of the papers suffered from underdeveloped theses—especially in contrast to their more persuasive conclusions. Before this assignment, I had told my students that they should rewrite their introductions after finishing their conclusions, but seeing my comments and suggestions on these early papers revealed to them how important this step would be in their later papers.

Several students did not effectively group the three to five advertisements, instead discussing them each individually. Again, this was an important step for them, since they needed to practice finding links and themes, rather than discussing each argument, artist, author, or artwork entirely separately. For this reason, I felt that focusing on more than two advertisements was an important component of this assignment. In fact, in order to get them to focus on larger ideas and comparisons, I might consider asking them to address four or five, specifying that I do not want each advertisement addressed separately, in its own paragraph.
These papers did not necessarily address the ads in great detail. This issue is apparent in several of the short blog posts the students wrote in preparing for the two-page media analysis paper. The images, these posts, and all of my students’ other blog posts are publically accessible on our class website: http://integrativeseminar2.tumblr.com/) These blog posts focus on only two images—and the students found it far easier to compare two images than to address themes and issues across a wider range of advertisements.

In this example, the student compares the logos for two companies focusing on locally grown foods, considering them as advertising products that highlight the way these logos sell not just the food product, but the concept of growing food within New York City. She ties in many interesting issues in the first paragraph, focusing on the overall message connecting the two images, and effectively discusses the differences between them in the second paragraph. Additionally, while all of these blog posts could use some editing, clarification, and further detail as the authors developed them into the full two-page paper, they often functioned as very effective drafts:

The two advertisements below both share the same goal. While they are not trying to sell a product to someone, they are trying to sell a lifestyle (one of buying locally grown food), through the use of images that depict both cities and the environment in their advertising logos. Buying locally grown food has become a fad in the modern world because of various discrepancies about what constitutes “organic food,” and about global warming and the use of transportation to ship food across the country (and world). Integrating these two different “worlds,” cities and nature, into the advertising logos allows the potential customers to see that it IS possible to buy locally grown food in a city, which had previously not been an option. The people living in cities were not given the opportunity to buy locally, until now!

The first advertisement is quite elaborate, but the main goal is still identifiable. This advertising logo uses detailed buildings and specific vegetables to make the viewer see that the city is not just good for the “hustle and bustle.” Instead, farms are available, not only to create green space, but also to provide food for the community. The second advertisement is a much simpler, but no less effective, design that uses a simple cityscape and simple leaves to imply the integration of an urban space with a natural one. While this logo is much more subtle in presenting its goal to the consumer, it is still successful because of its ability to portray two contrasting worlds, colliding. Both of the advertisements use the same kind of imagery, in different ways to promote a healthy lifestyle that is supportive of local businesses.

Not only did the blog posts serve as an effective step in building up toward the final paper, but these blog posts served as a public forum to test ideas and approaches before submitting the two-page media analysis paper. Another student creatively analyzed her works, arguing that pin-up images can move

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16 This was the assigned topic: Weekly Blog Post 5: Comparing Media Representations: Since your Media Analysis Report will be due next week, we will focus on analyzing and comparing advertisements related to your paper topic. (They might be only distantly related if your topic is not clearly associated with a specific type of advertising.) Include the advertisements in your post. Focus on one specific message, perspective, cultural, construct, or goal, and make a persuasive argument about how these two advertisements engage with or disseminate this issue. Before you start, brainstorm on all aspects of the advertisements and how they work together to convince the viewer to purchase a product—but also consider what else the advertisement promotes in terms of lifestyle, culture, stereotypes, and other issues. Include only the details that are most effective in persuading your reader of your point. Consider how you want to structure your response to be as convincing as possible to the reader and think about what sort of language you want to use to get your point across (your audience is your classmates).
beyond mere marketing and sexualization to promote confidence and feminism. Rather than focusing on differences between the images, she locates Lena Dunham as a modern-day feminist Madonna, arguing that Madonna herself built on the confident sexuality of earlier figures like Marilyn Monroe:

My topic of choice is the feminist pin-up.
A living oxymoron.
Feminism.
Dissent.

First and foremost is Madonna. An icon of the feminist counter culture of the 80’s. She still remains a prevalent figure. Here, she emulates the “pin-up.” Even being referred to as the legendary Marilyn Monroe. Madonna has either been loved or hated by feminists when she bares it all to the world. Comfortable in her sexuality? Using it as tool, as power? In this ad Madonna is scantily clad, while maintaining a poise about her. While owning it. While setting the stage for others.

While Madonna stressed sexuality, Lena Dunham seems to find herself pinned as a “female star” and a feminist.

Lena Dunham is indefinitely a powerful woman of our generation, who just like Madonna, knows exactly what she is doing. And she is owning it. Here we find her on the edge of a bathtub, wearing a hip-hugging, form-fitting black pin-up esque dress. In the bathtub bathes a naked man, sullen faced, looking straight forward. Not to call him powerless, but powerless over Lena Dunham. With Lena Dunham’s direct stare into the camera screams confidence and sexuality in nearly an equivalent way to Madonna.

Though both are Vogue advertisements, I am not showing how these women are portraying the clothes to the viewer. But rather how they are portraying confidence in self and sexuality. I am not saying sex sells. I am showing the living oxymoron. Women empowerment through self. Through sexuality. These, are the modern day feminist pin-ups.

Overall, many of the responses were highly successful analyses of the messages conveyed by images. Most of the advertisements were related to the students’ topics but would not play a direct role in their final research papers. Not only did this allow them to focus on how the companies and designers conveyed messages to their audiences, but it also gave them a different perspective on their research topic. Without the influence of MP, my own scaffolded assignments generally build up to the final paper much more directly, but this collaboration led me to develop a far broader range of assignments, modeling for my students the importance of considering a wide range of approaches to and perspectives on my topic.

**Primary Source Analysis Paper**

MP: The other assignment which MS built on was my primary source analysis paper. In this assignment, students were required to engage with primary sources in their newspaper analysis. The newspaper analysis was scaffolded into various stages and introduced students to close analysis of primary documents, a key skill needed in analyzing material. For this assignment, students were asked to find a newspaper article in *The Black Panther* and offer an interpretation of the article (content, argument, rhetorical strategies, historical significance) using their own insights as well as those of other historians and scholars, while situating the article in its historical context.

I divided the newspaper analysis into two stages. Stage one required students to submit a rough draft for feedback. At this point, students formed groups of two, read each other’s papers, and filled out a peer review form. The peer review form required students to provide a score in response to various questions such as: Does it describe and summarize the document? Does it address the rhetorical strategy?
Audience? Purpose? Does it address silences or omissions? Does it address the historical context? Does it use a course reading? Does it address the argument of the document? Does it focus on the document instead of providing a critique or opinion? Is it properly formatted? What suggestions do you have for your partner to improve their analysis? For the last stage students revised their papers based on the feedback they received from their partner. Many students found the newspaper analysis useful in writing the media analysis. Some students discussed the same themes in both assignments—such as the BPP’s breakfast program for children. Strategically, I designed the assignments so as to build critical thinking skills by requiring students to analyze various primary materials, such as a newspaper article and an artwork/photograph. Writing in these different formats allowed students to study the BPP in multiple ways for a more comprehensive understanding of BPP history. Overall the papers that I received in this class demonstrated to me that I needed to revise the instruction sheet and spend even more time in class walking students through the assignment. Additionally, especially based on MS’ experiences, I determined that it might be useful for students to submit a rough draft for feedback from the professor before turning in the final draft.

MS: The students in the Community Engagement class completed several activities related to primary sources. Students were required to turn in an analysis of a primary source about three-quarters of the way through the semester. However, in order to get them to think about primary sources in advance, I had an in-class workshop with an archivist from the school archives, who had them work in groups with archival documents pertaining to murals by Diego Rivera. That week, for a blog post, students were required to analyze a single article. They were given these directions:

### Weekly Blog Post 7: Analyzing a Primary Source:

Find a Primary source online—specifically, a newspaper article from the New York Times from 1900-1950 that is somehow related to your topic. Here is the online archive:  
http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/#/*/from19000101to19510101/

Post a picture of your source (You can use the “prt scn” (print screen) button to copy what you see on your screen) and cite your source (as you would in a bibliography).

Answer these questions:
What is the topic of the article? The argument and purpose? 
How is the article organized? (Note the structure of the article) 
What is the author’s perspective/pov? Is the author objective or biased and in what ways? Why or why not? 
Are there images related to your article? If so, how do these relate or add to it? 
What else would you need to research to better understand this article?

Student responses to this post were generally quite effective. In particular, since the only possible source was The New York Times, students picked much more appropriate articles than they probably would have chosen otherwise. However, their responses did vary in terms of how deeply they grappled with each issue. While some students answered the questions quite formulaically, the assignment was an effective blog question since it built on class work, requiring them to continue the class discussion on primary sources. In the future, I might specify that I want them to summarize the structure, not outline the source, since I would have preferred if they had analyzed the structures more critically.
Generally, the least effective aspect of the blog posts was the analysis of the author’s biases. Regularly, students referred to the authors as unbiased, rather than analyzing their specific biases and points of view. In the future, I might add another question on the author’s perspective. In the following example, the student does effectively explain that the author both celebrates and criticizes the farmer, but as she writes, further researching the context would allow her to understand the article better, and most likely, determine how the author’s lack of discussion of who is to blame reveals her possible biases:

The main theme of this article is to describe the reasons for labor shortages on farms on the East Coast and the solutions to these labor shortages. The beginning of the article starts out with a somewhat somber tone, yet by the end, it is happy and giving praise to the farmers on the East Coast for persevering through the labor shortages.

The article is organized by initially giving a description of the industrialization of some individual states. This description is then tied into the next section where the author discusses the reasons why there are labor shortages. The solutions to the labor shortages, which include labor-saving technology, are included in the next, small section. The article finishes by describing the outcomes of the labor shortages and the techniques and technologies farmers use to continue to farm successfully.

The article seems to be written in an unbiased way because of the presentation of both the farmer’s struggles and successes. The article also touches on reasons for the labor shortages, but nowhere does it place blame on anyone for contributing to the shortages. Instead, it accepts those who left the farm labor force in search of better work while also praising the remaining farmers for finding successful solutions to their problems.

I think it would be helpful to learn more about the affects of World War II on the labor force and the advancement of technologies to understand this article better. The article (and the title) touches briefly on labor being transferred to different markets, however, understanding why and if the people voluntarily moved to different industries would be helpful to the understanding of the entire article. It would be helpful to understand how World War II influenced technology, especially because the article discusses the use of technology on the farms to make up for the labor shortages.

Many other posts reveal similar issues in dealing with the author’s perspective. The students often referred to the articles as unbiased—especially when the article included an interview or chronological retelling of events. These instances reveal to me that I should have further discussed the fact that an author reveals her perspective and biases in terms of the choices she makes in any article—even in terms of how she lays out a series of chronological events, which quotes she chooses to include, or what questions she asks of her subject.

A few weeks later, students turned in an archival paper focused on their topics. This paper built on their previous work, but required them to find their own archival source and to write a formal paper about it. For the paper, students were given the following directions:
Choose one historical archival source related to your topic—a newspaper article, cartoon, advertisement, letter, or other document. (You can find this online or physically in an archive.) The source must be at least thirty years old. 

- Summarize the messages and analyze the source. 
- Consider: What are the main and secondary arguments/narratives/messages? What does it tell you about how this issue has been treated over time? What does it tell you about society at the time? How does this archival source differ from more recent sources? 
- This assignment should be two pages long. If possible, please include images of the source at the end.

These archival papers certainly gave the students a different perspective on their topics, requiring them to grapple with questions of how their topics had been approached over time. A few students added historical elements to their final papers because of this assignment and many others broadened their understanding of their topics. Several students picked sources that were not especially conducive to an effective paper—in particular, several picked advertisements similar to those that they had addressed in the media analysis paper. While they could have approached these advertisements historically, they tended to focus on the same issues they discussed in their earlier papers. Thus, in the future, in order to differentiate between these assignments, I would probably not allow archival source reports to be written on advertisements. Some students chose works that did not have especially interesting narratives or messages or they had very unusual or biased messages—in both cases, comparisons to other sources would have improved the papers. In the future, I might require that students complete an earlier blog post on this specific source, so that I can make sure they have chosen useful sources.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? REFLECTING ON OUR PROGRESS

Working with an interdisciplinary group like WAC, one expects to be able to discuss broader strategies and goals and to share and compare general teaching philosophies. Yet, neither of us expected to be able to develop and share specific assignments. By discussing our traditional techniques and the common assignments within each of our fields, we were able to develop more creative and unusual topics and guidelines to enrich our students’ understanding of widely varied fields. Looking at and discussing specific assignments, including those found in John C. Bean’s Engaging Ideas and those addressed in all of our workshops gave us many ideas. Yet our greatest growth and development came from discussing specific details, pushing each other further, and seeing how each of us planned and used each strategy.

MS: For me, all of these assignments were important because each was a building block guiding my students toward a final research paper. Scaffolding a paper assignment like this throughout the semester means that students will be able to build up to the final paper, meaning that lower-level students are able to work toward completing a well-developed research paper with little previous research experience.

In a final two-page paper reflecting on their progress, my students effectively considered and wrote about their progress, which assignments they found most and least helpful, and how their writing had

18 The assignment was: “In reflecting on your writing this semester, here are some questions you can consider—please do not try to answer all of them in order, instead, pick the one or ones you find the most interesting and
changed throughout the course of the semester. Unfortunately, some of them highlighted one drawback of this approach—that especially if they chose a topic which they were not very attached to, they could lose interest and motivation, as they wanted to explore different topics and subjects. Thus, one student wrote:

The biggest problem with this research essay I wrote is that I lost my sincerest interest after several weeks of working with this topic because we were constantly talking about it, working on it, writing about it. ... It is very exhausting to work on anything for nearly half a semester with no change of pace.

For me, this student reflection highlights the fact no student learns to write, think, or learn in the same way. One benefit of scaffolding and utilizing these types of assignments is that students can approach the same topic from different perspectives and analyze it in a variety of ways. Yet, one issue I must consider in planning future courses is the potential benefit to some students of further diversification not just of the types of assignments, but also of the number of topics each student explores.

On the other hand, another student wrote that, even though she often gets tired of working on the same paper for a long period of time, this helped her to improve her time management skills. She wrote that she developed as a writer because of the fact that she had so much time to focus on this one topic:

I realized that I often get tired of looking at and reading the same paper over and over, and it is important for me to be able to take a break from it. This gives me a fresh viewpoint when I come back to it for more editing.

Another thing that I learned about myself as a writer is that I work well if I break papers, especially my research paper, into different sections and work on one section at a time. I realized that if I work on a paper for a long period of time, the quality of my work decreases as time passes. As a solution, I chose to work on one section of my paper at a time, take a break, and then start a new section later on. While using this strategy takes me longer to write papers, it allows my work to be more consistent. This saves me time in the long run, though, because in the end, I do not have to waste time rewriting something that I have already written because of its poor quality. Instead, I can focus on editing and proofreading.

Overall, I learned that my time management skills are crucial to writing a successful paper. It reinforced what I already knew about myself and about writing. However, throughout the course, I also learned that it is more important to me to spend a long time writing a consistent paper, than a short time writing a paper of poor quality and ultimately having to rewrite it.

This response highlights a key benefit of these types of activities—beyond just learning the subject matter and specific skills like analyzing primary sources. When used effectively, WAC principles can help a student like this one to develop significant study and life skills, like effective reflection on progress, editing, and especially, time management.

write a cohesive two-page paper on your writing and research experience as a whole. Some questions to consider: What knowledge of myself as a writer have I gained from the writing I did in this course? Here are a few concrete examples from my experience that illustrate my progress. Of all the papers I wrote this semester, which do I think is the strongest and why? Which is the weakest and why? Which paper (or informal assignment or Blog post) forced me to grapple with how I write, with my own arguments or opinions, or required me to think critically?”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


