

SHAKEN OR STIRRED? MIXING ELEMENTS OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM (WAC) INTO LIBRARY INSTRUCTION SESSIONS

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Many universities include a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at their institutions. WAC principles state that writing is learning and responsibility for writing should belong to all academic programs and cross all disciplines. Yet within the library instruction community there is little discussion of incorporating WAC into our teaching. Is it even possible, given the time constraints of one-shot instruction sessions, to include elements of WAC? In fact, many librarians may already be incorporating one aspect of WAC in their instruction through the use of the minute paper as a means of gathering student reflections to help assess the effectiveness of library instruction. This chapter seeks to expand on the minute paper and demonstrate that Writing Across the Curriculum is not only possible in our classes, it can significantly enhance student engagement and participation during library instruction. Many institutions offer Writing Across the Curriculum faculty seminars that serve to introduce and encourage faculty from throughout the university to integrate more writing elements into their courses. It was participation in just such a seminar that triggered the incorporation of WAC techniques in the library instruction provided in the Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Some of the successful elements used in this setting are included below and can be easily adapted for a variety of instructional situations.

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WHAT IS WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM?

The earliest evidence of Writing Across the Curriculum programs can be found in the early 1970s, the first taking place at Carleton College in Minnesota in 1969-70 (Bazerman et al., 2005, p. 26). During the decade that followed similar programs began at numerous other institutions. (For a historical guide to WAC, please read the Bazerman article.) These early programs were concerned with student writing beyond introductory writing courses and shared a desire to incorporate writing throughout the curriculum. Growing national concerns with student writing were evidenced in a December 8, 1975 *Newsweek* article that noted the “U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates” (Sheils, 1975). The article also cited tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress which showed declining writing test scores, further evidence of a need for change in higher education. Two distinct approaches to WAC developed: the first, Writing Across the Disciplines, seeks to acknowledge the varied writing conventions in the disciplines. The second approach, Writing to Learn, focuses on using writing as a tool to facilitate student learning. The latter is most applicable for incorporation into library instruction.

Writing to Learn activities view writing not simply as an end product of learning, but rather a process by which learning takes place. Writing, thinking, and learning are all closely interconnected and can significantly impact a student’s understanding of a process or concept. The addition of WAC activities shifts, rather than increases, the workload of the teacher. The simple writing activities that take place are short and informal; they do not need to be collected or graded. The inclusion of WAC elements in library instruction engages students in critical thinking, reflection, and active learning exercises that can create a greater understanding of various

points of the research process. Because the writing that takes place during the instruction does not need to be turned in, there is no additional time required on the part of librarians to grade this work. The exercises can be collected, however, to provide additional insights into how students think and approach a variety of aspects of research.

THE QUICK WRITE

A quick write is a type of free writing, which is a technique that was introduced by Peter Elbow to offer students a risk free way to get their own thoughts and words on a page (as cited in *Writing across the curriculum*, n.d.). Free writing can vary from stream of conscious writing, where students simply write whatever comes to mind on a broad topic, to freely responding to a topic or question. A quick write can be defined as focused free writing that includes a written prompt seeking student response. It makes the class more relevant because it connects the topic with something meaningful to the students.

The quick write has several important roles in instruction. It increases student participation; when quick writes were introduced at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) Undergraduate Library, there was an immediate increase in both the depth and volume of student participation. The quick write also allows students to think more carefully about what they are going to say; since a quick write is low stakes writing where grammar and punctuation do not matter, they can focus on the ideas instead of the writing. When students are asked to complete a quick write, they are often concerned about it being collected; since quick writes are not collected the students can relax and focus on brainstorming. Finally, quick writes can be a great ice breaker; the quick write is introduced at the beginning of the class session and it allows librarians to start a conversation with students as well as get them involved in the class before it even begins.

Specifically, at the Undergraduate Library, students are asked to complete this quick write at the beginning of the class session: “*When I need information I start with _____ because... .*” Instructors then discuss student responses to this quick write before discussing and defining a database. Most often, students will respond with Google or Wikipedia and will then explain that they like starting with these sources because they are easy to use, fast, and have a great deal of information available. From this point, it is easy to introduce the idea of a database and ask the students to compare databases to their experiences using Google or Wikipedia.

The LOEX workshop asked attendees to complete a quick write at the start of the session. Following tips on how to create a quick write, attendees were provided with a prompt and directions for brainstorming quick writes for their instructional settings. The results of those discussions are below:

Directions:

At the beginning of our presentation attendees were asked to respond to this question in a sentence or two: “*Choose one word that best describes student participation in your*

library instruction sessions and explain why.”

Responses:

- Spotty: “Sometimes participation is good and sometimes I wonder if students are listening.”
- Underwhelming: “I would like to see more enthusiasm from students.”
- Varied: “Participation depends on the class and the time.”
- Cautious: “Students may want to participate but are unsure of what to say.”
- Compelled: “Sometimes students feel forced to participate.”
- Discipline dependent: “There is a different amount of participation depending on discipline of study.”

Resulting discussion: Participants agreed that there were many different ways to describe student participation in their instruction sessions, but the general consensus was that student participation is not very strong and library instructors have a challenging time encouraging participation among all types of student groups.

Directions:

Having answered a quick write and knowing more about what a quick write is, attendees were instructed to create their own quick writes. While creating quick writes, it may be helpful to keep these questions in mind:

- **Who** is the audience?
- **What** is topical focus?
- **Where** in class session would this fit in?

Responses:

- “The scariest part of this assignment is _____ because _____.”
- “Explain your research topic to a five year old.”
- “What comes to mind when you think of a library?”
- “My favorite feature of a database is _____ because _____.”
- “How would you describe a past research experience?”

Resulting discussion: Participants thought of quick writes that would help the students be more reflective, and think more deeply about the research process.

THE MICROTHEME

A microtheme is a guided writing activity in which “a small amount of writing is preceded by a great deal of thinking” (Bean, Drenk, & Lee, 1982, p. 27). In contrast to quick writes, which encourage free, stream-of-consciousness response, microthemes have students carefully consider and respond to a given text, puzzle, or data set.

WAC literature identifies four types of microtheme (*Writing across the curriculum*, n.d.):

- Summary-writing microtheme: students read a text and then condense it and put it in their own words.
- Thesis-support microtheme: students take a position on a particular issue and topic and offer a concise argument in its defense.
- Quandary-posing microtheme: students are presented students must then explain the fundamental principles involved, and offer a solution.
- Data-provided microtheme: Raw data is provided, and students are asked to explain why it is meaningful.

Data-provided microthemes are used in the one-shot instruction sessions at the Undergraduate Library to help students connect the abstract concepts we introduce at the beginning of class (e.g., credibility and scholarliness) with the practical database searching skills. The microtheme occurs in the context of a group search of the database Academic Search Premier. The instructor and students have done an initial search, and are faced with a page of results. Students are asked to select a record of interest from the first set of ten, and respond to the following prompt: “On a piece of paper note what information is available here that is not easily available in Google. Why/how could it improve the quality of your research?”

Using this data-provided microtheme at this point in the instruction is valuable for several reasons. First, it helps students make meaning out of the metadata they see in the database record by considering it in light of how it might contribute to the quality of their research. They do so by applying the concepts of credibility and scholarliness discussed earlier in class to the information they are presented with in the database record. This, in turn, helps students discover the differences between the information found in a database and information found on Google. Finally, this activity gets students to actively engage with what they see on the screen, and with each other. Rather than having the instructor explain what the various elements of the database record are (abstract, author information, subject terms, etc.), the microtheme encourages students to figure out for themselves what the information in the database record means, and teach each other what they have discovered.

Directions:

Having learned about different types of microthemes, LOEX attendees were asked to think of other applications of microthemes in their classes.

Participants were asked to keep in mind the following questions:

- **Where** in the class session will a microtheme contribute the most to student learning?
- **What** data will be the focus of the microtheme?
- **How** will you guide students in the interpretation of the microtheme data?

Responses:

- “How does the absence of a bibliography affect the credibility of sources of this book?”
- “What elements of this Google citation are missing?”
- Give a group of students two different types of articles, and ask when it is appropriate to use one or the other
- “Explain why a student might plagiarize, and offer solutions.”

IMAGE MAKING AND VISUAL ELEMENTS

Students attending library instruction sessions possess a variety of learning preferences and incorporating elements that address varied learning styles will serve to more fully engage the entire class. Visual representations can be meaningful to students by conveying feelings, perceptions, and fears. Research is not an easy process and it can elicit strong emotional responses in students. One activity that engages the students in image creation is to ask them to draw and share visual images of how research makes them feel. This activity provides them with the opportunity to recognize that their feelings are normal and shared by others in the class. Further, acknowledging that research can be difficult for librarians as well helps us empathize with the students. This can be accomplished through the creation of a visual representation of the librarian’s own research process. Minimal supplies (transparencies and markers) are necessary and, while imagination is required for the process, artistic skills are not. See Appendix A for an example of one librarian’s research process.

Directions:

Examples of the research process of two of the presenters were shared at LOEX. Attendees were then asked to create a visual representation of their own research process to share. They were instructed to keep in mind the following questions:

- **When** in the class session would a visual element

contribute most to the instruction?

- **Why** are you using a visual at this point?
- **What** connection do you want students to make to the visual element?

MIXING IT ALL TOGETHER

As librarians continue to seek additional ideas to engage students and encourage participation in library instruction, Writing Across the Curriculum can provide a number of elements that will facilitate exactly that. Activities such as quick writes and microthemes take just moments to complete, but because they require students to focus and organize their thoughts, they assure us that all students really have considered the issue and that each student has the potential to contribute to the class discussion. Look to identify constituents on your own campus that support WAC and can provide additional assistance and ideas for incorporating writing elements into library instruction. Seek assistance from units such as the Center for Teaching Excellence, Writing Center, and/or Center for Writing Studies. Discussions with faculty in English or rhetoric departments can provide help answering questions about various writing activities and faculty from other departments can provide ideas for incorporating writing activities in “non-writing” courses. Regardless of the approach you take, incorporating WAC elements into library instruction classes will result in more fully engaged and participatory students.

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APPENDIX A – RESEARCH PROCESS VISUAL IMAGE EXAMPLE



Research Process of Hilary Bussell:

From L to R, starting at the top:

- 1) I know that I have something due for a while, but the calendar reminds me that I really need to get started
- 2) I look over all of my research notes and start writing out an outline
- 3) My cat is hungry, so I take a little break to give him some food
- 4) I work for a while longer, but when I start writing out the paper on my laptop I get frustrated because I can't seem to make it all work
- 5) This tells me I need to take a little break, so I step away from my desk, put on my running shoes, and go for a nice long run to clear my mind
- 6) When I get back home, I feel refreshed and reenergized and am ready to tackle that paper