

A Conversation with Stetson Faculty Teaching WI Courses

In February 2014, Megan O'Neill, who directs the Writing Program, asked several faculty—faculty who are actively engaged in teaching writing intensive courses—to talk about their experiences and their techniques for deploying this high-impact learning strategy. Kevin Riggs (Physics), Kimberly Reiter (History), Camille King (Psychology), and John Tichenor (Decision Science) have each been involved in teaching with writing for years, whether because it's part of their specific discipline or because they teach an FSEM or because they teach a course carrying a WI designation.

Question: Which course or courses do you teach using writing to help students learn?

Kimberly: All of them.

Camille: PSYC 203, Great Experiments.

John: *All* courses. Granted, my statistics courses do involve calculations and I do use multiple choice items for assessment in stats courses. However, on each statistics exam I also include a number of short answer items that require students to express their statistical interpretations in writing. I also require statistics students to provide a written analysis of a statistical problem they have solved. I firmly believe that writing about anything helps you think about that thing. I also teach an FSEM in the fall and a JSEM in the spring – these courses involve much more writing than my statistics courses. However, besides formal papers, essays, etc., I also often ask my seminar students to write their thoughts about the topic we are discussing in class on a given day. Again, I believe writing helps thinking. I encourage students to write ANYTHING, even if it is garbage.

Kevin: FSEM 100 – Energy and the Environment, PHYS 312 – Laboratory Techniques (scientific writing), and PHYS 499- Senior Seminar (scientific writing).

Question: When you encounter problems in student writing (grammatical concerns), how do you handle them?

Kimberly: I will correct the little grammatical things once or twice. If it's not a glaring error, it's not going to affect the grade, and if it's not a perfect grade, then they always have the chance to resubmit. What's the point of grading if they're not going to learn something?

Camille: I tell them—if I have to read it several times for me to understand it, then that's when the points will be taken. I tell them I am not trained as a grammatical instructor but I have written papers a lot more than they have, so I've been the recipient of being told by others, “don't do this and don't do that.” I am sharing what I know.

Kevin: FSEM 100 - on early drafts I will try to suggest alternative wording for at least the first few pages, but rarely through the entire paper. Later on in the paper I will just suggest they revise

poorly constructed phrases or sentences. I often suggest that the student read the paper out loud to find awkward phrasing. I keep copies of the earlier drafts to see if they have made an effort to revise the grammar or content beyond my incomplete suggestions. I also often suggest that they take advantage of the excellent help at the writing center. I also have the students do lots of summary paragraph blog posts on blackboard before they tackle the research paper so they get practice summarizing the important points from articles they find on our topic in the popular press. These blog posts are presented by the students and then discussed in class which gives me a chance to comment on writing and also gives the students some informal oral presentation practice before a final oral presentation on their research project. Essay questions on quizzes and exams are graded not just for content, but also for clarity of writing. Laboratory Techniques and Senior Seminar – Here the main concern is the correct scientific format and the clarity of the explanations, but we do point out grammatical errors if they are particularly distracting to the reader.

John: I send them to the Writing Center – sometimes I require them to go. I will mark some grammatical errors in papers, but if there are significant issues, I send them to the Writing Center. I do include grammar/mechanics as a portion of formally graded assignments, but it is a small portion.

Question: Do you think teaching with writing helps students learn the material?

John: *Absolutely!* Writing requires thinking. And writing helps thinking. Having to put something in writing makes you have to more carefully form your thoughts. This is applicable whether the issue is a statistical interpretation, reflecting on what it means to run a “good” business (my JSEM topic), or describing characteristics of innovators (my FSEM topic).

Kimberly: Yes, by writing, a student has to think about what they have read or heard. Too often students expect to “absorb” material by some osmotic process of staring long enough. I not only encourage writing I also encourage active study by rewriting all notes. Involving the hand seems to stimulate the brain.

Camille: Yes. In this way: As the other part of the class is going through the history of psychology via the eyes of an empirical scientist, and so we go through these classic studies in the field. The high stakes assignment is not necessarily going to help them learn about those, but the other assignments in the course—the lower and medium stakes assignments—do. Because what I have them do, every day, when they come to class they’re supposed to have read the little study that we’re to talk about and write down one interesting fact about the methods and one interesting fact about the results. They don’t know when I’m going to ask them; it’s like a pop quiz. So one day in class I can ask them, “so take out a piece of paper and write down your methods and results from this class.” And so, I’ll collect it like seven times and only count five of them because, you know, they’re students and sometimes you have to give them a break in

some respect. So, I think that writing helps them learn because they're forced to have to read it and write something about it.

Kevin: Absolutely. In my FSEM course, the research/writing component is often commented on in student evaluations as a place where the students enjoy going in-depth on a topic that is of particular interest to them. Laboratory Techniques and Senior Seminar are where we cover the skill of writing a scientific journal-style article in the physics major.

Kimberly: My first few years I didn't teach with writing assignments. I would assign a work-- and my kids would read it, but even the brightest students wouldn't be able to remember all of the key points. Now they are assigned a writing exercise on the reading before we get to it in class, which does two things: First, in having to write about it, they remember what fascinated them the most and it's probably in front of them to talk about in class; and second, it guarantees the weaker students will actually have read it, which helps to gather their thoughts a little more. And it was night and day between not requiring these short reflective assignments and requiring them—it's a way of the student actively learning by having to write out a thought or opinion. It makes a big difference.

Question: How do you manage the paper load so that you can cover both content and skill?

Kimberly: I don't sleep. Why?..... I give them all the tools that they need and they have to nitpick every comma, because you know, scholars get nasty about that. And when I am grading the rough draft for the high level research paper, then I will get picky with every comma, because...I want to be able to read it as something where the student has done all of the hard work, and is now in a sense celebrating being a research scholar. I hate that section [of the course]. It comes about two thirds of the way through the semester, and I go "my weekend is gone!" But it has to be done because that's the way that it works, is to have one really good editor go over it and kill it. But other than that, why discourage them by nitpicking everything?

John: Grade fast using common scoring guides for assignments. I first skim through the papers and sort them into basic categories: poor, fair, good. Then, I read them more carefully, applying the scoring guide I have already prepared – this helps, I believe, to provide more objective scoring. The scoring guides are also given to the students as feedback along with marked up copy of their papers. Also, I generally spend more time on the first paper of the semester than the last.

Finally, I don't really consider myself a writing "skill" teacher – if there are major problems with a student's writing skills, I send her/him to the Writing Center early and often. I like to think that the writing "skills" I am teaching are really about the student's thinking skills. For example, some of the most common comments I write on student papers are things like, "this needs to be supported...this needs more clarity...this is awkward..." Such comments aren't really about writing, they are really about thinking. When I write such comments on student papers, I am

really saying, “think about this a bit more...is that what you really think?...how can you write that so I know what you think?”

Kevin: The FSEM courses are capped at a reasonable number (16) and the advanced physics courses are also general not high enrollment courses, so the paper load is not too bad.

Camille: What I learned about writing intensive is that there’s low stakes, medium stakes, and high stakes. The high stake assignment in this course is the manuscript that they have to write APA style since that’s our discipline. We’re teaching them at a 200 level how to write an APA style manuscript. ... There are dates by which certain parts of the manuscript are due. Then ...we talk about the background [section], and I give them two background papers to read. And they are to find one or two other peer-reviewed journals that they are going to incorporate into their intro, because that’s a part of our discipline. So they’re writing a mini introduction section. So after we talk about it a little bit, I have them turn in an introduction section that’s not graded, but I give them feedback and turn it back in to them. I do the same thing with the methods and results sections, because they have to learn how to write up and make graphs, and I give them feedback on those. ...So they are not penalized with their rough drafts in any way. But then they turn in, at the end, the final product. And at the end of the semester, when I’m grading the twenty manuscripts, it’s so much easier than it used to be, because of the feedback that I’ve given them. So now, that intro is much better, and the methods and the results sections are much better, and the abstract too.

Question: What advice do you have for faculty considering using writing to help teach?

John: Everything the student writes does not have to be painstakingly graded line by line. Use writing as the tool to make students think. For the assignments that you do choose to use for grading purposes, use a scoring guide or rubric to make the grading go much faster.

Kimberly: Accept the extra work. It really does help comprehension to require it. It is not easy on the faculty, but it is an effective practice for the students.

Kevin: I initially thought that I might not be qualified to teach a WI course like my FSEM, but I found that students don’t expect you to be and expert at grammar and diagramming sentences. They just want some helpful advice on how to write more clearly and cogently on topics that you probably are already passionate about.

Camille: I will say that [students] don’t necessarily like it as we go through. But students have come back after they have taken Research Methods and Senior Research, and say “thank you so much,” because the plan is that they don’t panic when they’re in senior research having to write an APA style manuscript because they’ve had experience in what I think is a less stressful kind of environment. As they’re going through it, though, they probably don’t think it’s that less stressful.

The mistake I made originally was that I was too worried about--this is going to sound weird--the writing part. But I realized all I'm doing is teaching Great Experiments of Psychology and having them write more about it. Our goal is to have all our kids to learn to write like a scientist. But again, the writing in my class might look different than the writing in her class -

Kimberly: And it should!

Camille: And it should! And that's what I meant. I was so worried on the writing, I was like "oh, I've got to be an expert on writing," but no, I don't have to be an expert on writing. I know how to *write for psychology*, and that's what I need to convey to the students. Does that make sense? We are experts on written communication in our field.

Kimberly: That's the way to put it. And that's what we need to convey to them, so they don't come out of there just knowing facts, but how to communicate in the field and how to communicate those facts well.