Proposal for the Marion Horstmann Online Teaching Innovation Grant

The Writing Lab

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Summary
My aim is to build a series of four Canvas-based modules that instructors may plug into their existing University College coursework to deepen their students’ engagement with course content in particular and the writing process in general.

The series will serve as a site for collaboration-based “lab work” that’s running in parallel with or in support of existing coursework, and the idea is to have students practice the tools and techniques associated with writing well and using writing to think deeply. Experimentation will be encouraged—hence, the name “The Writing Lab.”

While each module in the series has a particular focus, learning objective, and methodology, they all activate and facilitate collaborative learning. They can be plugged in individually or used as part of the following Writing Lab series:

- Social Reading: Textual Analysis
- Writing as Thinking: Critical Thinking
- Writing Workshop: Peer Review
- Writing Roundtable: Revision

Description of the proposed teaching and learning strategy. Where relevant, include links or examples that illustrate the strategy.

Proposed Teaching and Learning Strategy
This project aims to develop customizable, instructor-facilitated tools that give instructors the ability to integrate writing support into their existing coursework.

The tools are 2- to 5-week Canvas-based modules that instructors can import into their live/online/hybrid courses, then customize and facilitate. Using sequenced activities that harness the power of collaborative pedagogy, these modules will be designed to build writing communities by equipping students with the ability to serve as each other’s writing consultants and/or support teams. A primary goal of this collaboration-based structure is to allow for individualized writing support to be integrated into non-writing courses without creating an undue burden on instructors. Another goal is to train students to formulate writing support feedback for their peers in order, ultimately, to become better writers themselves.
**Background**

The challenge and pleasure of teaching writing is that the process thrives from individualized instruction. Students aim for individual goals, seek to overcome individual challenges, and start off with different writing toolsets. Given this, simply providing content about how to write well is nearly always insufficient. To be effective, writing instruction must be shaped to the individual writer—and writing must be practiced. This personalization process is of course one reason why courses in which writing instruction is central are necessarily small.

In addition, although writing is integral to coursework in a wide range of fields and at all academic levels, instructors are understandably hard-pressed to integrate individualized writing instruction into courses already aimed at delivering the complexities of their course content.

All to say, the Writing Lab series of writing support modules seeks to reconcile the competing demands of several realities associated with academic writing: (1) writing instruction must be personalized to be effective; (2) integrating writing instruction can create high workloads for instructors of courses in which non-writing-related content is the focus; (3) even in those courses where writing is integral (i.e., a paper is required), writing instruction is often not; (4) writing instruction can not only deepen a student’s engagement with course content, but because writing is a durable skill, writing support can engender broad, lasting benefits, bridging academic and workplace goals.

**Details**

The Writing Lab is a series of four modules that features a mix of activities, including formal/informal writing, staged reading activities, and social annotation projects, drawn from three branches of writing instruction: writing-in-the-discipline (WID), writing-to-learn (WTL), and writing-to-engage (WTE).

One element of writing instruction that is central to the creative writing workshop is collaborative learning—specifically in the form of peer review. The great benefit of peer review is that as students acquire and practice the skills of workshopping—i.e., providing feedback that is relevant, thoughtful, detailed, and craft-based—they become better writers themselves, not to mention, better readers. This is because the workshop process invites readers to participate in another writer’s compositional process from an emotionally cooler perspective. This act of articulating one’s understanding of a peer’s work-in-progress and considering the pros and cons of various revision strategies speeds up the acquisition of a student writer’s own craft awareness and self-editing skills. To this end, collaborative learning is at the heart of each of these Writing Lab modules.

By centralizing collaboration and introducing students to a team-teaching approach when it comes to writing, these modules seek to minimize the facilitation burden on the instructor while at the same time creating a (virtual) situation in which students formulate and receive individualized writing support.

The modules will not be designed to build sequentially, though there is a progression from reading and writing collaboratively to workshopping and revising.
Social Reading

Focus: Collaborative Learning Focused on Textual Analysis

Learning Objective: This writing-to-learn (WTL) module aims to deepen a student’s engagement with course content by introducing the etiquette and skills associated with active reading—namely, with producing meaningful digital annotation collaboratively—and to give students opportunities to practice and hone these skills in small- to medium-sized groups.

Method: Instructor-Facilitated Social Reading & Digital Annotation

Tools: Canvas; Perusall (A digital reading learning tool in Canvas); Instructor Support

Duration: 2 weeks (estimate)

Writing as Thinking

Focus: Writing Activities to Activate Critical Thinking

Learning Objective: This writing-to-engage (WTE) module aims to deepen a student’s engagement with course content by introducing the tools and techniques writers use to produce “structured thought.”

Method: Instructor-Facilitated Writing-to-Engage Activities

Tools: Canvas, Instructor Support

Duration: 1-2 weeks (estimate)

Writing Workshop

Focus: Collaborative Learning Focused on Writing Skills & Peer Review Methodology

Learning Objective: This writing-in-the-discipline (WID) module aims to harness the power of peer reviewing to help students identify and engage with the craft of writing.

Method: Instructor-Facilitated Writing Workshop

Tools: Canvas; Instructor Support

Duration: 2-4 weeks (depending on enrollment)

Writing Roundtable

Focus: Collaborative Learning Focused on Revision

Learning Objective: This writing-in-the-discipline (WID) module aims to equip students with strategies/tools to address their individual writerly needs at the sentence-level (and beyond) in order to revise projects. Possible Prerequisite: Writing Workshop module.

Method: Instructor-Seeded Writing Community

Tools: Canvas; Instructor Support

Duration: Multi-week (depending on enrollment)
These modules offer one way to integrate personalized writing instruction into courses where the focus is not on learning how to write in the discipline (though writing is required) and/or courses with large enrollments. I hope to make the modules customizable tools so that instructors can both adjust the desired level of customization and the degree to which they would like to participate in the facilitation of these writing modules.

**Purpose:** *How will the strategy impact student learning, engagement, and retention?*

By enabling instructors to integrate writing modules into their non-writing courses, this Writing Lab could give students the opportunity to:

- get writing support that is customized to the content of the course
- deepen their engagement with the course content via lateral learning
- improve their writing (and reading) skills through practice and focused collaboration with others
- speed up their learning through the act of teaching others (i.e., by formulating feedback for their peers)

By fostering meaningful, engaged collaboration among University College students from different disciplines and walks of life, the Writing Lab modules could also help build a sense of community, and since this community will have been formed online, in a respectful, task-focused space, it could flourish beyond the limits of a given semester.

Finally, although the writing support will be customized to the content of the course, the writing skills students gain through the Writing Lab activities would of course be transferable to other coursework as well as their present/future careers.

**Feasibility:** *Can the strategy be carried out with current Washington University technological resources? Are additional resources required? Explain.*

The Writing Lab series of modules would take advantage of tools already available at Washington University—namely, the Canvas Learning Management System and the external tools Kaltura, Zoom, and Perusall.

As part of the development of this series, I will test-drive these modules in the two courses I’m presently scheduled to teach for University College in Fall 2020: Online Fiction Writing and Research Writing in the Sciences. While I’ve already used pedagogical methods related to social reading, writing workshop, and revision extensively in fiction writing courses, I look forward to applying these methods in the Research Writing in the Sciences course and using that experience to build more broadly customizable modules.

To develop the Writing as Thinking module, I hope to use funds from this grant to attend (perhaps virtually) one of the workshops hosted by the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College in either July (“Writing and Thinking” Workshop) or October/November (“Writer as Reader” Workshop) 2020.
Application: To what courses that you teach would you apply this strategy? Comment on the scalability of the proposed strategy. If granted the award, which semester(s) are you available to teach in University College?

The Writing Lab modules aim to deliver writing instruction that is individualized, hands-on, and engaging. The interchangeability and complementary nature of these modules—i.e., their very modularity—presents several opportunities when it comes to scalability.

1. Writing is a durable skill that transcends academic disciplines and careers, and so these modules could serve a broad range of student populations, from those in the English Language Program to those in a variety of STEM fields, and even in Humanities courses where research papers are expected but writing instruction is not typically offered.

2. Students who encounter these modules in multiple courses will still be able to draw value from the experience of participating in them again because the modules in each course, having been customized to the course content and shaped by the students who happen to be enrolled in them, will be different—and also because writing skills are honed through practice. All to say, the modules are repeatable, which could contribute to their scalability.

3. From the instructor perspective, the modules offer an opportunity to build writing support into a course with a relatively large enrollment or one in which there isn’t an opportunity to provide individualized writing instruction. In addition, the modules can be integrated into live, online, or hybrid courses. In live courses, they would serve as an alternative space in which the classroom discussion could be extended; in online and hybrid courses, they could be fitted into the existing flow of ongoing content-focused discussions and thus deepen a sense of connectivity through collaboration.

4. The modules will be designed as templates that instructors will be able to import, customize, and facilitate. But there are a couple of other possible applications of the Writing Lab series. Instructors who are not able to take on the facilitation of the modules can import and customize the modules, but then make arrangements for the facilitation to be administered by another person, for example, a graduate student assistant, a writing consultant from the Writing Center, or even me.

5. Another application, which could also present an opportunity for scalability, involves forming the Writing Lab series into a single 1.5- to 2-credit course (facilitated by me or another writing instructor) that a student could take to improve her writing skills. In this application, the modules would not be customized to any course’s particular content. Instead, they would, more broadly, aim to engage students in the writing process by presenting a variety of academic and literary texts from different fields. In this scenario, students could self-selectively add the Writing Lab to complement the classes they are already taking in any given University College semester—or they could take them independently to develop their writing skills in general.

6. Finally, it is quite likely that the modules might evolve over time, perhaps through collaborations with interested faculty or by virtue of being facilitated in the future by a team of writing instructors, and this also may present unexpected opportunities for scalability, including interdisciplinary collaborations.
I hope to make at least two of these Writing Lab modules—Social Reading and Writing Workshop—available in Summer 2021 (or possibly Spring), and the entire series in Fall 2021.

In our present moment, when it’s uncertain how (and for how long) university courses and workplaces will continue to be transformed by the need to work online, my hope is that these Writing Lab modules might help instructors adapt their courses to the virtual environment with some pre-fabricated tools that they can simply plug in, customize and begin using. These tools will enable instructors to feature courses to feature content-specific writing support, and they could also help create a sense of community among socially distant students. Of course my ultimate hope is that the Writing Lab helps train students in how to collaborate online in working groups; to communicate with intentionality, clarity, and empathy; and to establish an online presence by developing their individual writerly voices.

Thank you.

Resources: