
Dead Psychologists' Book Reviews: WAC Magic in the History and Systems of Psychology Course

by Robert S. Miller

I was asked this past fall to teach History and Systems of Psychology for the first time. I recognized at once that this would provide me with an excellent opportunity to explore more fully some WAC techniques that interest me: peer response and the use of portfolios, and to integrate writing-to-learn deeply into a course right from its conception. I had flirted with peer response the previous year in another course with good preliminary results, but the experiment was a one-time-only event. I had seen Meg Peterson-Gonzalez work magic with the technique in Composition, and I wanted to try it more extensively. I had heard Michelle Fistek and her students talk about the use of writing portfolios in political science classes, and I longed to give them a try. But like others, I face great inertia when I try to redo on-going courses that I have been teaching successfully. It is much easier to try new techniques in a new preparation.

History and Systems seemed like just the right place, because I perceived a need in that course for students to write to learn. The course is a sort of capstone in the psychology major. Usually taken in the senior year, it is designed to cause students to reflect on the various systems or theories of psychology they have encountered in their other courses and place these in historical

context. In the course then, students are asked to integrate past and present. At this point in my development as a WAC advocate, I can no longer imagine how to bring that about *except* with writing experiences. I decided fairly early in my planning that I would have the students create a writing portfolio, that is, write a series of papers, putting each through a series of drafts, and then submit the whole thing as a portfolio at the end of the semester to be graded. Following Michelle's lead I decided I would have students peer review the first drafts each time, then using feedback from the peers, revise and create a second draft, which I would review. Students would then have the option of revising again for the final portfolio. Meg had used a similar system in Composition.

I thought it might work well to have students write five papers. My thinking was that if students wrote three drafts of each of five papers that would be 15 in all, one per week for each week of the semester. I was hoping that students would be learning about the process of writing as they went through the five assignments, and I decided that would be more likely if the assignments were similar each time.

A few weeks before the course was to begin, however, I still hadn't settled on the assignment. I wanted it to be one that would force students to do the kind of integration of past and present that we hope goes on in the History and Systems course. I also wanted it to be one that would get them to go beyond the mere memorization of historical events to a deeper understanding of historical forces. David Zehr loaned me a file of short paper assignments which he had used over the years in the course. I read through the file and one in particular captured my interest. It asked students to

speculate on what some historical figure would have thought about something in present-day psychology. I no longer remember the details. But I do remember that I looked up from reading that assignment, and my eyes focused on a tall stack of complimentary copies of general psychology texts on the windowsill in my office. It has been a good eight years since the last time I taught General Psych, but book reps keep sending these things to me, and about 35 had accumulated. I don't think I actually uttered the word, "Eureka," and I now regret missing such a perfect opportunity. In a flash an assignment came to me that would not only meet all the requirements of what I was looking for, but also allow me to make use of that unwanted stack of books.

I quickly sketched out what I later came to call the Dead Psychologists' Book Reviews assignment. The assignment asked the students to imagine that there is such a thing as Time Mail, which allows them to send written materials to people from the past. They were told they were going to be GIVEN a copy of a recent general psychology textbook, and that for each paper assignment they were to imagine sending the book to one of the important figures in the history of psychology accompanied by a cover letter which was provided in the assignment:

Dear Famous Historical Figure:

It is 1994 and I am a student of the history of psychology at Plymouth State College in Plymouth, NH. We regard you as an important figure in that history, and I am curious to know what you would think of how psychology has developed since the time you made your important contributions.

Enclosed is a psychology textbook of the sort we

might use today to introduce the discipline to college students. As such it summarizes where psychology is today in the late 20th century. I would appreciate it if you would read this book and send me a written reaction.

Specifically I am interested in knowing whether psychology seems to have developed as you would have expected. What in modern psychology surprises you the most? What surprises you the least? What do you see in modern psychology that reflects your influence? Feel free to answer only some of these questions or to take your reaction in another direction if you wish.

I know that you dead people all speak English (and conform to modern conventions of English usage as described in Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*) and that you all have access to word processors. A 3- to 5-page word-processed response to my questions would be most appreciated.

Sincerely,
An Eager Student

The students' assignment was to role play the historical figure and write the letter they thought the person would write in response to the modern text. For each of the five papers, the student was given a choice of three or four historical figures, all ones we had studied within two weeks prior to the due date of the first draft.

I hoped this assignment would get each student to review modern psychology and integrate the modern with the historical. I hoped by role playing historical figures the student would come to appreciate the personalities of the figures and the *Zeitgeist* in which they worked in a way that would go beyond superficial

awareness of the figures' historical importance. I hoped the assignment was rich enough that it could be done five times without becoming tedious and with there being some positive transfer from the process of writing the earlier papers (and reading others' drafts) to the later ones. But I knew if all else failed, I was at least going to get rid of that stack of books on my windowsill.

The writing portfolio method does require a certain amount of class time. In this case I scheduled five classes that would be peer review classes. These were the five days when first drafts of each paper were due. The syllabus warned for each of these days, **NO ONE WILL BE ADMITTED TO CLASS UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY A FIRST DRAFT**. This was because I intended the whole period be devoted to students reading each other's drafts and making written comments. If anyone were present without a draft, there would not be enough to go around. I also anticipated that other classes or pieces of classes might get devoted to discussing the writing assignments. Since I was designing a course I had never taught before, there was no great problem in setting aside this time. I had decided the writing portfolio would count as 40% of the students' course grade; within that context devoting whole classes to it made sense.

I have developed the habit of sharing my writing assignments with Roy Andrews at the College Writing Center. He provides help, guidance, constructive criticism, or (as in this case) enthusiastic encouragement. This time as we discussed the plan we became so excited, we decided merely observing wouldn't be enough: we wanted to participate. Specifically both Roy and I decided that we would write first drafts of each paper assignment, so we could participate in the peer review meetings.

In retrospect, I think this was a really important aspect of the whole project. The fact that Roy and I were writing these papers too gave a strong message of their importance. This also allowed us to be a part of the peer review process, modeling how to do that, and perhaps modeling how to do the assignments. One of the strengths of peer review is that weaker writers or writers who simply didn't understand the task very well may get to read the drafts of stronger writers who do.

The first peer review day we all were apprehensive, I think. I know Roy and I were! But this turned out to be the first evidence I had that this WAC experiment was going to work very well indeed. Every single student showed up. Every single student was accompanied by a complete first draft. To structure the task a bit, I asked each writer to staple a blank sheet of paper to the front of the draft and several more to the back. On the front sheet we each wrote three questions or statements to reflect what we most wanted our reviewers to tell us about our drafts. Reviewers were encouraged to write marginal comments that would reveal what they did not understand, also any comments that would help the writer decide what needed changing and what did not. They were asked on the blank sheets at the back to write general comments and to respond to the writer's questions. We discovered that first day that most of us could respond to about three drafts in the 40 minutes or so that were available. We left five minutes at the end to read what reviewers had written and free write about our intentions for revising. The period sped by with all 33 of us diligently working. Comments after this first session were highly positive.

A week later the second drafts were due. I believe

that first time everyone submitted one (except Roy and me—though it might have been even better for us to carry each paper through several drafts as the students did, we decided we were too young for sainthood), and I was generally impressed with the results. A number of them were highly creative and represented great success getting inside the personality of the historical figure, making the voice of the letter compatible with the thinking of that figure, and taking the *Zeitgeist* in which the person would have been operating into account.

With the later assignments there were always one or two missing students on peer review day (some for what seemed to be legitimate reasons and some not) and one or two who failed to turn in the second draft. Students had been told the final portfolio would be evaluated 50% on its completeness (and 50% on the quality of the final drafts), and surely this motivated some of their diligence. However, I have tried all kinds of systems of reward (and sometimes punishment) for encouraging responsibility in other classes and never had anywhere near the success I had in this case. I have to feel that some of it came from the fairly consistent level of enthusiasm that developed for the writing in this course, and from the fact that the class seemed to become, as I had hoped it would, a community of writers that increasingly took responsibility for itself.

As a group we frequently discussed the writing that we were doing, and as our sense of community developed, I turned over more and more decisions about the project to the group. For example, after the second peer response day, I set aside some class time to discuss how the whole project was going. At first the discussion was lively and enthusiastic and exciting. Then some-

how the topic of grades came up and the fact that somehow the final portfolio would have to be evaluated for quality. The discussion immediately became awkward and confusing. We left the matter alone for that day, but at the next class I told the students I had decided that **THEY** should decide how the portfolios would be evaluated and even who should do this.

We scheduled a specific class for this around the middle of the semester. We began by freewriting about what makes a good paper in this course. From that we generated a list of specific ideas. When we saw these on the blackboard, we noticed that some of them were similar. We eventually reduced the list to four criteria that we thought could be used to evaluate the final drafts:

- Effectiveness of **angle** taken. (Includes use of intellectual stance, creativity, consistency, and effectiveness of point of view.)
- Authority**. (Includes freedom and attitude of tone, confidence displayed by the letter writer.)
- Readability**. (Includes flow and ease with which letter can be understood.)
- Responsiveness to feedback** from readers.

At that same meeting, I asked who should evaluate the final drafts. Everyone agreed that as the course instructor, I should, but some thought maybe the writer should do a self-evaluation also. “How about a peer evaluation?” I asked. “And should all the final drafts be evaluated or only some smaller number the writer wanted to submit for this purpose?” There was no clear consensus on either of these two questions, and we put them aside for another week or so.

When I brought them up again, we had just peer reviewed the fourth of the five papers. This time a number of students declared that they had gotten tired

of the assignment, and argued that the papers were getting tedious and very much alike. I had felt this myself writing the draft of the fourth one. As a group, we decided we would cancel the fifth paper and devote the time saved to producing the best possible drafts of the first four.

We returned to the matter of how many final drafts would be evaluated, and after some discussion and without unanimous consensus we agreed that each student would indicate which two of the four should be evaluated. This was a compromise between a subgroup who wanted only one evaluated and one who wanted all four. After more discussion, we agreed (again without unanimity) that the two final drafts would be evaluated first by the writer, second by one randomly chosen peer, and finally by the instructor, with each of these having an equal vote in determining the 50% of the grade to be based on quality. When the time came I prepared an appropriate rating sheet, on which each of the two papers could be evaluated on the four criteria the group had chosen. Students did the self-evaluation first and submitted it with the portfolio. On the day the portfolio was due the class period was given over to the peer evaluations. As instructor I did my evaluation last and without looking at the two that had already been completed.

I do not want to give the false impression that everything about these writing experiences went perfectly. One problem already mentioned was that a number of writers found the similarity of the assignments tedious. Some students responded to this by writing what amounted to "formula papers," at least for the early drafts. These were generic responses of amazement to the modern text, interspersed with a few biographical or theoretical references to the historical

figure's life and work. Usually, however, the readers' responses to these early drafts succeeded in motivating the writer to overcome the problem in the final draft.

When I read the final portfolios, I was often astonished at the improvement between the second and final drafts. This often was much greater than that between the first and second drafts. A few students confessed in the written evaluation of the whole project at the end of the semester that they had made only superficial changes between the first and second drafts, preferring to wait for the instructor's response before attempting serious revision.

The one aspect of the project that I would definitely avoid another time is peer evaluation of the portfolio. Many students did this in what appeared to be a serious and responsible way, but a sizable group did not. There were many cases where the peer gave the portfolio top ratings in every category, when this did not seem justified, and, in fact, several students admitted on the project evaluation that they had done this because they were unhappy about having to evaluate others. Interestingly very few students gave their own portfolios top ratings. In fact, quite often the self-evaluation was the lowest of the three.

Despite these problems I regard my first experience with writing portfolios as a huge success. Of the 31 students in the class 28 submitted portfolios that were entirely complete. In most of these cases the quality of the final drafts was indisputably excellent. The enthusiasm which motivated this completeness and excellence was revealed on the project evaluations students wrote. Nearly every student encouraged me to make use of the portfolio assignment again in this course. I intend to take their advice.