

Over the past week I have had 4 of the WAC coaches come into my classes. Each session revolved around looking at Student Exams.

The exams had been written in class. The students had the questions a week ahead of time. They were allowed to use their book and any notes they wanted during the exam.

I experimented with two different formats. In one class I used only the opening paragraphs from the exams. I did this in part because it was the first of the sessions but also because the students seemed to have a difficult time forming reasonable openings.

Mike Burke was the coach in the first class. I typed up several of the hand written exam opening paragraphs. I sent them to Mike so that he would be familiar with the writing. On the day of the class session I projected the exams on the board with a projector.

I introduced Mike as a colleague in the WAC program who was here to act as an outside reader of their work. He was the audience that they were given on the exam prompt. Mike was able to give the perspective of someone who was unfamiliar with the texts they had read. I also informed them that they would be able to rewrite the exam based on my comments that I wrote on their exams as well as taking ideas from the current session to enhance their revision.

We proceeded to evaluate the first few writing samples. We gave very frank evaluations of the work, what made sense, and what was unclear. After several of these the students started to offer comments and evaluations of the work. Mike and I modeled how to read the work and the students were quickly able to participate thoughtfully.

At the end I asked for feedback on the session. Their comments fell into two categories. 1) They wanted to do this on subsequent exams, and 2) Many wished that their papers had been chosen to evaluate since those we specifically analyzed received invaluable help in rewriting the exam.

On subsequent sessions with Diane Musgrave, Jean Mach and Anne Stafford I typed up entire exam answers. These classes proceeded similarly with introductions, and analysis. Each had its own unique characteristics due to the students but also due to the WAC coaches. Each had excellent insights, comments and observation about the writing. Diane, Jean and Anne, for example, were much better at identifying certain problems that would be worth going to the Writing Center to address. (I thought this was invaluable. I also realized that more of this kind of analysis would greatly help me in the future.)

I am fairly sure that having someone who is not the instructor come into the class facilitated the discussion much more than merely more of me talking about their work. I think my comments would be okay, but the added authority of an outsider seems important. It introduces the students to an important aspect of the WAC program: the idea that writing is not merely a class specific activity. Rather, they see that writing is a community activity not done in isolation.

Working with my colleagues was very instructive. I was able to see how others work in class. I also was able to observe the class while my coaches offered insights. It allowed a good team working environment.

As to the question of which is better: small selections, or entire exams, I am mixed but leaning towards entire exams. The shorter selections allowed many to be examined. That allowed a lot of comparison. But it did not allow an entire train of thought to unfold and be assessed. The longer answers did allow a rich environment to follow the thoughts from start to finish. I suppose in the future I can assess this more specifically. Maybe have a session after every exam, start with openings, and then move on to longer selections. Or hold a session before the first exam that presents openings and evaluate them so students can create better openings. Then evaluate longer, complete answers after the exam. There is much room for further study here.