In her article, “From Outsider to Insider: Staying Academic, Discourse Communities Across the Curriculum,” Eleanor Kutz draws on students’ competence in what she calls “discourse communities” or “communities where people share ways of talking and writing as well as interests, beliefs, and values” to facilitate the development of competence in academic, disciplinary discourse (75).

The strategy is effective, Kutz suggests, because it positions students in a way that allows them to see the “larger patterns” within discourse communities, whether academic or otherwise (92). On March 30th, participants in the Writing in the Disciplines program at LaGuardia Community College used Kutz’s ideas to focus on their own experiences in becoming “insiders” within particular discourse communities. Interestingly, most faculty participants reported that they do not consider themselves as “insiders” at all. In reflecting on their own positions on their own status vis-à-vis their respective disciplines, participants were poised to consider the commonalities and differences for good writing in the disciplines, strategies to help students acquire insider disciplinary knowledge, and strategies to facilitate their engagement with other disciplines.

Across the disciplines. What follows is a list of their findings.

The commonalities and differences of what we consider good writing in our disciplines.

Different:

- Formats and structures
- Subjects of academic journals
- Methodological approaches and forms of argumentation
- Forms of specialized language
- Types of evidence
- Values regarding conciseness vs. elaboration
- Aims or goals: for example, a story, value, treatment, or results
- Degrees of incorporating other disciplines

Similar:

- Emphasis on accessible language
- Required use of specific examples
- Desire for clarity
- Desire that the audience be known
- Requirement for knowledge of literature on your topic
- Requirement for knowledge and use of specialized language
- Requirement for knowledge of authors associated with particular concepts
- Desire for the ability to take a position and be critical
- Desire for the ability to draw on acceptable levels of assumed knowledge
- What we can do to help students become “insiders”:
- Use specific, concrete examples
- Encourage participation and observation
- Model disciplinary moves
- Connect theory with real life
- Make methodologies and meta-analyses explicit
- Compare different ways of knowing

What we can do to help students develop writing skills that migrate across all their courses:

- Use specific, concrete examples
- Enourage students to form their own opinions
- Let them know there is not just one way to write
- Give students clear directions
- Be able to engage with other disciplines
- Be critical of our own discipline and others
- Be aware of our own assumptions about what good writing looks like
- Provide opportunities for peer and instructor review
- Welcome and allow students to draw on knowledge from other disciplines
- Allow students to draw on knowledge from “outside” academia
- Give students models of good writing
- Have students generate criteria of what makes the work good
- Position students as experts

In the spring, we are examining whether the WID process is dialogical. They run their ideas by family and friends, extending their classrooms from “outside” to “insider” within different academic disciplines. Justin Rogers-Cooper followed suit by retrieving some journal memories from faculty who completed the WID seminar within the last decade. Meanwhile, Fellow Elizabeth Bullock has organized the results from the final large-group faculty and Fellow meeting, which examined the transition experience from “outsider” to “insider” within different academic disciplines.
Getting Into WID

by Justin Rogers-Cooper

Every year, the WID program requires faculty to consolidate their revised assignments, syllabi and teaching documents into a portfolio. Besides archiving course materials for future classes at LaGuardia, these portfolios are small treasures for those interested in learning more about faculty development through the WID seminar series. This is especially true for the journals faculty use to trace their development in the program. Just like students learning the vocabulary and concepts in a new discipline, faculty in the WID program often have to challenge cherished assumptions and techniques about the nature of teaching. Their journals are a good source to follow these challenges.

In the spring of 2004, for instance, a math professor “WID-ed” his “Math in Action” class (MAT05). He used an idea from John C. Bean’s Engaging Learning to merge a low-stakes writing assignment with basic set theory. In addition to asking students to think of sets from their daily life, the math professor recorded in his journal his experience giving his math students writing. He was surprised by their response:

I expected the students to struggle as strange looks that the professor expected would probably become anachronistic as WID techniques spread throughout LaGuardia classrooms (or they should). This is because consistent student exposure to these techniques should lessen their unfamiliarity potential as professors use them more often to guide student learning.

Then again, not all WID experiences are equal. An English professor’s journal for her LH 200 course revealed some ambivalence about the use of low-stakes WID activities. She did note that her aim was not to challenge her student set writing “is often more accessible” to students because “they’re not so stressed in writing it.” The professor’s observation about student stress points to the experience of collecting "anxiety about the students feel writing. The professor also relates how much she liked Bean’s idea about forbidding students to write in their textbooks. Instead, she explains how she wants her students to write down what they liked a passage, rather than simply cover it in yellow ink. And yet this instructor also mentions how worried she is about the middle and bottom thirds of her students. She wants to reach the middle group, but also desires to somehow lessen the anxiety about the students that “don’t improve” over the course of the semester. This is also a natural fear for all faculty. And while the WID program can’t solve the issues surrounding these students, it’s philosophy is clear: the bottom third of students in a classroom will improve with writing to learn strategies. The tense question for them is not, can they improve, but, rather, how much writing is necessary for them to do it?“

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Graffiti: Art or Vandalism?

Creating a High-Stake Writing Assignment in WID

Professor Michelle Pacht shares a writing assignment that she worked on in the WID program. A documentary film following the students’ experiences with this assignment will be available in the Fall.

Research Essay: Graffiti

We are discussing the issue of graffiti in New York City using sources such as images, newspaper articles, government documents, and personal experience. After thinking critically about the different perspectives we have encountered so far, you are going to write an essay of at least 1000 words (approximately 4 pages) in which you develop a particular thesis about graffiti.

Your research sources may include books, encyclopedias, newspaper or magazine articles, reliable websites, interviews, films, photographs, and/or primary documents from the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives. The essay writing process is broken down into the 6 steps outlined below. Each step is worth part of the essay’s final grade. The essay as a whole is worth 20% of your final grade for the class.

Grades for this essay will be based on the following criteria (see Evaluation of Essays):

Main Idea
Organization and Coherence
Analysis and Development
Voice, Purpose, and Audience
Incorporation of Sources
Conventions of Standard Written English

Step 1: Examine What You Have (in class on Tuesday, March 24)

Make a list of all the graffiti-related materials we have discussed as a class so far. Review your notes for each and indicate at least one major issue about graffiti that is raised in the article, image, or discussion. Looking at all the sources together, how many different issues can you identify?

Step 2: Choose a Focus (in class on Tuesday, March 24)

Review your notes for Step 1 and choose the one aspect about graffiti you think would be most interesting to research further (i.e. gang activity, hip hop culture, cost of removing graffiti, its role as street art, etc). What stance do you currently take on the issue? What evidence do you need to support your thesis? Based on the feedback received, you will revise, edit, and proofread your first draft to save copies of all your sources (note the name of the source, its date, author, publication information, etc) for your source folder. Final drafts will not be graded without a source folder.

Step 3: Create an Outline (due class library lesson on Thursday, April 2)

Make an outline of your essay. What is an outline? An outline is a graphic representation of your ideas. It helps your paper flow logically from one idea to the next. Your outline should be a complete skeleton of your entire essay. It should not be too detailed. Instead, you want to focus on the main points you will use to support your thesis. See Keys for Writers pgs 22-24.

Step 4: Do Research (class library lesson on Thursday, April 2)

Find several reliable sources that address your thesis statement. Read and evaluate a number of books, academic articles, encyclopedias, etc. before you decide on two or three that best fit your topic and your point of view. See “Using the Library to do Research” worksheet and ask for the graffiti folder at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives to find additional sources on the topic. Be sure to save copies of all your sources (note the name of the source, its date, author, publication information, etc) for your source folder. Final drafts will not be graded without a source folder.

Step 5: First Draft Due/Class Presentations (due Tuesday, April 14)

Write a first draft of an essay in which you make a clear thesis statement that is supported by facts, evidence, and/or quotations from your research sources. You must use at least two (2) reliable research sources. Provide in-text citations for all quotations and paraphrases that support your thesis. Include a Works Cited page that adheres to correct MLA style.

Step 6: Final Draft Due (due Tuesday, April 28)

Based on the feedback received, you will revise, edit, and proofread your final draft to produce a complete and polished final draft. Your final draft must:

Meet the minimum requirement of 600 words (not including the Works Cited)
Follow the formatting guidelines listed above
Have a title
Refer to at least two (2) reliable research sources
Provide in-text citations for all quotations and paraphrases
Include a Works Cited page that adheres to correct MLA style