

What are Vanderbilt students saying about the Writing Studio?

“My session provided me with an opportunity to talk out my paper’s problems. Beforehand, I knew something was wrong with it, but I wasn’t sure how to fix it. After my session, it still took me some time to find a clear direction for my paper, but at least I left with a starting point.”

“The consultant helped me come up with solutions to problems in my paper instead of just telling me what to do. This way I learned to write better in general instead of just learning how to make that specific paper better.”

“I felt like my consultant was really listening and responding to my concerns. While I had different expectations for the session, it was very nice to be able to talk out my ideas with someone who has a strong grasp about what makes interesting and good writing.”

“The consultant did not dominate the session. I liked that he didn’t tell me what to do, rather he guided me along, always making suggestions. I felt comfortable right away, which was good because I was a little nervous about coming to the studio for the first time.”

“I couldn’t have asked for a better consultant. She helped me see more clearly the thoughts I had already written down, and she also helped me develop connections and more thoughtful analysis in my paper. Her questions were really amazing in helping me organize my thoughts.”

“The session was great. He really helped me figure out some new ideas for the paper. I came in very dissatisfied with it and had no idea and no motivation for how to fix it. He worked with me to make it something I could revise and improve a great deal. After my session, I was proud to turn in my paper.”

Honoring the Student’s Voice: The Heart of the Honor Code and the Writing Studio

By Rachel Bowers, Writing Studio Staff

The Vanderbilt Honor Code demands that students’ written work represent their own “original thoughts.” The Writing Studio, according to its stated mission, “fosters collaborative intellectual inquiry by encouraging conversation and critical reflection.” As a consultant in the Writing Studio and a member of the Vanderbilt academic community, I have felt the apparent and real tension between these two statements. How can we ensure that students submit work that represents their original ideas alone if we also promote collaborative inquiry?

In spite of the apparent conflict of interests, I have discovered a strong academic ethic that unites the purpose of the Honor Code with the mission of the Writing Studio: a commitment to promote the integrity and development of each individual student’s intellectual voice.

Consultants in the Writing Studio, as members of the academic community ourselves, take our adherence to the Honor Code seriously not only in our own academic work as students, but also in our work with those who come to us for help. That doesn’t mean that we don’t face challenges in interpreting the Honor Code.

These challenges can come in the form of three “types” of student:

- the silent student who claims only to want an editor,
- the confused student who wants to succeed but is truly lost, and
- the intensely engaged student who is eager to talk about ideas and work on writing.

While all three scenarios require writing consultants to hold in tension the responsibility to help students with the ethical obligations of the Honor Code, I find that silent students present the most difficult challenge. When a student arrives for a session, tosses a paper in front of me, and says, “I just need someone to look this over and tell me what to do with it,” the boundaries of academic integrity are easy enough to locate but more difficult to operate within. Clearly, I will not be “telling” the student what to do, nor will I function as an editor—and I take it as my responsibility to say so. What’s not so clear is how to convince the student to take ownership of his or her paper. Usually, when I explain these boundaries and ask the student to state more specifically what kind of trouble she might be having with her writing, she becomes a more active participant and learns quickly that I am there to challenge and help—not necessarily to make her work easier.

Some of my colleagues respond to this type of scenario with a more extreme “minimalist” approach by avoiding looking at the draft altogether. Instead, they encourage students to talk

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through their ideas, which allows the consultant to question and probe for claims, evidence, and detail. Along similar lines, I find that by sitting back and refusing to pick up a pen myself, I can elicit more active participation from the student. Students may view these strategies as cold or mean, but many of my most productive sessions grow from an initial moment of refusal on my part to coddle or make things easy for them. When I invest in the student’s learning (rather than in the draft itself), I see the student’s attention shift from getting a paper “fixed” to owning and defending his or her ideas. Through this type of collaboration, the student has no choice but to raise his or her own intellectual voice.

This outcome, it seems to me, is the core goal of the Honor Code. The Honor Code does not exist simply as a measuring stick to support punitive academic action, but rather as a statement of profound respect for each individual’s thought and learning. If a student represents another’s work as his or her own, disciplinary action should certainly be taken, but what is truly lost is an opportunity for that student to experiment with ideas, take intellectual risks, and learn from honest feedback. The collaborative inquiry taking place in the Writing Studio extends and supports students’ intellectual risk-taking. We question, we challenge, and we help clarify students’ ideas in ways that help them experience the value of thinking for themselves. In so doing, we hope to empower students and increase their confidence along with their capacity to formulate and to voice those independent thoughts in conversation and, of course, through their writing. ■

Words and Woods Kicks Off Its Fourth Season of Workshops

John Morrell, Writing Studio Staff

Every human language secretes a kind of perceptual boundary that hovers, like a translucent veil, between those who speak that language and the sensuous terrain that they inhabit. As we grow into a particular culture or language, we implicitly begin to structure our sensory contact with the earth around us in a particular manner, paying attention to certain phenomena while ignoring others, differentiating textures, tastes, and tones in accordance with the verbal contrasts contained in the language.

– David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996)

Words and Woods kicked off the spring semester 2008 with one of its most exciting events yet. On January 17th, Jonathan Gilligan, Senior Lecturer in Earth and Environmental Sciences, inspired a crowd in Alumni Hall with a talk on two topics: the role of rhetoric in the climate change debate and the role of nature and place in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which Gilligan is adapting for the stage in an ongoing collaboration with his mother. Professor Gilligan stressed the difficulty faced by environmentalists and concerned scientists in generating a sense of urgency about a problem like climate change, which unfolds over the course of several human generations. This difficulty contributes to the strategy behind many of the images and rhetorical moves that dominate media portrayals of climate change, Gilligan explained, including reminders about retreating glaciers, calving ice shelves, and trees and flowers blooming out of season. These images of beautiful places changed by global warming aim to generate an emotional response in their audience, to express the dramatic consequences of a process that might otherwise seem remote in time and space.

Professor Gilligan’s discussion of adapting *The Scarlet Letter* for stage moved our considerations of language, space, and place into exciting, new territory. As Professor Gilligan reminisced about hiking the same trails in Massachusetts that Hawthorne had hiked over a century before, read aloud from *The Scarlet Letter*, and performed lines from his own play, he offered the audience in Alumni Hall the opportunity to consider Hawthorne’s and his own use of natural imagery to affect our understanding of social and moral issues. After attendees spent some time writing in response to Gilligan’s presentation, a lively question and answer session followed in which audience members traced out the connections between Gilligan’s concern with political and literary rhetoric.

Words and Woods is a series of place-based writing workshops dedicated to exploring the ways that language shapes our understanding and appreciation of the natural world. These workshops were initiated in the fall of 2006 to support the mission of the Writing Studio to foster interdisciplinary conversation about writing at Vanderbilt. To this end, all *Words and Woods* workshops offer the opportunity

for written reflection and discussion. Past workshops have included a visit to Chris Drury’s exhibit *Inside Out/Outside In* at the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery, a guided tour of the campus arboretum with Steve Baskauf, Senior Lecturer in Biology and creator of the Vanderbilt online tree tour, and an exploration of the environmental aesthetics of haiku. This fall, *Words and Woods* took its first trip off-campus, collaborating with Vanderbilt’s Outdoor Recreation program to take a group of students backpacking in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Outfitted with cameras, journals, and a copy of Edward Abbey’s 1972 collaboration with photographer Eliot Porter, *Appalachian Wilderness: The Great Smoky Mountains*, we set off into the northeast corner of the park to enrich our experience of the outdoors through words and images. Participants hiked the Low Gap trail, wrote poetry and chased butterflies at lunch, photographed flowers and caterpillars, and camped out near a babbling brook, whose language we tried to translate into our journals on the final morning of our travels. Images from the trip and excerpts from participants’ journals are posted on the Writing Studio Web site under “Events.”

Two workshops remain for the spring semester. On April 14, Steve Baskauf will return with the leaves for another tour of the campus arboretum. Then in early May, *Words and Woods* will take a second trip to the Smokies with Ed Abbey. This time we’ll spend four days away from campus, long enough to hike to the Albright Grove, one of the last remaining stands of old-growth forest in the East. Keep an eye on the Writing Studio Web site for more information about these exciting opportunities. ■

“A Pair of New Eyes” Cont.

The Honors students were divided into four groups. After having collaborated in a peer-only environment during the fall Honors seminar, each group was assigned a graduate writing consultant. English graduate students John Morrell, Sarah Childress, Josh Epstein, and Christina Neckles filled these roles. Over the course of the semester, these peer-consultant groups met three times: having exchanged drafts (of one chapter from each thesis) the previous week, the 1 ½ - 2 hour

meetings were spent discussing ideas and plans for revision and expansion based on the group’s comments.

Schoenfield liked the idea of “introducing a new brain in the middle of the process” and felt having graduate students participate in the groups added an “extra level of professional opinion.” As for the honors students, they too generally saw the graduate consultant as a beneficial addition. Honors alumna Ashley Owens said her consultant “served as a kind of mediator as the three of us took turns discussing each other’s work.” But, Owens added, “he also contributed revision suggestions of his own to each of us and I could tell that he had spent a great deal of time with our drafts between meetings.”

Of course, additional readers present a potential problem: both Schoenfield and his students were worried about contrasting advice from peer reviews, the graduate consultant, and faculty advisors. Some students found the meetings made them unduly self-conscious, but others were pleasantly surprised by the results. Owens, in particular, appreciated her discovery that “I needed to ultimately trust myself and my own way with words and my own vision for the project.” Schoenfield credits his students’ intelligence in handling such issues: “Learning to evaluate and integrate criticism,” he notes, “is one of the most important parts of growing as a writer and a thinker.”

In the end, Schoenfield was pleased with the results that the writing groups had on the theses. Although some students invested more in the process than others, he thought it important that he was not “micromanaging them” and emphasized the overall improvement he saw in both basic and complex aspects of writing (especially organization, logic, and structure).

As with all writing projects, there is still a lot of room for revision in the Writing Group structure. There was a consensus that the groups added, in Schoenfield’s words “an extra layer of organizational chaos.” Graduate Bryan Spoon points out the pressure of printing “400 pages a week” and that the lag between meetings could make discussing the overall project a bit “like trying to talk about the shape of a lake from individual rocks you pick up along the shore line.”

This year, Schoenfield tried to lift some of the organizational stress by integrating writing consultants in the brainstorming process. Nevertheless, the potential value of the experience seems to outweigh most of the drawbacks. Spoon and Owens echo each other precisely, both asserting that the experience is “definitely worth it” for thesis writers. While meetings for the English Honors Thesis groups for this year are still in progress, we hope the experience will again prove beneficial to all involved. ■

UPCOMING

EVENTS

april

Friday April 4

12:10–1:10 p.m., Alumni Hall 117

What is My Paper About, After All?
– Revising Thesis Statements

Tuesday April 8

4:00–5:00 p.m., Alumni Hall 117

Revision Strategies

Tuesday, April 8

6:00–8:00 p.m., Alumni Hall 117

Dinner and a Draft with Jonathan Neufeld

Thursday, April 10

4:00–7:00 p.m., Buttrick Hall

First-Year Forum

Monday, April 14

3:00–4:00 p.m.

Words and Woods:**Tree Tour with Steve Baskauf**

may

Thursday–Sunday

May 1–4

Words and Woods: Backpacking
the Big Smokies with Ed Abbey

Writing about “God, Sex, and the Earth”: Help for the First Year Writing Seminar

Gay Welch, Director of Religious Life and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

I have taught a first-year writing seminar three times in the last three years, with varying success. This year, because of the range of writing ability represented in these groups, and because the Writing Studio had been so helpful to my students in the past, I decided to schedule a visit by one of the staff early in the semester, and I’m so very glad I did. Because the course involves the intersection of several disciplines (religious studies, gender studies and environmental ethics), the readings and the writing assignments present several challenges.

Religious Studies courses present unique problems for a first-year course. As one would expect, students come to Vanderbilt from a wide variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, and many identify with specific religious traditions and creeds. Students who have not previously taken religion courses—and that’s most of them—are often not aware of the distinction between writing

about religious ideas and expressing their own religiously-based ideas or beliefs. The subject matter of the course makes the “They Say” vs. “I say” perspective particularly important. Discerning what counts as evidence for a particular assertion or argument is often quite difficult for students just entering college, especially when the issue of religious authority arises in this course. Add the category of gender into the mix, and deeply held convictions can be threatened. The discussions are usually not not dull(!), but the need for discipline and clarity is even more important, given the sometimes sensitive nature of the topics under consideration.

The in-class writing workshop was especially helpful to my students in that it introduced them to the difference between opinion and scholarly analysis, between writing about how one feels about an author and how one might assess that author’s argument. Finally the workshop illustrated the importance of having

a thesis or argument, supportive evidence, and a conclusion, as opposed to a list of issues, or disconnected summary quotations.

Perhaps the success of the workshop could be attributed to the fact that it was planned collaboratively. The consultant and I communicated about the course and about the problems my students faced in writing their first round of papers. I was able to provide him with examples of texts from the various disciplines around which the course was formed. With this information in mind, he crafted a preliminary lesson plan—a carefully organized presentation that was designed with the course in mind—which we discussed at a later meeting. The consultant was a skilled communicator, interacted well with the students, and held their interest and mine. He helped me discuss writing with my students and he helped my students reconsider the role of writing in the classroom. If I didn’t send a formal thank-you note, I should have! ■

the Writers’

block

Issue 1, Spring 2008

writing
studio

Directors’ Note By Jennifer Holt, Gary Jaeger, and Tom Orange

Hello reader! As befits a relatively new operation—this is only our fifth semester as a fully staffed campus service—much has been happening at the Writing Studio in recent months. We want to take the opportunity in this debut issue of our bi-annual newsletter to familiarize you with our services and guiding mission.

In order to assist with the overall steering of the Studio, Director Jennifer Holt has brought two new Assistant Directors on board, both of whom hold joint teaching and administrative appointments. Gary Jaeger comes to the Writing Studio and the Philosophy Department from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where he was a Visiting Assistant Professor. Before that, he taught academic writing as a graduate student in the Philosophy Department at the University of Chicago. Tom Orange comes to the Studio and the English Department from Washington, DC, where he taught contemporary poetry and worked in disability support services. This year, they join our new Office Administrator, Morgan Loper, along with a consultant staff of 16 students, both graduate and undergraduate, to form our core staff.

The interdisciplinary nature of these appointments informs our overall mission. Good writing is integral to many academic disciplines and a well-rounded university education. Last semester alone, our consultants met with students from over forty different disciplines and from all four undergraduate colleges and schools, which demonstrates how instrumental writing

support has become across the disciplines, not just in the humanities.

At the Writing Studio, we aim to provide writing support to students in all divisions of the university and from all ranges of writing skill and experience. We are able to satisfy this goal not only because our consultants have varied backgrounds, but also because they undergo continuous training to serve as interlocutors for students in all disciplines. Sometimes a writer needs a sympathetic ear, a devil’s advocate, or a sounding board. We help students express their ideas in writing and see new possibilities and directions in their work. In this issue, Rachel Bowers writes about her experience as a writing consultant negotiating the Studio’s mission to foster collaborative inquiry and the demands of our University Honor Code. She tells us how she has come to understand the ways in which writing consultations help to fulfill the requirements of the Code.

In addition to providing consultation services, we also create forums for writers to engage with each other. In her article, “A Pair of New Eyes,” Christina Neckles’ tells us how writing consultants cultivate critical response among undergraduate honors students participating in thesis writing groups. Another forum we continue to host is *On Writing*, a series of conversations with advanced and professional writers. Keeping true to our mission of interdisciplinarity, our recent guests to this series have included science writers, poets, and Vanderbilt’s own Brooke Ackery, Associate Professor of Political Science, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Philosophy. You can listen to some of these conversations

on podcast by visiting our Web site.

As John Morrell tells us in his article, writing in the sciences has also been a feature of our *Words and Woods* series. This semester, Jonathan Gilligan of the Earth and Environmental Sciences Department gave a talk about his work not only as a scientist who researches and writes about the environment, but also as a playwright who allows his ecological sensibility to shape the natural imagery he deploys in his plays. Morrell also tells us about how *Words and Woods’* camping trips to the Smoky Mountains advance the Writing Studio’s mission to promote experimentation in the practice of writing beyond the Vanderbilt community.

Back on campus, the Writing Studio promotes experimentation in the practice of writing with workshops that happen both in and outside the classroom. Our consultants are happy to work with faculty to co-create a workshop that fits the specific needs of a course. You can read in this issue about how Director of Religious Life and Assistant Professor Gay Welch used just such a workshop to tackle the challenges of writing about religion in her course *God, Sex, and the Earth*. And since the work of writing does not end with any single class or assignment, we continue to offer a regular series of in-house workshops on topics ranging from writing thesis statements and revising drafts to writing about film and triggering the creative process of writing fiction and poetry.

We hope that you will enjoy browsing this first issue and that you will continue to look for upcoming issues online at www.vanderbilt.edu/writing. ■

A Pair of New Eyes By Christina Neckles, Writing Studio Staff

In May 2007, fourteen seniors graduated with an Honors degree in English, and by May all of these students were intimately acquainted with the Writing Studio. As in other programs, the English honors thesis is the culmination of an intensive Senior Seminar. Each year, students work under the director’s supervision in peer writing groups and individual discussions with faculty advisors to develop their ideas and to hone their writing. Director of the undergraduate English Honors program,

Professor Mark Schoenfield, oversaw their work just as he had the previous year and in his first three-year tenure. Professor Schoenfield supports the peer review process, both as Honors director and in his regular classroom. Although he had utilized small writing groups in the past, he realized his presence sometimes undermined the process. “If I was a member of the group during the course of the semester,” he recalls, “they kept looking to me as the authority rather than responding to each other.” Moreover,

as individual students are required to meet with Schoenfield throughout the semester, he found that much of his commentary on each project had been exhausted during the group discussions.

With the relatively new service of the Writing Studio at his disposal, Professor Schoenfield contacted Studio Director Jennifer Holt. “I thought the Honors program had particular needs, and the Studio was a creative place to meet them,” Schoenfield recalls.

Cont. on p.3

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