

UPCOMING EVENTS

october

Tuesday October 6

4:00–5:00 p.m. Commons Center 235

**College Writing II:
Evidence and Revision**

Thursday October 8

4:10–5:30 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

**Faculty Salon
with Steve Graham**

Wednesday, October 14

4:10–5:25 p.m. Commons Center 233

Organizing Papers and Paragraphs

Sunday, October 17

9:00–5:00 p.m. Commons Center 237

**Dissertation and Proposal Writing
Workshops**

Wednesday, October 28

7:00–8:15 p.m. Commons Center 233

**College Writing II:
Evidence and Revision**

Thursday, October 29

6:00–7:30 p.m. Dean's Residence

**Dinner and a Draft
with Jim Lovensheimer**

november

Tuesday, November 3

7:00–8:15 p.m. Commons Center 233

Organizing Papers and Paragraphs

Monday, November 9

4:10–5:30 p.m. Alumni Hall 117

On Writing: Featuring Robert Scherrer

Monday, November 16

7:00–8:00 p.m. Commons Center 235

**The 11th Hour: Making the Most of Last
Minute Work on Writing**

december

Thursday, December 3

4:10–5:10 p.m. Commons Center 202

**The 11th Hour: Making the Most of Last
Minute Work on Writing**

Monday, December 7

4:10–5:10 p.m. Commons Center 235

Timed Writing: Preparing for an Essay Exam

Wednesday, December 9

7:00–8:00 p.m. Commons Center 233

Timed Writing: Preparing for an Essay Exam

New at the Writing Studio: HOD Assignment Advisor

Peabody Library and the Writing Studio have formed a new partnership for the fall 2009 semester. Leslie Foutch, the librarian for Human and Organizational Development (HOD), will serve as the first Assignment Advisor to the Writing Studio. She will help students in the HOD program interpret their course assignments and advise them on how to begin the research process. Leslie will have set hours each week at the Writing Studio, so that students who need to ask questions about library resources can just turn to her, instead of packing up their belongings and heading to the Library.

This effort grew out of a successful collaboration between Peabody Library and the Writing Studio last spring. Leslie worked with Dustin Lynn, a writing consultant who also served as a teaching assistant for the HOD 1000: Applied Human

Development course. Leslie and Dustin developed subject-specific workshops that aided the students with their research paper assignment. Sixty students attended the two part workshop series and spoke positively about the experi-



ence. This accomplishment solidified the connection between the two service-oriented units and paved the way for the new fall semester project.

Leslie is very excited about this new

collaboration and feels this is a natural fit for everyone involved: “Our HOD faculty require library research as an integral part of the assigned writing in their courses. In the past, HOD students have looked to the Library and the Writing Studio for guidance as they begin to tackle these complex tasks. By joining forces, the Library and the Writing Studio are both streamlining the research process and expanding our boundaries to try to reach as many students as possible. I look forward to working with the staff of the Writing Studio and hope that our students will take advantage of this new endeavor, and visit me at Alumni Hall.”

Leslie will begin holding office hours at the Writing Studio's location in 117 Alumni Hall on October 5. She will be available each Monday from 10am-1pm and Thursday from 1pm-4pm through December 10. ■

the Writers'

block

writing
studio

Issue 4, Fall 2009

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Consulting Across the Disciplines

By Megan Minarich

With the growing trend toward interdisciplinarity in academic settings, one should embrace consulting across the disciplines. Engaging in discourse with someone who is writing in a discipline other than one's own presents a unique opportunity for growth for both consultants and clients. Consulting across the disciplines forces us consultants to leave the comfort zones of our home disciplines and to approach conceptual problems from new perspectives. Even when working with unfamiliar content, the consultant is still working in a very familiar context: the Writing Studio.

When I first began tutoring as a sophomore English and French major at the University of Illinois at Chicago Writing Center, I was terrified of encountering a non-literature paper. By that point, I had written papers for courses other than English, but I was much less certain of expectations for writing outside of my home discipline. What if someone came in with a paper on a topic about which I knew nothing? How could I possibly help that person? What if that writer thought less of me or my capabilities? What if that writer asked me questions I couldn't answer?

The anxieties were many, and rightly so. The unknown can be scary, especially when the pressure is on to successfully help those with writing-related concerns. But as I continued to encounter writers from Psychology, Political Science, and Bioengineering, I began to realize a few things about tutoring outside of the safe and cozy world I knew best.

Lesson 1: From these initial experiences, I learned that writing

consultants need not be experts in every conceivable subject. When consultants encounter papers outside of their home disciplines, they should not forget their role as one who helps clients develop writing skills. The actual role of the writing consultant is *not* to be an expert in any particular subject area. As writing consultants, our clients expect our expertise in writing: constructing arguments, providing and analyzing evidence, organizing ideas, making and supporting claims clearly and effectively. If a consultant happens to know something about the writer's subject, that can positively shape the dialogue. But if not, no sweat. In fact...

Lesson 2: From my experiences consulting at Vanderbilt's Writing Studio, I have come to the conclusion that it is good that a consultant is not an expert in every conceivable subject. Although working with a client who is writing about a topic that is familiar can offer certain advantages to the session working with an unfamiliar subject has its advantages too. Being unfamiliar requires one to ask the writer lots of questions. This is beneficial insofar as it not only gives the consultant a better sense of the kind of work the client is doing, but also forces the client to explain her or his work to an objective third party—to someone who has not been in on the classroom discussion. Having the writer explain the subject not only helps the writer to realize what she or he does and does not understand about the topic, but it also helps build confidence, as the writer takes up the role of being the “expert” on that subject.

Lesson 3: Consultants do not need to know all of the rules of formatting

and citation outside of their own disciplines; the Writing Studio's library is full of style guides and formatting manuals. If a writer comes in with a question about formatting that I cannot answer offhand, I turn it into a moment to model research strategies. Recently a graduate student in Chemistry came to talk with me about turning a conference paper into an article. I didn't have the faintest clue about what kind of information belonged in either, so I asked her to explain her argument as well as her organizational strategy for the conference paper. In doing so, it became clear that this writer was most concerned with how to construct her overview. I went over to the Writing Studio's library, picked up the guide to writing about Chemistry, and we used that as a jumping off point for outlining her overview. It was completely okay that my knowledge of amino acids and peptides was far inferior to hers; she sought a writing consultant, after all, and not a tenured chemist.

Lesson 4: Consulting across the disciplines is fun! Who doesn't want to learn new and interesting bits of information while helping others to improve as writers? Encountering writers from different departments and fields helps consultants develop into careful listeners as well as adds to their knowledge of field-specific practices. Likewise, encountering consultants from different disciplines helps writers communicate more elegantly and clearly.

Interdisciplinary conversation is an integral part of university life and is something that should be sought out instead of shied away from. Working outside of one's comfort zone can help to make one a more effective and versatile thinker and writer. ■

writing
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Consulting Across the Disciplines

by Jennifer Holt, Katherine Fusco, and Gary Jaeger

Writing Studio consultants are trained to be good generalist readers. Many of us have even found ourselves committed to the idea that consultants have a significant advantage in conversation when we lack expertise either about an entire field or about the specific material that a writer has chosen to discuss. A lack of expertise can help consultants be better listeners, more attentive to the development of a client's ideas and insights, and more likely to ask questions that can help writers see where or when their audiences might need more guidance.

Though at the Writing Studio we tout

be fully divorced from efforts to understand ideas, or that writing may be *the* academic task which most challenges assumptions about the distinction between having ideas and communicating them.

But does the truth of the claim that writing and thinking are intimately connected render necessary the pairing of clients with consultants who have encountered already the field or the specific subject matter addressed by a given assignment?

Other universities' writing centers have answered this question in a number of different ways: some refuse outright

claim that there is a certain kind of knowledge about discipline-specific practices that consultants absolutely need to have in order to help clients successfully address their concerns. The knowledge that consultants need is, however, *not* knowledge of all discipline-specific practices themselves.

Instead, consultants need minimally to have an awareness of the practices of the discipline (or disciplines) in which their own studies are focused (e.g.: what kinds of questions does my discipline pose? how does it pose its questions? what counts as evidence? what counts as a defensible or interesting claim in my field?), as well as an awareness of when and how these characterizations might affect the writing process. A consultant who can articulate the practices in her own field (and recognize those practices as field-specific) is capable of offering possibilities that can help another writer consider and articulate the demands of another discipline. Beyond the scope of the particular practices of their own disciplines, consultants ought to have general understanding of and sensitivity to what makes a claim or topic *academically* interesting.

While a writing consultant need not only work with writers in her or his own field, there very well might be times -- especially when working with advanced graduate students -- when a consultant familiar with the habits of a given discipline might benefit significantly a client seeking assistance. Cultivating good generalist writing consultants is, in our view, hinged to having a staff whose disciplinary interests represent a multiplicity of fields and so enable both discipline-specific and generalist conversations. Diversity of interests and expertise contributes to the development of a more nuanced sense of when and how discipline-specific concerns affect the work of writing. ■

to do any discipline-specific consulting and have strict policies that refer students back to their course instructors for help with content; some designate special departmental writing fellows or even course-specific writing assistants (typically graduate students who can speak to course content and who receive additional training to foster productive conversation about writing). At some institutions, all of the writing consultants work only in their specific disciplines, whereas at other schools, discipline-specific writing consultants are available upon request or for special projects only.

Although we publicize the role of consultant-as-generalist, we do want to

Featured Collaboration: The Office of Honors Scholarships

by Lyn Fulton-John

The Office of Honor Scholarships (OHS) provides information, outreach, and support to Vanderbilt undergraduate and graduate students who have the potential to become candidates for nationally-competitive fellowships. Over the past several years, the number of students applying for these high level awards has grown significantly. As a result, the OHS and the Writing Studio began working in active collaboration to provide guidance for these scholarship applicants and for faculty writing letters in support of them. This natural collaboration has had the effect of providing Vanderbilt candidates with multiple opportunities for formal, structured guidance as they master a form and style of writing that is often quite different from what they have done for class and for their research.

Guiding students through the scholarship writing process begins with in-depth conversations with them about their goals, motivations, and options. Most students completing applications for scholarships and fellowships are, at the same time, applying for graduate school, jobs, and a number of other post-baccalaureate opportunities. Each scholarship review committee, however, wants a candidate to acknowledge that particular scholarship opportunity as the one the candidate seeks more than any other.

So what's an applicant to do? For the purposes of each application, a candidate's goals, commitments, and desires need to align directly with the goals and commitments of the scholarship foundation. The more multi-talented the candidates, and the more divergent their interests (for example there's the Fulbright ETA application for Germany, the Marshall application to study political theory at the London School of Economics and

the Luce application for a work/travel project in Indonesia), the more challenging establishing this singularity of purpose will be. The good news is that this is where most students find

Guiding students through the scholarship writing process is a collaborative effort on every level.

the work involved in preparing these applications to be of greatest value to them. As writers, they get the opportunity to imagine themselves into each of these different futures and work out a short term (5 – 10 year) life plan for each one. In this imagining phase of the application process, most students find that some futures are more compelling to them than others.

Students are advised early on that, although a record of academic excellence and leadership is a necessary precondition for candidacy, these fellowships are not recognitions of past performance but investments in future potential. Writing scholarship applications seems especially daunting for most writers because the applications require them to reflect upon the past in order to imagine how the fellowship period will enable them to position themselves in relationship to their future goals.

Candidates write about formative experiences from the past to establish a history of experience, action and involvement which shows the reader that they are the kind of person in whom the scholarship foundation wants to invest. These stories are fairly well established, derived from what the candidates have done, the choices they have made, and the people, places, ideas and experiences that have shaped their interests. Candidates don't have control over which stories are at their

disposal, but they *can* choose which stories to tell and creatively determine how they will tell them. Identifying and selecting the stories comes out of the initial collaborations with both the OHS and the Writing Studio.

Stories about the future are much more difficult to write. To do this well, candidates have to know enough about their fields of interest to project developments in those fields and anticipate the ways in which their finished

projects will align with the field at that time. Most candidates are knowledgeable about their disciplines but less so about the market forces – economic, political and social – that determine how their fields are or will be funded and where those fields will appear on the priority scales of the organizations that fund scholarships.

Though these tasks can seem daunting, Vanderbilt students are more than capable of handling them well. In late August, the OHS and the Writing Studio worked together to present the second annual scholarship writing retreat to help those writing applications for Fulbright, Marshall, Mitchell, and Rhodes. Initial OHS collaborations with the students serve to get them started on their applications; the additional support of the Writing Studio throughout the process helps students develop and complete their applications. Those chosen as finalists will be prepared by select faculty members for the interview process, and in the spring semester, the entire Vanderbilt community will celebrate the accomplishments of our award winners. ■



the benefits of a generalist approach, we often find ourselves negotiating requests from clients (and the faculty who refer them) to meet with only one particular writing consultant who has specialized knowledge in a given field. Both clients and their instructors, in these instances, believe that a consultant in the field can offer the sort of discipline-specific assistance necessary to appropriate completion of course assignments.

There is something well-founded about such a request. We suspect that the desire for discipline-specific writing consultation is founded on the recognition that content and writing are so intimately connected that work on writing cannot

On Writing:
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Monday, November 9
4:10-5:30 pm
117 Alumni Hall