

The Point

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Inside the point

2

Beyond Google Scholar:
Goals of WRIT 1133

3

Writing Center at Large: A
Conversation with Eliana
Schonberg

5

Brad Benz
Interviewed by Blake Sanz

"Use MLA. Write from Your Heart:" The 2012 Survey of First-Year Writers

Doug Hesse

Consider a few facts about the DU Class of 2015.

- Over 60% consider themselves strong or proficient writers who write well in most situations; only 5% think their is writing weak.
- Over 75% believe that writing will be important or highly important in careers after graduation.
- Most wrote at least 40 pages during the fall 2011.
- More than half spent over ten hours per week in social media; less than half spent more than 1-2 hours reading print texts.

Each January we ask all students enrolled in WRIT 1122: Rhetoric and Academic Writing to answer 15 questions about their attitudes and previous writing experiences. In 2012, 435 students replied out of 872, a rate of 50%.

(Continued on page 7)

Beyond Google Scholar: The Goals of WRIT 1133



"Writing and Research focuses on the relationships between epistemology and rhetoric."

Gulp.

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The University of Denver Writing Program has been awarded the CCCC Certificate of Excellence.

"Writing and Research focuses on the relationships between epistemology and rhetoric, using that understanding to develop writing abilities." Put most concisely, that's the goal of DU's second required writing course, WRIT 1133. Fortunately, we spare students that language. (Now, it is tempting to invoke it when students claim, "But I already know how to write a research paper.")

WRIT 1133 differs considerably from the researched writing students have done in high school and, even, in other university programs. "Research" in traditional situations consists of finding and, one hopes, evaluating published sources; synthesizing them in a paper of moderate length; then producing a manuscript that meets format and other conventions. Indeed, that kind of writing is featured in "Writing and Research," albeit with closer attention to the intellectual and rhetorical work involved, not just the simply formal ones, like properly hanging the indentations in a References page.

But research in the academy takes many other forms, of course. There are quantitative and qualitative traditions, methods of gathering data as diverse as ethnographic observation, interview, survey, physical measurement, and experiment. In addition to

googling or searching the library, students may have a sense of researchers boiling things in test tubes, but they don't know much about traditions between these polls. Just as crucially, undergraduates rarely understand research as a process of creating knowledge; usually it strikes them as a way of testing or performing.

So, WRIT 1133 aspires to teach researched writing in multiple traditions. Even when students do "primary research," they learn that data is always situated and interpreted against the knowledge of the field. They learn, further, that different disciplines expect different conventions.

Some of them are obvious at the surface level: MLA v. APA v. Chicago Manual. Some are more nuanced. What counts as evidence? How much or little do writers summarize previous scholarship? Is first person encouraged or forbidden? How about passive voice? Are there prescribed sections organized under headings, or is the paper supposed to be "organic," following the data and its interpretation rather than a standard template?

Our goal in the course is decidedly not to make students expert in all the methods and styles of the academy. That would be pretentious, even misguided. We recognize that



Writing Center At Large

A conversation with
Eliana Schonberg, PhD

Though we pondered building an outdoor consulting yurt during Penrose re-construction, the University Writing Center packed up its tables and pencils and moved to the Driscoll Ballroom in June 2011. With the staff settled in their temporary home, and only occasionally counting the days until the library renovations are complete in December, we sat down with Writing Center Director Eliana Schonberg to learn more about the move and what else is new in the Center this year.

We're still offering the same collaborative consultations we always have.

TP: What changes have you noticed in the Writing Center since the move to Driscoll?

Eliana: Very few, actually. We're still offering the same collaborative consultations we always have. In fact, this fall we had 1,477 consultations, 45 more than last fall in Penrose. Our sessions are still conducted by a mix of graduate and undergraduate student consultants (all of whom take a graduate-level course in writing center theory and practice) who talk with a writer about his or her goals and how to achieve them successfully in a text. We haven't seen any dramatic changes in the writers who see us either: half of our consultations this past fall were still with graduate students, as they have been for several years now, and we still see writers from a wide variety of departments.

The main difference for us is that because our walls no longer go all the way up to the ceiling, we've all gotten a bit more self-conscious about noise. The Writing Center consultants are a pretty



Continued on page 4



lively bunch, so they've had to try to lower their collective volume. We're trying to keep it to a dull roar most of the time.

Speaking of the consultants, can you tell us a bit about who's working this year?

We've got 20 really terrific and smart folks—13 grads and 7 undergrads. Because we work with writers from all across campus, we try to recruit as diverse a group of consultants as possible, and I'm delighted because I think this year is our widest range yet. Among the undergrads, we've covered economics, environmental chemistry, sociology, psychology, marketing, business administration, Spanish, English, biology, art, gender and women's studies, and one self-designed major. The grad students are studying intercultural communications, communication studies, poetry, fiction, literature, religious studies, and international studies.

So what's the most frequent question writers come to you with?

That depends on whether you ask them before or after their session. When writers sign up for appointments, they usually say they want to work on "editing" or that they "just want someone to read it over and see if it makes sense." If we look at what our consultants report having addressed in a session, "clarity" is the topic most frequently mentioned. However, our second most frequent topics are "content" and "organization." Because our sessions are truly collaborative, those topics are coming from the writers too; once a writer starts reading

through a text and discussing it with a reader, she frequently decides there are areas she wants to reorganize or change entirely. But if you ask most writers before they see us, "do you plan to change the organization of your text today?" they'll inevitably say "no!"

What's one thing most people don't know about the Writing Center?

The artwork you see on our walls was made by our consultants as part of their writing center pedagogy class. To expand the ways in which we think about different writing processes and our work with different types of writers, we experiment with depicting a consultation visually. Sometimes the most complicated sessions make the most interesting, and the most abstract, pictures. And no writers have recognized themselves yet.

Winter Quarter Hours

Mondays: 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Tuesdays: 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Wednesdays: 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Thursdays: 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Fridays: 10:00 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Sundays: 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Sometimes the most complicated sessions make the most interesting and the most abstract pictures

A Listening Man and Former Dead Head

Brad Benz

interviewed by Blake Sanz

Brad Benz joined the Writing Program in 2010, leaving Fort Lewis College, where he was associate professor of English and Director of Writing. Benz earned his PhD at the University of Washington (BA, Kansas; MA Humboldt State).

[Note: Blake Sanz is interviewing all writing program faculty. Prior to each interview, Blake asks his colleague to select one of 25 items from a list of artifacts and talk about how they'd use it in teaching. -ed.]

Though he's not trying to, Brad Benz can fool you pretty easily. There's his disarmingly genuine, high-pitch laugh that puts you at ease and hides his intellect. There's the hooded sweatshirt he's wearing this Wednesday afternoon at the office, which makes it easy to imagine he's never stressed. There's the gray-haired, bespectacled visage you can picture anxious students finding a comfort, making it easy for them to forget the complexity of an assignment he's asked them to complete. There is, too, the casual, reserved demeanor that belies his Dead Head past. None of this is a front. He's not hiding anything.

This befits a man whose primary role these days outside of DU is raising his daughter, Lily. It didn't take long for her to come up in conversation.

"The other day, I was trying to teach [her] to ski, and she's 4, so she just wanted to go straight down," he says. It's a full-on job

for him to get her to understand that every once in a while, turning—or even stopping—might be in order. "Both teaching and parenting involve a lot of patience," he explains. This complements the sense you get when you're around Brad: that he approaches life at home and work with a certain, measured amount of calm. Within a few minutes of hanging out with him, you can see he's a guy who knows not just about patience, but about listening, too. "I think that's a teacherly trait," he remarks,

Life as Brad the Dad in Louisville, Colorado is "pretty suburban," he says laughing, but he's embracing the role. "Being a single dad's great. It's complicated," he offers. His routines have changed now. For example, he can't write in the early mornings anymore, and so he's become a bit of a night writer, in the hours after he puts Lily down for bed. "I've learned a lot about myself," he says. With a smile he adds, "It's a lot harder than teaching."

Having served as Associate Professor and Director of the Writing Program at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Brad has spent his adult life in higher

education, teaching at public universities and private ones. He's given conference talks on HBO's *Deadwood* and on the rhetoric of the phrase "clean coal." But his academic trajectory, he admits, wasn't necessarily a straight line.

"I wasn't a really good student as an undergrad [at KU, in Lawrence]. I had like seven majors before I settled on English." Couple that with a youth that included following the *Grateful Dead* around the country, and you get a sense of the meandering path that led him to a career in Rhetoric and Composition.

And it was that musical interest that, indirectly, played a role in his discovery of a place where he eventually first took classes in the field. "The first time I went to Humboldt County was to see the *Dead*," he says. "I was just blown away by how beautiful it was. And [later], I thought, wow, they have a university here. I could get a masters degree," he says laughing, and admits: "It wasn't academic ambitions that were driving my choices back then."

Continued.

I'm sure that Trent Reznor was stoked when Johnny Cash covered his song, whereas with our academic notions of plagiarism, the reaction is more like "Well, they're stealing from me."



Brad's Choice from The List

When asked which of my 25 artifacts he'd most want to consider using in a writing class, he chose a Johnny Cash tune, Cash's version of "Hurt," the Nine Inch Nails dirge from the 90s, and we talk for a while about that choice and what he found interesting about possibly using it in the classroom.

"I do love Cash, and so that was the immediate attraction, but I was thinking in terms of his covers, too. We talk a lot in my class about originality and making claims out of ideas and then citing them and not plagiarizing them. And I was thinking that it's pretty different with music in some ways. [Johnny Cash's 'Hurt'] is a cover song. And yeah, people know that it's a Reznor song at least in the credits on the album, but a lot of people who hear it probably have no idea."

This comparison to academic notions of giving credit intrigues him. "I'm sure that Trent Reznor was stoked when Cash covered his song, whereas, with [our academic] notions of plagiarism, [the reaction] is more like 'Well, they're stealing from me.' It's not that generous."

Brad's most recently been working on a project that explores the term "clean coal"—where it came from, how it gets appropriated, and how its uses have morphed over time. Originally, he figured the project would only focus on its recent political uses. "I was really surprised to see that the phrase has been around a while. The earliest reference I found was in 1734. And it was more in terms of coal that you could stick in your stove that wouldn't get your hands as dirty, or that burned cleaner in terms of the amount of smoke.

And then I found some really cool ads from newspapers from the 1890s—these clean coal ads from the classifieds describing coal for family use. And so, I was really surprised because when I started researching, I figured I would focus on how we use the term now. I hadn't anticipated the history of it."

He's presented a portion of this project at Western States Rhetoric and Literary Conference this past year, and in CCCC in St. Louis, he'll present more research. "I was mostly thinking of [the term] as this oxymoron, this Orwellian double-speak. And that's still a big part of what drives the argument. What I've found is that people don't say "clean coal" any more. They say "clean coal technology." So, it's become this modifier for "technology," which is in some ways at least a bit closer to the truth—well, because there's really no such thing as clean coal."

One more time, he laughs. He's talked enough, I sense. He'll listen—to colleagues, including professors from other departments for whom he conducts workshops. To students asking questions about his assignments. To Lily as she makes him listen to some particular track from the new *Lucero* album he's introduced her to. It's not that he only listens. But that's likely the version of him you'll remember most.

Goals of WRIT 1133, cont. from 2

students learn to write effectively within a discourse community over time, as they're ever more steeped in a field's knowledge and practices. However WRIT 1133 introduces students to concepts and strategies, which they practice in multiple drafts, in multiple assignments. We insist on writerly habits, such as reading one's own work with a critical eye and being willing to do the hard work of revision. We foreground how to analyze and synthesize source materials and how to present research—to popular audiences as well as popular. All of these occur in the context of extensive writing. Finally, too, we want students to read research more critically, especially reports in popular media.

Following, then are the course goals for WRIT 1133. Students will:

1. Demonstrate practical knowledge of academic research traditions (for example, text-based or interpretive; measurement-based or empirical; and observational/qualitative) through effectively writing in at least two of those traditions.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of rhetorical/conventional differences among various academic disciplines or groups of disciplines.
3. Demonstrate practical knowledge of rhetorical differences between writing for academic audiences and writing for popular audiences, through both analysis and performance.
4. Demonstrate proficiency in finding, evaluating, synthesizing, critiquing, and documenting published sources appropriate to given rhetorical situations.

(Survey, Continued from p. 1)

Several findings have striking implications for faculty across campus. Following are a few.

Student Confidence in their Writing

As I noted above, incoming DU students are confident in their writing abilities, and they have some reason to be. Most earned good grades in high school courses and seem to have earned good grades in the fall quarter at DU. They're generally fluent (that is, able to generate sufficient words on most topics) and they're generally able to produce error-free prose.

However—and this is the big however—many of them have not experienced the challenge or complexity of writing assignments they will confront in college. For example, very few high school students are asked to use a particular theoretical framework to interpret a particular set of data or analyze a particular text; very few are asked to articulate the bases of disagreement between divergent authors and to argue for one position.

Now, it's completely normal that college writers encounter new challenges; learning to write is a long developmental process that continues through the college years. While it's better to be confident about one's abilities than to be desultory, there's a danger that students may miss or dismiss new challenges and complexities. After all, if a beloved high school teacher deemed them an excellent writer, who are professors to demand that they become better? There's one rub for the faculty.

Past Writing Experiences

Although students come to DU with a fairly rich set of writing experiences, especially compared to students at some other universities, certain experiences predominate.

Foremost is the five-paragraph theme. 87% of our students have extensively followed the formula of 1) tell them what you're going to tell them; 2) break it into three points; 3) tell them what you told them. Of course, a five-paragraph theme can have 3 paragraphs or 11; what's common is the forecasting thesis, the partition into three points, and the summarizing conclusion. And, of course, this approach is useful for a range of tasks.

However, most of the writing in the academy or in the world beyond doesn't come parceled into five paragraphs. Often students adhere rather to the form and formula rather than to the demands of the subject matter or the needs of the rhetorical situation.

Students have also done a fair amount of literary analysis in high school (about 82% of them), writing about a story, poem, or

play. This makes sense given that a) most high school writing takes place in English courses, b) most high school English teachers are really trained as literature specialists rather than writing specialists, and c) most high school English curricula focus on literature, especially in the advanced classes from which DU draws its students.

There is no doubt that closely reading literary texts to support interpretations helps build skills for writing about reading. However, analyzing a sonnet is different from analyzing the argument, assertions, and evidence in a piece of nonfiction. Only about 50% of DU students had that experience in high school.

The purpose here is not to denigrate high schools. Especially with No Child Left Behind and the Common Core Standards, coupled with the teacher to student loads, these are challenging times for high schools. Additionally, I'd argue that some writing tasks are developmentally more appropriate for the college years. Rather, my point is simply to give an additional perspective on the basis of students' confidence in their abilities.

10. How would you characterize yourself as a writer at this point?	Out of 435 DU FY students
I'm a strong writer who excels in most writing situations.	10.5%
I'm a proficient writer who generally does well in most writing situations.	52.1%
I'm a competent writer who generally does OK in writing situations.	32.3%
I sometimes think or am told my writing is unsatisfactory.	3.7%
I frequently think or am told that my writing is unsatisfactory.	1.4%



continued

Most Memorable Advice

We asked students an open-ended question about the “main advice and strategies about writing” they remember from high school. The results are a mélange of often-homespun wisdom. For example:

- My junior teacher gave me the advice that an essay should be like a lady's skirt: long enough to cover the subject, yet short enough to be interesting
- Don't overthink
- Anything other than 5 paragraphs is ridiculous. Use MLA.
- Write from the heart.

sentences in a paragraph, number of drafts, the importance of proofreading, and so on. Almost no student cites the writer's need to consider audiences or any rhetorical strategies for developing arguments.

We also ask students to explain their favorite and least favorite kinds of writing experiences. These questions yield a fascinating dichotomy. A good percentage of students love “creative writing” and an equally good percentage loathe it. A good percentage of students love very specific tasks with explicit guidelines, almost algorithmic checklists, and an equally good percentage find those tasks abhorrent.

The challenge to DU professors, of course, is that any given class likely has students holding both perspectives. Now, students tend to sort themselves into majors that align, more or less, with these views. Our longitudinal study of writing as teased out this last point. But that's a topic for a future newsletter.

We asked students about the main strategies they remembered. The results are a mélange of often-homespun wisdom.

I sometimes bring a page of these comments into my own first-year writing class and ask students to synthesize them. The task resists doing, but students eventually recognize that the most common advice has to do with formal matters: number of paragraphs, number of

11. What were the main types of writing you did in high school? By “main types,” we mean kinds of writing that you did at least a few times. Please check all that apply.	Number of students reporting	Percent of all students reporting
Literary analyses (of a story, novel, play, poem, etc.)	353	82
"Five-paragraph" essays or themes	376	87
Argumentative or persuasive essays about an issue or event	338	78
Autobiographical writings, such as a memoir or personal essay	199	46
Analyses of a nonfiction reading	215	50
Responses to a nonfiction reading	257	59
Research papers using library or other published sources	327	76
Lab reports for science classes	284	66
Blogs or Wikis	68	16
Rhetorical analyses	181	42
Journals, diaries, or logs	160	37
Speeches, presentations, debates	294	68
Timed essay exams or quizzes that required writing	325	75
Journalistic writings	100	23
Videos or podcasts	83	19

Note: For reasons of space, not all categories were included in this table.