

# Writing Matters

For instructors at the University of Hawai'i

From assessment studies conducted by The University of Hawai'i Manoa Writing Program

## On-line Interaction

Students tell us that they become better writers when they can interact with others about their compositions. Interaction typically takes place in class discussions, small groups, student-teacher conferences, and through written comments to the student. The internet, coupled with computer software for teachers, provides new ways to interact with students—and increases student-to-student

discussion. And the best part is that the interaction is accomplished through writing. On-line assignments give instructors additional ways to

- extend classroom discussions
- discuss student writing
- help students learn from each other
- assign collaborative projects.

### Extend Class Discussions

Instructors have found that on-line assignments can extend the class discussion. The on-line format lets students pursue issues in greater depth and gives all students an equal chance to participate. They can focus on their message instead of worrying about interruptions, gender bias, or other classroom distractions such as seating arrangements. Plus, on-line discussions require that students write much more, which can lead to better writing skills. (Instructors can still keep their workload manageable. See "Avoid Overload" on p. 2.)

Students and teachers easily communicate with educational software such as WebCT or MAILE. Both contain "tools" or "features" such as Conferencing or Bulletin Board, Discussion, and E-mail. (These programs and training are available to UH instructors at no cost.) You can use either program to give assignments like these:

- Post an assignment to an on-line bulletin board that asks students to create several "ethnicity" scenarios (such as a Filipino spending his first Christmas away from home). Choose one for the students to write a letter home about. The letters are posted for all class members to read. Each student must read at least one letter and respond to it.
- Post a question about a reading assignment or ask students to post a question. Require that students post responses and then later in the week read a classmate's message or question and respond to it. To make sure everyone gets a response, assign students to small groups or pairs.

### Discuss Student Writing

Discussions about students' compositions can be moved on-line to save class time. If you usually include peer writing groups, you can treat them as you usually do, except no paper exchanges hands and all comments are typed.

Each student attaches a word-processed document to an e-mail message and sends it to the instructor, a partner, or group to review. The reviewers open the document and use the "comment" feature (an option in Microsoft Word and WordPerfect) or they insert their feedback in a different color text. When finished, they send the document back to the author.

Alternatively, students post their assignment to a "public" space for classmates to read. MAILE features a "Writing Exchange" area that allows students to give comments without having to use the same word processing program.

*"About eight times a semester, students write and post Language Observations. They must also respond to eight observations by their classmates. They do this on a bulletin board which is open to both of my sections. In effect, they're interacting with a community of junior linguists." –Professor*

*"At the end of the semester, students print out their contributions to the on-line discussion. They summarize them and draw conclusions about what they learned that semester. I grade on participation, and this helps me see each student's level of participation." –Professor*

*"Pairing up students and assigning them to review each other's work makes the expectations of interaction between students clearer, more specific. It also gives them a peer audience for their work." –Professor*

## Help Students Learn From Each Other

Students are important resources for each other. Simply allowing the class to see other students' finished work can motivate students to improve. Writing assignments can be published on a class web site, in the WebCT Student Presentation area, or e-mailed to the class. You can also design an assignment so students' efforts directly benefit the entire class:

Ask students to construct an annotated bibliography of web sites and post it for all to see. Students then use the abstracts as a starting point for their own research projects. An English professor requires students to search for five web sites connected to the Bill of Rights. Students write and post 100-word abstracts for each web site. Later in the semester, they read other students' abstracts as they search for sources.

## Assign Collaborative Projects

Business and engineering instructors, among others, prepare students for future professional team projects by giving collaborative assignments. Students appreciate career-preparation but complain about scheduling conflicts and claim that "group grading" is unfair. You can eliminate most complaints by asking groups to "meet" asynchronously on a private bulletin board. And you can promote equal participation and fair grading by requiring that students submit their individual contributions.

Traditional group projects can be moved to an on-line forum or you can experiment:

- Arrange an on-line debate. Divide the class into teams and set up deadlines for each posting: presentation of case (pro), rebuttal (con) and so on. After the debates, students can write critiques of each side's argument.
- Have student groups develop a web page. The web page can be put on the UHM server or in WebCT's Student Presentation area. This project will require that students save their work in HTML format (a feature of most word processing programs) or that they create web pages. All class members (or the general public, depending on where the page is located) can view the group's product.

## Getting Started

### Avoid Overload

You can prevent being overwhelmed by e-mail or bulletin board messages if you adopt a simple grading system: Credit/No Credit or Excellent/Good/Unsatisfactory. Many choose this method because they are simply looking to see whether a student has participated in the on-line discussion. Also, extensive instructor feedback is usually unnecessary because the writing will not be revised.

### Move On-line One Step at a Time

You can switch from a "paper" class to an on-line class by adding one element at a time. For example, two years ago a professor started requiring two e-mail messages per unit. She realized that the on-line discussion gave quiet students a way to participate more fully. And it gave her feedback on what concepts the students had trouble understanding. Each year she added to her on-line site. With the help of a WebCT workshop, she placed her syllabus, quizzes, grade book, and a glossary on-line. Her success echoes that of other teachers: through e-mail and bulletin boards, students discuss ideas about the course among themselves and pay more attention to their writing because they want to be understood.

### Take Advantage of UHM-sponsored Training

UHM offers training and support for instructors interested in adding on-line assignments to their syllabus. **Contact:** Digital Media Center in KUY 105, 956-5662 (WebCT support); Outreach College, 956-2453 (MAILE support); Information Technology Services Help Desk, 956-8883 (e-mail accounts, accessing the internet, general assistance).

*"Prior to using WebCT, I would get very compelling and insightful papers that I wished the other students could see and benefit from. I find that the students' voices and experiences add a dimension to the course that I cannot offer myself. Some students have deep Hawaiian roots and significant links to the culture. Others have powerful insights into the challenges of preserving biological diversity."—Professor*

*"I read all responses [posted on a bulletin board], but I do not respond to each one. Generally speaking, I try to keep out of the students' forum. They work hard to make sure their classmates understand them and they seem to do a lot of the 'policing' themselves."—Professor*