

ACS Teaching with Technology Fellowship Proposal
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Who Says Grammar Instruction Can't Be Fun? Web-based Instruction for Basic Writers

Background and Context

As the Writing Program Director of Millsaps College, an ACS school, I am responsible for helping my college address the needs of basic writers on our campus. That is, when my teaching colleagues exclaim simply that “our students can’t write,” I am, first, to discover *which* students, and, once I have located these students, I am next to discover what my well-meaning colleagues mean by “can’t write.” What I have learned in the last several years in this position is that my colleagues quite rightly mean that many of our students do not possess the basic writing skills requisite to succeed in their many classes at Millsaps. What I have also learned is that my colleagues at Millsaps are not alone in their concerns about student writing. In conversations with other writing teachers at other ACS colleges, indeed in conversations with almost all writing faculty with whom I have spoken, I have learned that faculty are increasingly concerned about the perceived decline in writing skills for entering college students. After years of battling between process and product emphasis in writing pedagogy, many writing theorists now agree that, in addition to meeting students where they are, we also need to hold them to a standard of English usage in order to equip them to meet expectations in graduate programs and in professions. At small schools, such as schools in the ACS, we are positioned to respond to this need creatively, balancing the need to work individually with students and to meet them where they are with the need to hold them to a high standard of writing proficiency. My proposal would allow for just such a creative response to the needs of basic writers on our campus by employing technology as a grammar teaching tool in a self-paced writing workshop.

While there are many areas in Millsaps' creative curriculum where we can address the larger issues of students' ability to think, to reason, and to communicate their ideas, there is only one class in our curriculum in which writing alone is the sole focus. In our curriculum, students are evaluated at the end of their first semester, and, if found to be "non-proficient" writers, these students are required to take the follow-up course in their second semester. This course has had a troubled past on our campus for a number of reasons, namely that students resent having to take such a course, that the course has a reputation for being boring, and that grammar has gotten a bad name in higher education. When I taught the course last spring, however, I quickly learned that technology could revive this course. In short, when students found web-based grammar tutorials, they responded much more favorably and, in fact, willingly worked on their grammar. Their required work with pencil and workbook and my dry discussions with chalk and board fell flat compared to the lively format that web-based grammar tutorials offered.

Proposal

Using the current syllabus for my class in basic writing, I propose to create web-based grammar tutorials as resources for these struggling students. While grammar help and on-line writing tutorials are available in abundance on the web, these tutorials are aimed primarily at students who know what they need help with. This is, however, counter-intuitive because basic writers rarely recognize the problem in their own writing. There is no systematic way in which basic writers can proceed through self-paced writing tutorials on-line. With this fellowship, I would like to pull together the available resources on-line, revise and supplement these resources with exercises from my own teaching, and tie them together in an on-line syllabus with exercises, tests, and essay assignments. I will use these tutorials in my writing class this spring.

Requirements

I have already arranged to teach my class in the spring in a computer lab so that students can access these materials in class. This lab/workshop approach will allow me to work with students individually while the rest of the class continues its progress otherwise. Furthermore, Millsaps has already equipped me with a new state of the art PC, with read/write CD, so that as a bi-product of this project I can produce CD versions of these exercises for use on non-networked computers on our campus or for check-out from our campus Writing Center. In addition, in order to complete this project I have a reduced courseload so that this course in web-based basic writing instruction is my only course for the spring.

Assessment

In addition to the evaluation of this course by students as part of the institution-wide evaluation of each course in our curriculum, I also plan to have students complete a web-based assessment after each tutorial in the course. Furthermore, because this project is part of a larger assessment project of the interdisciplinary Writing Council, I have data from the previous two years measuring our basic writers and improvement during their first year at Millsaps. I will be able to compare not only student responses to the course but also student writing after the course to see if increasing interest in the subject matter does, as I anticipate that it will, increase student learning.

Collaboration

Participating in an on-line listserv for Writing Program Administrators, I am already in contact with many teachers of writing at other ACS schools. In addition, I served as a contact for a comparison project on Writing Centers at ACS schools for an ACS project earlier this year. Once I have completed the on-line tutorials and basic writing web-based syllabus, I will encourage others in the ACS to experiment with it in order to improve it. I plan to contribute it to the On-line Course Materials

Database, as well as to advertise the web address and request feedback from colleagues on the listserv. There are many writing teachers in the ACS who are actively using technology to improve writing instruction. There are not, however, other on going projects on teaching basic writing. In fact, many of the schools in the ACS do not have existing programs to support non-proficient (either ESL or basic) writers although they do enroll students in need of such support. The web allows for easy access of writing resources, but these resources are useless unless they are tied together into a coherent whole and offered in logical progression.

My survey of any web presence for ACS College writing support revealed that not all ACS writing programs have a web presence. Those schools that do generally have a mention of the Writing Center and links to other on-line tutorials at non-ACS schools. I would like to create this resource, add it to our existing Writing Program web presence (<http://www.millsaps.edu/dean/writing>), and provide a valuable link for other ACS writing program websites. This project will not only further existing conversations about teaching basic writing, but it will also, no doubt, initiate such conversations. In fact, in tandem with this project, I want to begin a listserv for ACS teachers of writing. I plan to contact members of English departments and other writing instructors at ACS schools to survey the interest in such an avenue for shared resources in writing instruction.

Web Resources

Available ACS Writing Resources

<http://www.rhodes.edu/kamhi/center/index.html>

<http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/writersref>

<http://www.southwestern.edu/academic/writing/awc.html>

http://www.davidson.edu/academic/english/writing_center/index.html

<http://gateway.lib.uiowa.edu/index.htm>

Selected Non-ACS Writing Resources

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>

<http://www.bsc.edu/humanities/English/writingCenter/default.htm> <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

<http://www.sewanee.edu/wac/writin1.htm>

<http://www.wlu.edu/~writing/resources.html>

<http://personal.centenary.edu/~acoughen/writinglab/>

<http://www.rollins.edu/wc/>

<http://www.richmond.edu/~english/links.html>

<http://www.wlu.edu/%7Ewriting/>