

# Writing in the Physical Education Department at Dawson College

A Physical Education – Writing in the Disciplines at  
Dawson Project

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## **A. Introduction: A Physical Education WID Project**

After being accepted to participate in WID for the Fall 2012 semester, I was asked by Ian MacKenzie to lead a WID project for my Department that would extend into the Winter 2013 semester. Although I had only a vague sense of the direction for such a project, I was confident that the Department would be supportive ... and they were, and that Ian would guide me through the process ...and he did. It is not often in our teaching careers that we have the opportunity to push ourselves academically and I am grateful for this experience.

I would particularly like to thank former Department WID members Cindy Starzenski, Heather Bradley and Anthony Berkers who collaborated with me, and the executive members – Ginny Malcolm, Carol Chatland, Doug Smythe and Richard Montreuil who facilitated Department involvement by including WID in monthly meetings and by dedicating our curriculum workshops to WID.

At our December 2012 workshop, the Department identified the writing mode of reflection as being widely used by teachers and important to our curriculum. Subsequently, the examination of writing modes became my central focus for the project. During the winter semester I referred to the Ministerial course competencies to identify a mandate for the use of writing modes. I also conducted a survey of the different types of modes used in our various courses. This study concluded with the presentation of a summary document on writing modes in our curriculum which was presented to the Department at our May workshop.

In this project, the Department addressed fundamental pedagogical questions. How do we use writing to develop critical thinking? How much class time should be dedicated to content versus time spent on writing and thinking, and which is more valuable to the student? What are the best assignments to develop writing? How should we evaluate informal student writing? Can we evaluate thinking? In response to these questions, Department members Chantal St.-Pierre, Carrie Markin, Mark Abbott, Tim Miller and Jonathan Egan presented their best writing assignments at our May workshop; Patricia Armeni collaborated with me to develop evaluation rubrics, and Kathy Morrison volunteered her time to restructure a department website to facilitate discussion. I am thankful for these individual contributions and to the Department at large for putting aside other curriculum issues to focus on student writing this past year.

To read the personal teaching portfolio that I developed over the course of my participation in WID, visit my teaching portfolio page on the WID@Dawson site at <http://writing.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/joanna-farmer-physical-education-wid-teaching-portfolio/>.

## B. Summary Of Modes of Writing in Physical Education

Student writing is instrumental in developing critical thinking about personal health choices, and in fostering an inquiry-based learning environment. In accordance with Ministerial competencies for students to “explore and meaningfully interpret” course information, the department has adopted reflective writing as a primary mode of writing in the discipline. In addition there are a range of alternate modes for writing assignments; see subsequent section D for examples.

| INFORMAL  |  | FORMAL   |
|---|--|--|
| Exploratory, In-Class Writing   | Out-of-Class Communication   | Home work Assignments  |
| <p>1. think pieces</p> <p>to probe a subject<br/>to focus and engage students<br/>to enrich discussions<br/>to reduce lecture</p> <p>Teachers may or not collect and read</p>                             | <p>1. journals and logs</p> <p>to link experience to theory<br/>to explore values and feelings<br/>to scaffold into formal writing or a portfolio</p> <p>Teachers may or not collect, spot read.</p>   | <p>For students to express their thoughts, interpretation, and connections to:</p> <p>health and lifestyle issues 101<br/>skill progression 102<br/>active living program development 103</p> <p>Teachers collect and grade.</p> |
| <p>2. “quick think” at end of class</p> <p>to respond to learning activity<br/>to underline key concepts<br/>to converse with teacher<br/>to self-asses performance</p> <p>Teachers collect and read.</p> | <p>2. on-line blogs and forums</p> <p>to converse with other students<br/>to learn of student concerns they may not want to express in class<br/>to follow the development of projects and presentations</p> <p>Teachers may or not listen-in and track participation.</p> | <p>Other Writing Forms</p> <p>Along with reflective writing, teachers use other modes such as surveys, summaries, reports, and short answer assignments to meet course competencies.</p> <p>Teachers collect and grade.</p>      |

| Courses | Reflective Writing Mode  |  | Other Modes<br>short answer assignments<br>summaries, reports, surveys  |
|---------|--|--|---|
|         | Informal, Exploratory  | Formal   |   |
| 101     | explore health /wellness concepts<br>explore personal values ...<br>explore personal needs ... | statement of main physical needs ...<br>statement of motivational factors<br>use of clear arguments to explain activity choice | identify:<br>steps to lifestyle change<br>FITT formula<br>activities to promote fitness<br>components of a work out<br>personal effects and safety ...<br>amount and type of activity |
| 102     | assess current abilities and attitudes   | use of clear arguments for activity choice<br>meaningfully interpret progress in activity<br>statement of expectations         | identify strategies for:<br>progressions, motivation,<br>safety and evaluation  |
| 103     | explore active living concepts<br>assess interests, needs and abilities                        | formulate personal objectives<br>meaningfully interpret progress achieved and difficulties experienced in program              | review theoretical background<br>review safety considerations<br>choose measurement criteria  |

I was planning to analyze the relative amount of one writing mode to another from the course outline competencies; however, this was not possible as many competency statements are written vaguely and without verbs, for example, "Appropriate choice of physical activity or activities to practice" (4.1, 103 course).

## C. Interviews with PE Department Faculty: How We Use Writing in Our Courses

### i) Chantal St. Pierre

#### **Name the class and describe the writing assignment.**

At the start of Yoga class, students spend five minutes responding to an ancient yoga sutra. In all my other classes, student reflect on a motivational statement.

#### **How long have you been doing this and why did you start?**

I started three years ago with my yoga class. Yoga is founded on spiritual notions or sutras. I would not be comfortable teaching what may be perceived as religious beliefs and thought it would be better for students to interpret these teachings on their own.

Also, there was the practical reason of wanting to reduce late entries - so annoying in yoga. This writing was so successful I wanted to repeat the experience in my other classes so I compiled a list of motivational statements for students to respond to.

#### **Can you give me examples of these and the prompts you use?**

Yoga Sutras:

“Joy is the result of right action, sorrow of wrong action. When one abides in truthfulness, actions result in their desired end.”

Motivational statements:

“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” *Albert Einstein*

“Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.” *African Proverb*

Prompts for both: What does it mean to me? How can I apply it to my life?

#### **Describe the benefits of this writing for the student and teacher.**

For the student, writing at the beginning of the class serves as a transition from their previous activities and helps to increase their concentration and focus. For the teacher, it reduces late arrivals and serves as attendance. It settles the class down making it easier to teach. It helps me to engage with students individually. I usually know all their names by the third class.

**How do you evaluate this writing? Do you grade it?**

It is rare that students write flippantly just to get it over with. When they do I ask them to elaborate. Most students consider the statements seriously and try to write something meaningful filling up all the space provided. I grade it on effort for 5%.

**Do you consider yourself to be teaching thinking?**

Not initially; but after reading the student writing - yes.

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**ii) Carrie Markin**

**Name the class and describe the writing assignment.**

At the beginning of each yoga class, I introduce a yoga intention. I then ask students to bring their consciousness to this intention and apply it to their practice during class. At the end of class, after the relaxation and closing segments, I use the same intention in a statement or quote and ask students to write a reflection on this.

**How long have you been doing this and why did you start?**

Since I started to teach yoga four years ago, I want students to be able to connect what they learn on the mat to their lives off the mat.

**Can you give me examples of these intentions and the prompts you use?**

Intentions: Mind - perseverance; Spirit - self-acceptance; Body - balance

Prompts: What was one moment when you persevered with your practice today?  
What is one area of your life where you need to persevere more?

**Describe the benefits of this writing for the student and teacher.**

For the student, this writing makes students aware of thoughts and emotions that would otherwise remain concealed to them. The formal reflection increases their awareness of their strengths and puts them on a direction for positive change in areas that need to be developed.

For the teacher, giving students time to think and write in class leads to better quality work. This writing helps me to connect with them as individuals and visa

versa which builds trust. For students experiencing difficulties, it is often easier for them to write rather than say them which helps me to understand their situation and be more empathetic.

**How do you evaluate this writing? Do you grade it?**

I do not grade the in-class writing; however, this writing is a precursor (serves as scaffolding) to a formal reflection worth 10% where students address similar intentions that must be supported by specific examples from their lives.

**Do you consider yourself to be teaching thinking?**

Given the importance of physical activity and health to student lives, it is important that we give students opportunities to reflect on their personal situation.

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**iii) Mark Abbott**

**Name the class and describe the writing assignment.**

At the end of each course, my outdoor education students write a letter to the next semester's class describing their experience. During the second lecture of the following semester, the new students randomly select a letter and read it out loud to the class.

**How long have you been doing this and why did you start?**

I've been doing this for about two years. My son Joey gave me the idea. I was looking for a way to give students an overview of the course without lecturing.

**What prompts do you use for this writing?**

Write a letter to a future student and tell them about what you learned and the experience you had in this course.

**Describe the benefits of this writing for the student and teacher.**

Student: It's a fun activity that covers a lot of pertinent, detailed information, often things I wouldn't think of.

Teacher: Students listen better to each other and I am able to cover a lot more information than if I lectured.

**How do you evaluate this writing? Do you grade it?**

I do not grade it. Students enjoy writing the letters and are glad to share their experiences without any grade attached.

**Do you consider yourself to be teaching thinking?**

Yes.

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**iv) Tim Miller**

**Name the class and describe the writing assignment.**

In 103 Team Sports, the writing assignment is a reflection on an 'interview' conducted with a 'professional' within students' area of interest.

**How long have you been doing this and why did you start?**

This is the first semester that I completed this assignment. Matt uses it as well. I attended a work shop during last semester's Ped Day. The workshop was centered on ways to incorporate Entrepreneurship into courses. I thought this assignment would be a good way to do that.

**Can you give me examples of these and the prompts you use?**

How did you feel when you spoke with the professional?  
Were you impressed or disappointed with their lifestyle habits?  
What did you suggest to the professional to improve their lifestyle?

**Describe the benefits of this writing for the student and teacher.**

Student: Writing out an interview and paraphrasing the important items. The ability to complete a summary is quite useful to practice and will help them in the future (example minute taking).  
Teacher: It helps me analyze their knowledge of healthy living by being able to determine what aspects of someone's lifestyle the students find unhealthy.

**How do you evaluate this writing? Do you grade it?**

I evaluate the assignment on 10%. If the assignment is completed on time and the student has performed an adequate reflection they receive a 10/10. An adequate reflection includes

3. student able to decipher between healthy and unhealthy choices
4. student is able to reflect at college level
5. student is able to provide appropriate tips to help professional improve their lifestyle

**Do you consider yourself to be teaching thinking?**

Yes.

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**v) Jonathan Eagan**

**Name the class and describe the writing assignment.**

In all my outdoor education classes, students participate in an on line forum.

**How long have you been doing this and why did you start?**

For three years. We share camping knowledge through storytelling; the forum allows for this informal sharing of experience. It also provides a non-threatening venue for students to find answers to potentially embarrassing questions they would not raise in class - on hygiene for example.

This past year I also tried using a forum for my sport performance course. It is in a developmental stage.

**What prompts would you use for this writing?**

In what ways are you preparing for this hike?  
What's your experience in the outdoors?

**Describe the benefits of this writing for the student and teacher.**

For the students, they share more resources and information than I could ever provide - links to sites, videos, packing lists, personal experiences and stories. For the teacher, I learn what is really scarring them about the trip - all the weird off the wall anxieties they have that I can then address in class. I can follow the progression of their presentations.

**How do you evaluate this writing? Do you grade it?**

The forum is worth 10% of their final grade. I evaluate it on their involvement - their frequency of posting information and responding to each others questions. I also evaluate them on forum writing etiquette which I teach.

**Do you consider yourself to be teaching thinking?**

I want my students to be autonomous thinkers. I spend the first fifteen minutes of every class asking, "What are you thinking about?" I feel that the outdoors provides a place for exponential learning as students try out their ideas and then live with the consequences. Not thinking things through leads to beautiful blunders which are marvelous learning experiences.

## D. Reflective Writing and Communication in the Physical Education College Curriculum

In 2012-13, I was privileged to participate in the Writing-in-the-Discipline (WID) group at Dawson College, led by Ian MacKenzie and Anne Thorpe. At our meetings, writing modes was a common topic of discussion. Science students write lab reports; English students write literary analysis essays. “What is the principle writing mode in physical education?” I was asked. I couldn’t answer this question. I had never thought about it. We give various written assignments to our students. Isn’t that enough? Is it necessary that a discipline should have a primary writing form? Who would benefit from identifying a common mode and what would it be?

At the conclusion of our December Department WID workshop, WID Writing Fellow Anthony Berkers asked the department two questions: “What did you find interesting about WID, and what would you like to learn more about?” When I reviewed the responses, it was clear that there was a broad interest in reflective writing and I wondered if this mode could be developed as an important part of our curriculum.

In his text *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean defines reflections as “the exploration of the connections between course material and a person’s individual life.” Our Ministerial course objectives are imbued with such words as personal, meaningful interpretation, explore, analyze. As part of general education, our students are expected to think critically. And “writing is thinking” is the WID mantra. Thus, reflective writing may be the best approach to bring all these aspects together.

It is perhaps easiest to define reflective writing by what it is not. It is not free writing; a reflection has a purpose. Nor is it a simple report of results or writing information. However, when we ask students to analyze, interpret, judge or draw meaning from course work, then students are engaging in reflective writing. Reflective writing can be informal, exploratory in-class writing with the singular objective of generating student thinking (not graded for English expression) or formal, out-of-class homework assignments where English expression is graded.

The 101 Physical Activity and Health course is broad in scope as students learn about the many facets of health. Teachers can easily cover information through lecture and tests, but health issues are complex with political, social, and ethical issues to contemplate. Adding a short exploratory writing exercise to lectures gives students time to consider their thoughts and feelings about issues. It also leads to a more thoughtful discussion. Writing requires all students to think about the material - not just the several with their hands up.

Compared to the 101 course, the focus of the 102 Physical Activity and Effectiveness course is concerned less with content and more on activity and skill development.

Students analyze their skill level, interpret activity strengths and weaknesses, define specific goals for improvement and then implement strategies and practice drills to achieve their goals. Motivation, ethics in sport, goal setting, sport aesthetics and the connection of mind and body are integral aspects of skill development that lend themselves to thoughtful reflective writing.

The 103 Physical Activity and Autonomy course is quite possibly the ideal college course for reflective writing. From the first to the last class, students reflect on their personal abilities as they go through the process of designing, carrying out and evaluating a personal activity program tailored to their specific needs and interests.

Outdoor education courses offer particular enriching opportunities for student reflection and teachers have responded with creative assignments. Not just limited to writing, students communicate their thoughts and feelings of being in the outdoors through art, songs, photo albums and multimedia, hence the extension of the idea of reflective writing to reflective writing and communication.

Having identified reflective writing as a possible primary writing mode, the next logical question is how would we restructure existing assignments to be reflections and how would we grade this writing?

When I look at my own student homework assignments, there are many that I would classify as personal essays; they have titles such as: Fitness Assessment, Dance Abilities, and Stress Coping Analysis. However, my expectation for personal, thoughtful analysis is not always clear and some students simply state information. How could I change these assignments to reflections?

- change the title of the assignment to include the word reflection; for example, and change Fitness Assessment to Reflection on Fitness Assessment Results
- change the writing prompts so that students clearly understand the requirement to give specific examples from their lives.
- provide examples of student writing – both acceptable and unacceptable
- provide a grading rubric that would include levels of thinking - substantive, adequate and superficial.
- provide opportunities for in-class exploratory writing on the topic

Writing personal reflections on lifestyle and health issues may be the most important writing students do at Cegep. I can't think of another discipline where student opinions are more valued. It is certainly meaningful, thoughtful, authentic writing. To answer to the question of who would benefit from adopting a common reflective writing mode, I respond that everyone would: the students, the department, and our discipline.

## **E. Guidelines for Students: Writing Reflections**

The purpose of writing a reflection is to present your perspective on the learning activities in your physical education classes. A reflection is not a summary of an activity, a research paper or a free write. It cites your reactions, feelings and analysis of an experience.

### **Informal, Exploratory Reflections**

In general, there are two types of in-class exploratory reflections: writing at the beginning of class to probe a subject, and writing at the end of class to make connections to the activity. Homework assignments are typically journals and on-line discussion threads. The purpose of this writing is to stimulate your thinking about a topic and to relate the material to your experience; as such, you do not need to be concerned about the reader nor features of formal writing. When graded, you will be evaluated primarily on your level of thinking and engagement.

### **Formal, Summary Reflections**

A formal reflection should be organized as any other type of essay with an introduction, body and summary statements. The introduction could perhaps express your expectations before the activity. The text should focus on your thoughts and feelings about the experience and demonstrate your connections to and integration of the material. For your summary statements, you may want to draw some tentative conclusions and/or raise some questions. The writing voice should remain personal.

The writing process is the same as for any formal writing assignment. It should develop from brainstorming ideas, to creating an outline and then writing several drafts for clarity and correctness. The reader and all features of formal writing apply and are graded.

Remember to save a copy for yourself. Like a photograph, a reflection is a personal statement of who you are at this point in your life's journey.

## F. Grading Rubrics for Reflective Writing Assignments

### Informal, Exploratory Writing:

The term Meaningful Interpretation is from the Ministerial course outlines.

| Reflection   | 3          | 2        | 1           |
|--|------------|----------|-------------|
| Meaningful Interpretation                          | Insightful | Adequate | Superficial |
| Student connects material to their own experience. |            |          |             |

### Formal, Out-of-Class, Assignment

The assignment is worth 10 marks:

2 marks for rough draft, stapled to assignment

5 marks for content

3 marks for writing features

| Content   | 5                                 | 3-4                    | 1-2                               |
|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Meaningful Interpretation   | Insightful                        | Adequate               | Superficial                       |
| Development of Ideas  | Ideas developed with details      | Ideas stated           | lacking ideas, mostly information |
| Student connects material to their own experience and develops ideas accordingly. |                                   |                        |                                   |
| Writing Features  | 3                                 | 2                      | 0-1                               |
| Paragraph Structure   | well organized                    | loosely organized      | one, disorganized paragraph       |
| Personal Voice  | 1 <sup>st</sup> person & engaging | 1 <sup>st</sup> person | no clear voice                    |
| Mechanics – word choice, sentences, grammar, coherence                            | none or few errors                | Some errors            | Many errors                       |

## G. Alternate Writing Modes and Genres and Sample Prompts

Along with reflective writing, there are numerous alternate modes or genres of writing that are well suited to writing in physical education courses, and that will produce insightful thinking on the student's part. Below is a list of options for teachers who want to experiment.

| <b>Mode</b>            | <b>Sample Prompt</b>   |
|------------------------|--|
| Lecture Summary Notes  | After the lecture, in ten sentences, explain how improving cardiovascular fitness can lower your resting heart rate.             |
| Making Maps            | Create a map for cardiovascular training within Dawson   |
| Quick Think            | Describe an experience where you were the victim or instigator of unethical conduct  |
| Letter                 | Write a letter to prospective students on your experience in Winter Camping  |
| Synthesis / reduction  | Write a single sentence on what you learned from today's class/lecture.  |
| Poster                 | Create a poster to explain the difference between aerobic and anaerobic exercise to grade 6 students.                            |
| Affirmation            | Write a personal affirmation to say to yourself before athletic performance to center yourself.                                  |
| Progress Report        | Write a paragraph expressing your thoughts on your progress in golf thus far.  |
| Research Field Notes   | Practice the breathing meditation you learned in class today in two different environments and then record your thoughts on ...  |
| Critique of Abilities  | Write a 250 word evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses in tennis.  |
| Performance Assessment | After viewing your video of today's dance performance, write a 250 word critique of your success in reaching your artistic goal. |

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Self-Assessment         | Write a paragraph to grade your presentation according to ...   |
| Prediction / Hypothesis | Based on the exercise, diet and lifestyle habits of the boy in this article, write a prediction on his future health.   |
| Summary                 | Summarize the reading into 100 words.   |
| Procedure               | Write out the sequence of steps for a successful badminton serve.   |
| Explanation             | Describe a sport to someone who has never played it.  |
| Analytic exposition     | What similarities and differences are there between canoeing and kayaking?  |
| Argumentation           | Present your views before or against high school football   |
| Case Study              | Design a fitness program for a specific individual  |
| On-line Forums          | Post a response to today's discussion on...   |
| Flyers                  | Create a flyer with text and visuals to explain fishing to other students   |
| Portfolio               | Keep a portfolio to monitor your progress in your personal activity program ...   |
| Multimodal              | Create a one minute video on a dance style not learned in class and upload it to classmates with a written description. |
| Diary / Journal         | After each yoga class, free write in your diary about the experience.   |
| Creative Writing        | Write a poem, song, rap, short story, script to express your feelings towards an activity.                              |

## H. Resources

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