

Dear Readers,

The last year has been a big one for the Duke Reader Project. I want to thank you all for making this project possible and to share with you some news about the project and changes that will begin in 2011 (details below):

- New opportunity for participation: Writing 20 course blogs
- New courses
- NSF Grant
- Changes in the project in response to assessment data

I welcome your feedback on these and any matters related to the Reader Project, at any time. Just drop me a note at [cmosk@duke.edu](mailto:cmosk@duke.edu)

Sincerely,

Cary Moskovitz  
Director, Writing in the Disciplines  
Thompson Writing Program  
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### **New opportunity for participation: Writing 20 course blogs**

Two facts led us to try out this new way for our volunteers to help students become better writers: First, some instructors of Duke's first-year writing course, Writing 20, have started using blogs as a way for students to get their writing beyond the confines of the classroom and into the larger world. But even with public blogs, there is no guaranteed audience; since these students have no name recognition, they have tended to receive few replies to the writings they post. Second, since we are currently using about 20 to 30% of the volunteers in our reader pool in any given semester, we have many available readers who are eager to participate.

So, beginning this semester, with the help of Thompson Writing Program Assistant Director Seth Dowland, we'll invite our volunteers to join the conversations on these blogs in a pilot study. While we will provide guidelines for "Blog Readers," these volunteers will basically read the writing posted on one of these blogs and add their own thoughts in response a few times during the semester. Although our Blog Readers won't be interacting directly with students (at least not initially), they will be making a substantial contribution by giving students an audience for their work, allowing them to see how thoughtful people with a genuine interest in the topic respond to what they write.

We'll post a list of blog subjects from participating courses on our website and invite readers to subscribe. Look for an announcement about this opportunity soon. (If you haven't had a chance to learn about Duke's current first-year writing course, take a look [here](#). The course, which has received considerable attention in the field of composition, is taught by instructors from a remarkably broad range of disciplinary backgrounds on a fascinating range of topics.)

## **New courses**

This spring, we welcome four exciting new courses into the Reader Project:

- The Economics course Medical Malpractice is taught by Frank Sloan, a national expert on malpractice liability. We're hoping that Reader Project volunteers can help students move beyond finger-pointing debate to produce thoughtful, nuanced analysis on this hot-button issue.
- Public Policy majors who are undertaking an honor's thesis will be able to participate in the Reader Project as well. These two-semester projects offer opportunity for readers and students to work together for an entire year at a more relaxed pace.
- In Genome Sciences and Society, volunteers who have an interest in the science and societal impact of a genomics will have a chance to work with students on their essays.
- In our first Documentary Studies course, Short Audio Documentary, taught by radio journalist and producer John Biewen, students will be producing 4-5 minute audio compositions on a variety of subjects. Tech-savvy volunteers will be invited to give students recorded audio feedback on drafts of two of their audio projects covering a wide range of topics.

## **NSF grant**

I am pleased to announce that the National Science Foundation has awarded a grant for the Reader Project to improve the communication skills of science and engineering majors. This 3-year grant will support the inclusion of more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) courses in the project and dissemination of information about the project nationally. The grant is funded by the NSF's Division of Undergraduate Education under the "Transforming Undergraduate Education in STEM" program.

## **Assessment results and program changes**

### *More direct interaction*

Students seem to particularly value receiving feedback in real-time conversations, and a majority of both students and readers continue to request more direct interaction. Off-campus readers who interact with students by webcam tend to report having a better experience than those who interact only by email. We've also learned that a number of student-reader pairs are not having any real-time interaction—not even in the introductory meeting. Given these trends, we will emphasize the importance of students and their readers having the chance to get to know one another through face-to-face or webcam meetings if at all possible, and by phone otherwise, and we will be encouraging real-time interactions for giving feedback as well.

### *Feedback*

Over the past three years, we've learned a lot about the kinds of feedback that work best in this context:

- Feedback given in real-time—whether in person or by webcam or phone—is most consistently rated as very useful by students. In fact, *all* student survey respondents who met with their readers by webcam rated their experience highly.
- The Word feature "Track Changes" is most likely to pose ethical challenges related to Duke's honor code. Although we haven't had any reported cases, a number of instructors have expressed concern about students receiving this type of feedback.

- The technical challenges of audio feedback (digitally recorded responses)—seem to make this type of feedback too complicated except for special cases.

Given these findings, we will now (1) recommend that readers give feedback in real time if at all possible, (2) strongly discourage the use of Track Changes, and (3) discontinue recommending audio feedback except when the method has advantages for a particular course. We will continue to provide webcams for readers or students who need them (as long as we have sufficient supplies/funding) and to provide personal instruction and guidance in all aspects of web conferencing. To further encourage the use of webcams for our out-of-town volunteers, we will invite readers who are experienced webcam users to be listed as support contacts for volunteers who need help.

### *Inconsistent Reader Experiences*

While the majority of our readers report positive experiences, we continue to see many cases in which students do not follow through on their commitment. A number of factors seem to be at work here: procrastination (a ubiquitous and largely unavoidable problem among all college students!), overextended students, and a lack of professional maturity. In addition, we suspect that some students may be unhappy with the quality of their written work and so are reluctant to share it even after committing to the program. Our data show an especially high rate of unsatisfactory follow-through on the part of first-year students, which should not be surprising given the number of other new challenges these students face.

To address these issues, we will be more selective in allowing first-year students to participate, and we will continue to experiment with ways to reduce the number of students who sign up but are not fully engaged in the project and to guide the rest through the project successfully (including setting firm deadlines for the initial steps). Nevertheless, we are realistic in our expectations, and I am pleased by just how patient and understanding our volunteers have been. Based on student participation in other kinds of non-required educational activities, we should expect that, at best, around 20% of students who sign up would not complete the entire project for various reasons.

I do want to emphasize, however, that in spite of some disappointing cases, most students continue to be quite grateful for this opportunity. Here are some of the favorable comments we received from students last semester (note how many comment on how this project helped students *avoid* procrastination—one of the unanticipated benefits of the Reader Project):

“His background in the subject was invaluable and showed me what I should try to do with my project.”

“With such a particular style of writing assigned... it was extremely helpful to get feedback from a professional!”

“Great comments on writing technique!”

“She was very timely and enthusiastic, always providing helpful feedback.”

“The [feedback] really help me to expound on my topics and really develop them more.”

“My reader helped me to focus my arguments around the ...cases I cited rather than persuasive arguments. She helped me focus my paper appropriately.”

Most useful: “Having specific early deadlines and a real person to keep me accountable. Also, it was extremely helpful to have someone available to sift through questions regarding ... jargon, argument strategies, etc.”

“Having an expert opinion other than that of the professor of the course was so helpful. It felt like the Reader was there to help me rather than to judge me, and that made me very comfortable.”

“It was helpful for me to have the time pressure to hand in the drafts earlier. The Reader Project also helped me to get started because in the beginning I was overwhelmed by the assignment and didn't really know where to begin.”

“Tough subject, but I got to talk to someone who makes his living writing these sorts of papers.”

“Feedback on earlier drafts was helpful to get me on the right track right from the beginning...”

“The project created a sense of accountability... to really work hard, especially given the detailed feedback and overall effort provided by the readers.”

“The early submission dates really helped in ensuring that the work turned into professors was already in the works of becoming exactly what they wanted.”