

RESEARCH REPORT:
2004 IPFW SUMMER GRANT FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Submitted by Jennifer Stewart, Continuing Lecturer
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In summer 2004, I was awarded a Summer Grant for Instructional Development by the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. The CELT Board funded the development of a faculty development website for the writing faculty of IPFW. Based on the needs of the IPFW writing faculty, I spent the summer researching writing issues, developing a user-friendly website, and hounding my fellow faculty for best practices; the result is the Writing Instructor Research and Development (WIReD) Site, a 24-hour, online professional development resource for our writing faculty.

Rationale

When I started teaching at IPFW in 1997 as a graduate student, I was very wet behind the ears and needed help. I'd taken one course as an undergraduate at Ball State that addressed teaching in college; however, I had minimal practical resources to draw from when composing my own syllabi and assignments. As my instructional skills and teaching resources developed and grew, I began to share my work with any and all incoming part-time faculty; of course, I was not the only instructor sharing her materials. This community of sharing not only created a pleasant, collegial atmosphere among part-time faculty but also served as a way to maintain the quality of instruction in the writing program.

While the English department encourages this sharing environment for its faculty, many of the part-time instructors spend a limited amount of time on campus. Thus they cannot participate as readily in this community. Also, because of their part-time employment (and sometimes second and third jobs), these faculty members cannot attend on-campus professional development opportunities as readily as our full-time instructors. The part-time faculty of the English department is responsible for approximately 94% of the beginning writing classes (ENG P131, W130, and W131) and

is among the first freshman encounter. By offering an online resource for faculty, I hope WIReD helps improve and enhance the instructors' pedagogy, which can benefit the student body.

Developing WIReD

I developed and have maintained a website for my own courses for approximately five years now. When I taught myself web design, I used Microsoft Word; it is simple and user friendly. However, in my experience, MS Word has coding issues that I did not want to affect WIReD, so I spoke to several colleagues who have developed websites. Specifically I sought out the aid of Ernest Ruffleth and Seana Lane, present and/or former IPFW composition instructors knowledgeable in web design and IPFW Writing Program pedagogy. As a former IPFW ITS employee, Lane also has valuable information technology training. Ruffleth and Lane both suggested I consider using Macromedia Dreamweaver MX to compose the WIReD pages. I had taken an ITS class in Dreamweaver with Pam Zepp approximately three years ago, so I gathered the materials she distributed (I was extremely proud I still had them and found them relatively quickly), purchased *Macromedia Dreamweaver MX for Windows and Macintosh (Visual QuickStart Guide)* with grant monies, and began relearning Dreamweaver MX.

Dreamweaver is an excellent designing program because it offers the option to view both the HTML source code and the webpage as it would appear on screen. The duality of this option taught me not only about design but also much more about HTML code than I previously knew. For example, while creating WIReD, I learned how to create a rollover: when an instructor browses the best practices, as the cursor rolls over the name of the linked assignment, a credit ("contributed by J. Parker") appears. As another example, by discussing and testing this project with a former colleague of mine, Erica Berliner, a project manager in Information Technology at New York University's School of Medicine, I became skilled at using HTML code to automate a subject line in an email link.

Many of the site's stylistic decisions came quite easily. The font of the site, for example, is Verdana. I chose this font because I knew the site would be referenced by our faculty mainly from the Department of English and Linguistics' main webpage, which also uses Verdana. A stylistic consistency among connecting sites creates unity and coherence. Similarly, the site is based in blue, white, and black to emphasize WIReD's connection to IPFW. On the same note, the IPFW information located on the main page of the site is required for IPFW-based sites; therefore, its inclusion was mandatory.

Organizing WIReD

According to the grant proposal, I wanted WIReD to offer best practices, professional development texts, and miscellaneous pertinent material to IPFW writing instructors. To create and organize the pages of WIReD, I drew up a list of the various materials WIReD should offer. After brainstorming alone; with Ed Moritz, Director of Writing, and Karol Dehr, Associate Director of Writing; and with numerous IPFW writing faculty, I formulated the following list of material to be included in WIReD:

- Best Practices
- Books
- Journal Articles
- *The IPFW Writing Handbook*
- IPFW Information for Students
- IPFW Information for Faculty

Eventually, a list of approximately seventeen general topics was generated. From this list, I began grouping topics together according to their similar features. For example, textbooks, journal articles, instructional websites, and conference and organization websites became grouped under "Professional Development." According to various webpage design documents and the *Dreamweaver* text I read, a simple layout is much more appealing and user friendly. Therefore, I opted to group the information into three main pages, with each page remaining moderately short; thus, instructors who browse the site from home with potentially slow page-loading capabilities can access WIReD conveniently.

Collecting Best Practices

I began compiling best practices information for WIReD as soon as I received notification of the award in late April. Aware of both the faculty's geographic dispersion and my need for a variety of best practices submissions, I opted to gather materials

before spring term ended, and then organize everything. My first step was to contact the Composition Committee. Each year the committee members examine and respond to teaching portfolios of the part-time writing instructors; therefore, I thought it best to solicit suggestions from the committee members. Specifically, I asked them to name faculty members I should “aggressively contact” for the best practices section. The committee members identified part-time faculty members whose portfolios either reflected the goals of the department well or whose assignments were exemplary. Initially, I waited to contact these individuals until after phase two.

Phase two of the best practices solicitation consisted of an email notification sent to all part-time faculty. I presented my project to the faculty and asked them to submit material for our site. In the email, I stated, “If each writing instructor were to submit just one (though of course I'd love more) best practice--even if it was already presented at a PEER or if you picked it up from someone else, the website would offer over 65 best practices for you to examine, modify, and/or use for your writing classes.” After waiting two weeks and receiving minimal submissions, I requested a phone list of all limited term lecturers and graduate aides. I spent two weeks trying to contact the faculty, and the results were spotty. Those faculty members I was able to speak to were accommodating and willing to submit material for the site. For those who had not yet submitted material, I intended to hound them when I presented the site to the writing faculty at the annual meeting in mid-August.

All in all, the site now offers 132 best practices materials with the promise of more submissions from new faculty. As I receive submissions, they are added to WIReD with a “new” indicator that remains on the site for approximately a week. However, many who promised submissions have yet to follow through on that promise. Therefore, I intend to continue to solicit material for WIReD at least once per academic year. My theory is a solicitation email will remind and prompt many of the faculty who offered material for WIReD to submit their work.

Evaluating Best Practices

As stated in the award letter, the CELT board members asked that I clarify the criteria I developed for determining best practices. Jeanette Claussen sent an article entitled, “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, which served as a strong foundation for the development of criteria.

The article states, “Good practice in undergraduate education:

- encourages contact between students and faculty,
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
- encourages active learning,
- gives prompt feedback,
- emphasizes time on task,
- communicates high expectations, and
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning.”

With this list in mind, I next examined the sections of *The IPFW Writing Handbook* dealing with course design and assignments. All writing courses have common elements. In no specific order, students are required to:

- write for a variety of purposes and audiences;
- participate in the writing process—prewriting, writing, revising;
- compose texts that are focused, developed, and organized;
- practice proper research methods and accurate documentation styles;
- show progress toward mastering standard written English; and
- demonstrate critical thinking.

After examining these two documents, I decided each best practice needed to address the concerns of Chickering and Gamson in addition to speak to one or more of the standards established by the *Writing Handbook*.

Another criterion for the best practice submissions was variety. The site offers several examples of assignments, exercises, and syllabi. Writing instructors who gain access to the best practice materials have the opportunity to view several syllabi by different faculty members; this variety can manifest itself in structure, format, language, tone, and

content, which can prevent a homogenized, didactic classroom. Thus, instructors are able to pick and choose elements of various practices that correspond with their teaching style.

Collecting Professional Development Material

When I proposed WIReD, I hoped to offer a collection of professional development texts. After researching through Helmke Library and the Internet, WIReD offers descriptions of and links to over 20 journal articles, 10 textbooks, and 40 websites. I began my search as most of my students do—with a broad, generalized Internet search. I used a variety of search terms and combinations, most pretty obvious—writing, teaching, pedagogy, tips, help, assessment, criteria, principles of good education, best practices, etc. For approximately four weeks, I investigated websites and perused EBSCOHost and IUCAT. As for criteria, I determined the articles, texts, and websites should meet the same standards of the best practices; therefore, the published material often adheres to the practices presented by Chickering and Gaston and/or the requirements of the IPFW English Department.

Presenting and Promoting WIReD

Once WIReD was complete, I tested it with various colleagues and peers. First, I sent the WIReD link to the Director of Writing, the Associate Director of Writing, and the Chair of the Composition Committee. All three gave some minor revision suggestions, mostly focusing on style or mechanics; the content and organization were widely accepted. After revising their suggestions, I sent the pages to Berliner and Lane. Because both colleagues are very knowledgeable in web design, I wanted their feedback. Lane identified areas that were “messy,” or too busy with color, headings, or links. Her revision suggestions offered WIReD a more professional, clean layout. In the same way, Berliner offered suggestions regarding usability of the layout. For example, the reference buttons at the bottom of each WIReD page used to be flush left. Moving the buttons to the bottom of the page allowed more room for text and encouraged faculty members to read the entire page before accessing further pages.

After getting feedback regarding WIReD from just about anyone who would look at it, I presented the site to the writing faculty at the annual writing instructors' meeting held in August. The Director and Associate Director of Writing organize this meeting; they gave me 20 minutes to present WIReD to the faculty. For those 20 minutes, I walked faculty through the layout and contents of the WIReD site. I ended the presentation with a plea for more best practices submissions. Questions were minimal; however, directly after my presentation, we broke for lunch, and that is when the questions hit. Many faculty members praised me for compiling the information for them. A few asked for individual help sessions to maneuver through the site. Mostly, I received a good deal of thanks. It was a very rewarding experience.

Throughout the academic year, WIReD has been more informally promoted. Within the first week of classes, I posted a sign at all part-time faculty campus computers that indicated the URL for WIReD. With the help of Cathleen Carosella, the chair of the Associate Faculty Graduate Aide Council, I attempted to add WIReD to the bookmarked favorites list of the campus computers; however, each instructor's favorites list is different, and without knowledge of their passwords, we could not amend the favorites list. Because one of the duties of the Associate Director of Writing is to promote professional development, Karol Dehr has been promoting WIReD via word-of-mouth and at departmental professional development sessions.

When I created WIReD, my main purpose was to serve the IPFW writing instructors. What is interesting is because the site is on the Internet, I have received requests for access to WIReD material from several universities and colleges throughout the world. Both the best practices and the journal articles available are password protected—another trick I learned from the helpful staff at ITS. Currently, I do not have permission to grant their requests for either document, as all contributing instructors have not yet authorized the release of submitted material and the journal articles are copyright protected; however, making the site open for writing instructors beyond IPFW is something I am continuing to investigate.

Evaluating WIReD and Its Future

I conducted a survey of the part-time writing faculty regarding WIReD in January 2005 (refer to Appendix A). Over 25% of the surveys were returned with feedback concerning the effectiveness of WIReD (refer to Appendix B). The response to the survey was, for the most part, positive. While I have to admit I was disappointed that so few responded and several who did respond admitted to never visiting the site, I am thrilled to see that those who use the site often use it more than once. Moreover, I had always suspected that the best practices section of WIReD would be the most valued. As evidenced by the feedback on the survey, save one participant, every faculty member who uses the site recommends there be more best practices added. Specifically, one instructor commented, “The Best Practices site offers some valuable help, but it seems that not everyone is into contributing—including me. I hope the site grows! Thanks for doing this work!” Another faculty member added, “You’ve given all of us a great resource. I think that you should nag people more about giving you course materials because that is the most valuable tool you have up there.” With this comment in mind, I will continue to aggressively solicit this material from faculty members.

In order to maintain WIReD, approximately once a month, I will update the current news calendar on the main page. This section highlights upcoming events for IPFW writing faculty—workshops, lectures, holidays, etc. If faculty members submit new material or if an error is identified on a page, I may have to update the site more than once a month. Ultimately, my intention is to maintain WIReD throughout my duration as an IPFW faculty member.

I appreciate the opportunity the CELT board offered by allowing me to develop WIReD. I learned a great deal about web design, pedagogy, and the part-time writing faculty. All in all, the WIReD project relies on the desire of our part-time faculty to develop themselves professionally. As the adage says, you can take a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. From the results of the WIReD survey, not everyone wants to take a drink, but the ones who do are pretty thirsty.

Appendix A**Writing Instructor Research and Development (WIReD) Website Survey**

(please return to Jenn Stewart—CM 145 or stewartj@ipfw.edu)

Dear colleagues:

In order for me to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of WIReD to CELT and make any necessary changes, please take a moment to fill out the survey below.

Thanks, Jenn

1. Have you accessed the WIReD site? Yes No

2. How many times have you accessed the WIReD site since its activation?
 1-3 4-6 7-10 more than 10

3. Which section(s) have you used on the WIReD site?
 Faculty Resources Student Resources Professional Development

4. Which section(s) have you used most frequently? (Circle all that apply.)

<u>Faculty Resources</u>	<u>Student Resources</u>	<u>Professional Development</u>
Best Practices	IPFW Information	Textbooks
Developing Online Course Material	Composition Information	Journal Articles
IPFW Writing Handbook		Websites
		Conferences and Organizations

5. Which section of WIReD would you like to see more developed? (Please discuss why and how below.)

<u>Faculty Resources</u>	<u>Student Resources</u>	<u>Professional Development</u>
Best Practices	IPFW Information	Textbooks
Developing Online Course Material	Composition Information	Journal Articles
IPFW Writing Handbook		Websites
		Conferences and Organization

6. What, if any, additional comments or suggestions do you have regarding WIReD?

Appendix B

Nineteen Respondents

1. Have you accessed the WIReD site? 9 Yes 8 No
2. How many times have you accessed the WIReD site since its activation?
 2 1-3 2 4-6 4 7-10 2 more than 10
3. Which section(s) have you used on the WIReD site?
 10 Faculty Resources 1 Student Resources 4 Professional Development

4. Which section(s) have you used most frequently? (Circle all that apply.)

<u>Faculty Resources</u> Best Practices 8 Developing Online Course Material 3 IPFW Writing Handbook	<u>Student Resources</u> IPFW Information 1 Composition Information 1	<u>Professional Development</u> Textbooks Journal Articles 3 Websites 2 Conferences and Organizations 2
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5. Which section of WIReD would you like to see more developed? (Please discuss why and how below.)

<u>Faculty Resources</u> Best Practices 6 Developing Online Course Material 2 IPFW Writing Handbook 3	<u>Student Resources</u> IPFW Information Composition Information 1	<u>Professional Development</u> Textbooks 1 Journal Articles 1 Websites 1 Conferences and Organizations
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6. What, if any, additional comments or suggestions do you have regarding WIReD?

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