

## THE WRITING ON THE WALL: CELEBRATING NATIONAL DAY ON WRITING AT HOSTOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Since its participation in the 1999 CUNY Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) Initiative, Hostos has sought to foster a campus-wide recognition of the value of writing and its place in the academic, professional and personal lives of both faculty and students. Today, with over 75 Writing Intensive (WI) sections, an appreciation of the connection between reading and writing, ongoing professional development, and WAC principles and practices incorporated into both English-language and Spanish-language courses across a wide range of disciplines, Hostos has made great strides in fulfilling the CUNY Board of Trustees mandate to provide students with frequent and meaningful opportunities to write. As we move forward, the Hostos WAC Initiative is guided by the views outlined in the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) report, "Writing in the 21st Century," by Kathleen Yancey. This pivotal report recognizes the shifting roles and demands of writing in the 21st century and points to the prevalence of blogs, wikis, text messages and social networking sites such as Facebook which have changed the ways students learn to write and the ways in which they use writing both inside and outside of the academic setting.

For NCTE, establishing October 20, 2009 as a National Day on Writing was one visible and meaningful way to focus attention on the centrality of writing in our lives and to recognize the variety of purposes and forms this writing takes. It seemed only appropriate that Hostos, a bilingual campus with a college community increasingly conversant with WAC and its place in learning, should participate in this event.

We envisioned the National Day on Writing at Hostos as a day when every person on campus - faculty, administrators, students, staff, security guards, custodians and food service workers - would write. Since we are an academic institution, writing happens on our campus all the time, but on this day, we wanted to move beyond the writing that takes place in the classroom and invite the entire Hostos community to participate in a celebration of writing and to make the campus cog-

nizant of the fundamental role writing plays in our lives. Thousands of people walk in and out of our doors every day; each one brings a story, a perspective, and a voice. We wanted to know what our college had to say.

To create a writing community we planned for two different “walls of writing,” one physical and one virtual. There would be three physical walls, 4 feet high and ranging from 12 feet to 30 feet long, mounted in the lobbies of the “A,” “B,” and “C” buildings. These large wooden boards were wrapped in sheets of white paper with strings for sharpie markers attached to them. The virtual wall was a blog that could be easily accessed from the College’s homepage and that would enable those who were not on campus to participate in the day’s celebration. On each wall we posted prompts developed in collaboration with the Hostos Writing Fellows to engage the writer:

- What is the best thing you ever read?
- I would like the world to know... (in English and Spanish)
- The funniest thing that ever happened to me is...
- The saddest thing that ever happened to me is...
- The most romantic thing that ever happened to me is...
- The weirdest thing that ever happened to me is...
- What do you wish people knew about you?
- Why are you going to Hostos?
- How do you imagine yourself in 10 years?
- If you could change one thing about NYC what would it be?
- Write in any language you want.

At 9 a.m. on the morning of the National Day on Writing, our college community was greeted by three white walls on campus and a blog open for comments on the homepage. It was slow going initially, but once two or three folks took a sharpie in hand and began writing, curiosity got the better of our community, and the walls were soon crowded with people reaching for pens to leave their mark on the day. Others enjoyed themselves reading and then responding to what others had written. By mid-day all the walls were full and needed to be changed; the second sheets filled up as quickly as the first. By evening, what remained proudly on display was a written cross-section of our college community - its dreams, fears, complaints, achievements, questions, prayers, advice, and even jokes. While the physical wall was filling up with a rainbow of ink, the virtual wall was also abuzz with activity. Throughout the day approximately thirty people used the blog to post longer, more reflective pieces. By popular demand, the walls and blog remained on display for the rest of that week so that folks could read each other’s comments and continue to add their own.

As a community, we used this moment to share with the world the things we love and the things that bother us. We used it to give advice to readers or to share spiritual or political beliefs. We wrote in different languages; we wrote to each other. Whether we wrote about our frustrations or our ambitions, we wrote, and in doing so we transformed blank walls of paper and an empty piece of cyberspace into a written mosaic of our college community.

### THE WALLS OF WRITING

On the walls in the lobbies, responses were spontaneous, brief, and “social.” People reacted to each other and posted notes to and about their friends and families. In response to the prompt, “How do you see yourself in 10 years?” folks wrote:

- Not knowing is the most exciting part!
- Living in accordance to humanity
- Being a dentist
- A really good producer, writer and singer
- With a PhD
- Not here!

The prompts were intended to spark conversation, but many had additional thoughts they wanted to share:

- Can we think of writing as a way of ‘righting’ things that are wrong ...and standing up straight so that we voice our concerns and make this world a better place to live in. R. Cohen
- English is my second language and I am proud to be able to speak both
- When the night seems the darkest it’s because the sun is going to come out.
- Regole amore senza regole; Love rules without rules.
- Perseverance is the tool that sharpens how much dedication you are willing to devote to a life’s endeavor.
- Thank God for my family.
- Believe in your dreams.
- Thank you God for your son Jesus Christ without him I would not be at Hostos.
- You don’t need drugs to laugh and have fun.
- I am a dedicated Hostos student. Hostos rocks.
- The Best thing I ever read is the Joy Luck Club
- I wish to be the best drummer in the world

### THE BLOG

Our bloggers tended to write longer pieces as the blog allowed space for rumination and lengthier text. Composing on a computer also allows for more revision and change, and the comments left on the blog reflect this.

“The saddest thing that ever happened to me...” elicited this entry:

The saddest thing that ever happened to me was my being away from my lovely mother. What can I say now? Nothing...I hope I could do something about it but there is no money for a visit just only a phone card...

Bloggers frequently contributed poetry:

*First Kiss*

*You call me your baby so i call you my boo  
You pick me up when my feelin are blue  
You got a boyfriend but i dont thinks he's your type  
Yeah im dog.. so what im friendly i don't bite  
I walk you home hold your hand then gaze in your eyes  
I think its the right moment, right time so i give it a try  
When we kissed ...felt like i was the center of the sun  
It felt like, New Yearz, 4th of July, and valentine day all in one  
When im around i want to be closer when i not around you i want to be wit you  
Some times it feel like im a runny nose and you my tissue  
What ever problem you facing we could handle tha issue  
I know all cuples break up sooner or later so when we do ill miss you  
nicquan*

Overall, the blogs were forums for sharing innermost feelings and reflections of self, for making the private public.

Thousands of people embraced the walls with an enthusiasm that we could not have anticipated. The success of the day revealed that people relished the opportunity to share a bit of themselves with the world. In turn, people also enjoyed reading the walls and many times replied to what others had written. The real and virtual walls became tangible examples of the deep connection between reading and writing. While people wrote and read, it was also apparent throughout the day that they were enjoying themselves. As one member of our community, Denair, commented on the blog,

*"I really enjoyed the sense of community that it brought to the school. It was as if we were all one big piece of work. It was interesting to see the things people are willing to share. Thanks!"*