

Forum

Writing across the curriculum

I. Writing in all the arts and sciences: Getting started and gaining momentum

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Instructors inside and outside English departments will readily agree with those of us who administer writing programs that writing is an important part of the college curriculum. Such agreement, however, is light years away from establishing a program of writing in the total curriculum. That comfortable sense of initial assent frequently masks disagreements about fundamental definitions of the two essential words: writing and curriculum.

Many of our colleagues in other disciplines define writing narrowly in terms of its surface features. Some of them derive this reductive definition from memories of their own undergraduate days, when their composition teachers merely proof-read and graded finished essays. Since such papers were usually assigned on literary subjects, these future scientists, sociologists, and art critics frequently felt insecure about both subject matter and commas. Consequently, it is not surprising that our colleagues in disciplines other than English associate the teaching of writing with grammar and literature, two areas that most of them feel unqualified to teach. If we want them to incorporate more writing instruction in their classes, we must begin with a few reminders: writing is a mode of scholarship in all disciplines; all college instructors are responsible for teaching apprentices how scholars behave in their disciplines; and since writing is an essential form of discovery and communication in a discipline, instructors in all fields are, in that sense, teachers of composition.

Paradoxically, the department that may prove most difficult to convince of these points is the English department. As Pogo says, "We have met the enemy and they are us." Richard Fulkerson, who has studied the match between philosophies and practices in teaching composition, writes, "My research has convinced me that in many cases composition teachers either fail to have a consistent value theory or fail to let that philosophy shape pedagogy." The most important step for a WPA who wants to develop a program of writing in the total curriculum, therefore, is to work with the composition staff to formulate a consistent philosophy for teaching composition.

A consistent theoretical formulation of this kind requires many English teachers to break old mind-sets and to reflect seriously on unexamined prejudices about teaching composition. As readers of this journal know, the fact that many English instructors have never studied or even thought systematically about teaching composition is the dirty little secret of our profession. That absurd situation is chang-

ing, but WPAs must still work with English instructors, frequently senior colleagues, who were nurtured to expect that professional advancement meant no more 8:30 a.m. classes and no more teaching composition. Some of these English instructors view a request for consistent philosophical, pedagogic, and curricular thinking about teaching composition as though we had asked them to develop a theoretical perspective on teaching hop-scotch. They view composition as a subject without content, and their syllabi reflect this frustration. Either they have silently substituted a course in introduction to literature for the required composition course, or they have constructed a syllabus based on mechanics, conventions, and analysis of rhetorical patterns.

Neither syllabus serves well as the foundation of a cross-disciplinary writing program. If we want our colleagues in other departments to reinforce the process of writing in their courses, we must design a composition syllabus that introduces first-year students to these processes. Procedures and practice should be the content of a composition course. We should use class time to introduce and model strategies of invention, drafting, and rewriting. And at every stage we should teach students how to learn from their peers. Students need explicit teaching in the ways that scholars share—how we connect with each other and with the appropriate academic traditions—through collaborative learning.² Our reading list should be short but varied, introducing students to forms of writing in the social and natural sciences as well as in the humanities (including literature). Finally, the composition course should provide practice in the conventions of standard written English, as those conventions relate to students' own problems with composing.

This suggested emphasis on process in the composition course leads us from disagreements about definitions of writing to disagreements about the construction of a college curriculum. Clearly, I am suggesting that a program in writing across the curriculum works best when faculty members in all departments organize their courses to teach the scholarly processes in their fields. Undergraduates begin with the belief that different disciplines contain discrete bags of facts. Most instructors understand that all courses have the same subject matter—the world—and that different disciplines provide varying perspectives for exploring that common subject matter.

If the overall curriculum emphasizes process, then as writing program administrators we can suggest a reasonable division of labor among departments. The composition staff can introduce all students to a variety of procedures in writing and provide extensive practice in all stages of the writing process. Instructors in every department can make writing an inevitable part of every teaching and learning day by asking students to write before they speak, to write a one-paragraph summary of the lecture's main points, to write informal letters or reaction sheets that express responses to academic material, and to do other ungraded writing exercises. Scholars in every discipline can also use writing assignments of a more formal kind to teach students the complex forms of social behavior that are manifested in the rhetoric of each discipline. In practical terms, instructors can build stages of exploration, drafting, and revising into every extended writing project they assign, and they can employ the collaborative learning procedures that students have practiced in their composition classes.

When students have learned how to respond in helpful ways to their peers' preliminary work—that is, when they have learned to work collaboratively—then

a program of writing in the total curriculum becomes practical as well as desirable. As WPAs we can persuade our colleagues that, without overworking, they can structure courses that provide useful intervention in the students' processes of learning and composing. A program of writing in the total curriculum involves a more productive redirection of faculty energies, not a marshalling of new ones. Students do more writing, but instructors grade fewer papers, since the instructors working under this system assess only the finished product after commenting at least once on work in progress. Most of the preliminary commentary can be provided by peers.

I have suggested so far that instituting a program of writing in the total curriculum depends on developing a consistent philosophy of writing and its place in the curriculum. My own philosophy views writing as a variety of complex processes through which students can explore similarities and differences among the many perspectives on the world provided by courses in a college curriculum. A process approach to both writing and curriculum therefore implies collaborative learning in the largest possible sense. To engage faculty members at large in this necessary collaboration is a big but not impossible task. To get it under way, and to help sustain it, I offer the following suggestions.

1. Let colleagues inside and outside the English department know that composition studies is a scholarly field. Offer faculty research talks on the subject. Report on professional conferences. Make sure the library and bookstore are stocked with copies of important texts and journals. Organize brown-bag lunches for informal discussion of this material.

2. Make sure that the composition program is legitimately useful to instructors in other disciplines. Design the course to be cross-disciplinary and process-oriented.

3. Maintain an attitude of respect toward writing in all disciplines. Remember that flavor and flair may not be universally appropriate. Differences in aim and audience lead inevitably to differences in style. Read James Kinneavy's *A Theory of Discourse* (1971; reprinted by Norton, 1980) for a theoretical perspective that allows us to value styles beyond the belletristic.

4. Maintain an attitude of respect toward literary colleagues, even those who have enjoyed some of the perquisites entailed in abandoning composition to us. Literary scholars know more about rhetorical and linguistic analysis than they have ever thought applicable to composition teaching. We can learn a great deal from them.

5. Ask the dean or educational policy committee to set up a cross-disciplinary composition committee to study practices in teaching writing at your institution. That committee should include powerful people from other departments and the writing program administrator.

6. Once you have studied your own situation and have written a systematic report on writing practices and attitudes, bring in an outside consultant, even for one day. The consultant will say many of the things you have been saying. The difference will be that now some people will listen. Consultants are available through application to the Consultancy Grant Program of the National Endowment for the

Humanities (write for information to Janice Litwin, Program Officer, Consultant Grants, National Endowment for the Humanities, 806 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506). Consultant-evaluators are also available through WPA (write to Professor Harvey S. Wiener, 309 Clearview Lane, Massapequa, New York 11758).³

7. A consultant can help with faculty-development procedures, including workshops. But you should first employ other subtle, informal means of teaching your colleagues about teaching writing. Teach your colleagues by asking them for advice. Ask to see copies of assignments they are using with their students so that you can explain procedures for these assignments in your composition courses. If you use an anthology of cross-disciplinary readings, distribute the table of contents to colleagues in all departments and ask for suggestions about teaching the selections from their disciplines. Adopt a departmentally selected grammar handbook and offer free copies to colleagues in other departments who are willing to list it on their syllabi as a required text.⁴

8. Many institutions have funds for faculty development. Apply for a portion of this money to conduct a writing workshop for faculty. At this point it is very important to invite an outside consultant to conduct the workshop. I have already alluded to the difficulties of prophets in their own countries. But choose your workshop leaders carefully. If possible, observe them in action at a professional meeting before issuing an invitation. Remember, their successes on your campus will be their own, but their failures will be yours. Remember also that outside agencies are becoming more and more unwilling to fund extensive faculty workshops unless your institution has already conducted a pilot project with inside funds.⁵

The benefits of a program of writing in the total curriculum extend well beyond improving the writing abilities of our students, although that outcome should not be overlooked. Albert Kitzhaber's study conducted at Dartmouth in the 1960s indicated that freshmen who were concluding one year of instruction in composition wrote more effectively than seniors. Why? The seniors had not written very much since their first-year composition course.⁶

What Kitzhaber's results indicate is that as writing program administrators we should provide opportunities for reinforcement and practice of writing skills throughout a student's total academic experience. By working toward this specific goal, which is clearly under our aegis, we are also cooperating with colleagues to reformulate the college curriculum in a fundamental way. Cross-disciplinary work on writing leads to other opportunities for intellectual sharing. Discussing writing as a process may lead to improved understanding of learning as a process. And a program of writing in the total curriculum may even help us to reestablish that disappearing social structure in the twentieth-century academy—a community of scholars.

Notes

¹Richard Fulkerson, "Philosophies of Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (December 1979), 347.

²See Kenneth A. Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Winthrop, 1980, 103-34.

³See also "Writing Program Evaluation: An Outline for Self-Study," by the WPA Board of Consultant Evaluators, *WPA 4* (Winter 1980), 23-28.

⁴For further suggestions see Robert Lyons, "Faculty Development through Professional Collaboration," *WPA 4* (Winter 1980), 12-18.

⁵An additional source of help is the Beaver College Institute in Writing Across the Curriculum. See the announcement in this issue.

⁶Albert R. Kitzhaber, *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: the Teaching of Writing in College*, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1963.