

Some Speculations About the Future of Writing Programs

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Almost two years ago in my CCCC Chair's address at the Minneapolis convention, I raised a storm of controversy in the profession by suggesting that if writing teachers cannot function as equals and gain professional recognition and respect within the university English departments, they should consider leaving those departments and try to establish separate composition and rhetoric programs.

Such a suggestion raises the issue of where do writing programs belong? In English departments as an integral part of a broad program in which all faculty teach or outside of English departments in a separate division where composition and rhetoric faculty can focus their energies? It is easy to forget that this question that has generated so much discussion in the past few years was not even an issue ten years ago. Before that time most English faculty took it for granted that their department would teach virtually all the writing courses for their college or university even though they would freely admit those courses were troublesome because they were necessarily labor extensive and consumed a large amount of energy and resources of a department. They were also hard to teach. But few faculty contemplated getting rid of them for two reasons. First, they were the bread and butter courses of most departments, financing small upper division classes. Second, because of practicality and a certain noblesse oblige, even senior faculty felt some responsibility for seeing that students were taught to write. Perhaps not by them, but by someone in the department. That someone became junior faculty and graduate students and composition took its place, at the bottom of the totem pole to be sure, but still an important part of the total program in English.

The dispute about where such a program should be has arisen only because a new kind of writing faculty has emerged in the past ten years: an articulate and energetic group who has put forth a powerful new view of the nature of writing and brought fresh vigor and insights to the enterprise of teaching it. Going back to the ancient art of rhetoric for vitality and scholarly sophistication, these scholars have created a new discipline and moved in to fill a need they believe has not been filled by too many English departments. They have made their weight felt throughout the country by challenging the view that expository writing is

essentially a low level skill of transcription and that teaching it is a service. And they have been successful enough to challenge English departments and to try to claim a larger role for themselves in those departments.

During this same period, the nature of literary studies in English has also been changing. As the field flourished in the 1970s and many new scholars came into the profession, English departments became more and more specialized, more fragmented than they were in the 1960s. Pressure to publish in the profession also increased, even in institutions that until recently thought of themselves primarily as teaching institutions. As pressure rose, scholars tended to pick smaller and smaller areas to focus on and dissect, and literary criticism flourished. Moving farther away from concern for primary texts and for teaching those texts, literature professors have made literary theory and criticism their chief concern. As this has happened, naturally the focus of many scholars has shifted almost entirely to graduate studies, where they work in an atmosphere increasingly rarified and detached from the general student population.

In most cases, however, departments have not given up the required courses that serve that population because those courses still pay the bills and furnish teaching jobs for the graduate students who are absolutely necessary for the critical enterprise to flourish. Such students must exist in order to justify creating a body of criticism to teach them. Besides, few literary theorists are so eminent that a university will subsidize them just to think and write. The public expects them to do some practical teaching. Increasingly, however, a new kind of narrow and unabashedly elitist professoriate has emerged in many departments.

Both these developments have driven a serious dividing wedge into the fissure that has always existed between the writing programs and the literature studies in English departments. Historically, this fissure has been papered over for pragmatic reasons and because the distribution of power in the departments has been so unequal that raising the issues we now face did not even occur to anybody. Composition faculty were, for the most part, not composition scholars so they had neither the self confidence nor the power to even think about changing the situation.

There are, to be sure, certain kinds of institutions in which English departments are likely to have strong and well integrated writing programs. One is the liberal arts college that stresses undergraduate education very heavily and has a faculty who have diverse interests and diverse responsibilities. In many of these departments everyone teaches writing. There is simply no discussion about it. They teach at all levels, they know their students well, and they see their program as a whole. They understand that if students do not have good teaching in their freshman

writing courses they are not going to stick around for upper division courses. Often everyone is involved in the decisions about textbooks, and in some schools the faculty meets regularly and plans the writing course.

Miami University of Ohio fills this description in many ways even though it also offers the Ph.D. in rhetoric. So does the University of Hartford and other institutions such as DePauw College, Reed College, Austin College, Gustavus Adolphus College, and St. Olaf's in Minnesota. I will grant that I know of some small liberal arts schools where the predominantly literature faculty says "Let's hire a composition person in a staff position and give it all to her," but I do not think it happens often.

Nevertheless, I think that in the better liberal arts colleges it is possible for trained writing faculty to work well within the English program, and by being tactful and patient gradually to shift the direction of a program, bring in new ideas, and eventually effect a paradigm shift. They can earn the respect and cooperation of the traditional faculty. It is not easy to do, but it is worth doing and I think many writing faculty are currently working toward this goal.

The second kind of department in which one may well be able to work out an accommodation is the large, principally urban university that serves a diverse, non-traditional and generally highly pragmatic student population. Typical of these kinds of places are Wayne State University, University of Louisville, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Houston, and the University of Cincinnati. Many schools in the CUNY system in New York are similar.

The faculty of these English departments are very likely to understand that their existence depends on offering a broad-based and varied curriculum that responds to students' needs and interests. They can offer fine courses in Shakespeare and Victorian literature, in creative writing, and they can have a very strong English major, but they must also offer a good basic writing program. They must teach technical writing, train English teachers, and perhaps offer a concentration in professional writing and editing or something similar. Not only do their students demand such a diverse program, their mandate from the state legislature often requires it. These institutions are funded to educate the citizens of the state, and in the long run that has to be their top priority. Nevertheless one can find many fine literature scholars at these places who do good work and make their mark on the national scene.

The same kinds of priorities and constraints often operate in another kind of institution; that is the branch campuses of state universities and schools in what might be called "the second tier" of the state university system. Many different kinds of state schools fill this category: South-west Texas State University, University of Texas at Arlington,

San Diego State University, Ball State University, and Washington State University. They may offer Ph.D.s, but research is not the absolute priority in this kind of school. Again, these institutions often have excellent faculty, some of them distinguished.

Certainly it is true that in these universities the faculty in English departments can be factious, divisive, fight for territory, and compete for power and funds within their department. But writing program administrators in places like these have a good chance to make their programs respected and to consolidate their own positions in the department so that they can function as equals in the departmental hierarchy. They flourish by doing their own work well, by bringing in grants and recognition to the department, by providing good training for graduate students, and by demonstrating to their university administrations that they are enhancing the reputations of their institutions.

Writing program administrations in these kinds of schools—and there are scores, perhaps hundreds of them around the country—can be strong and effective within an English department. They can work well with literature faculty when they are equals, and they can occasionally even pursue their interests in literature or other media such as film. Most important, they can be respected, if not loved, by their colleagues.

I would encourage any WPA in this kind of institution to work towards this balanced arrangement of power. It is practical, it is economical, and it can be a congenial solution. One has to be self-confident, committed, and often one has to fight. But the situation is tenable and potentially productive. These are perhaps the kinds of departments that have the most work to do to convert other literature faculty or more traditional faculty from what I call a composition slave attitude over to new approaches.

But what about the writing programs in English departments in the big universities—University of Michigan, Indiana University, Harvard, New York University, UCLA, and the University of Texas? How well can writing programs function in these institutions which are strongly research-oriented universities, where faculties are highly specialized and focus primarily on graduate education?

I am not optimistic about the future of writing programs as part of English departments in institutions such as these. They have already split off in Harvard, Michigan, and UCLA, but in a way I do not think is healthy. In these institutions, there are no graduate programs connected with the writing programs; consequently, the universities regard them largely as service programs and they cannot command the respect and support a good writing program needs. Nor are such programs likely to generate the research and scholarship that will help them to retain good faculty and advance the discipline.

Theoretically, writing and literature faculty in any university ought to be able to work out at least a marriage of convenience, but I know few major research institutions where that is happening. The University of Maryland and the University of Utah do seem to be moving in that direction. More and more, however, I believe it is in our best interests, the best interests of our students, and of the whole population for writing and rhetoric programs in major research-oriented and basically elitist universities to think about moving out of English departments. Those of us who work in such institutions should start planning how we can set up our own divisions. And we need to plan carefully, for the hazards are considerable.

Let me explain my basis for this radical proposal, although as many historians in our field have pointed out, it is not written in heaven that writing programs naturally belong to English departments. They could just as easily have gone with speech or linguistics departments. In its simplest form, I suppose my rationale is best expressed in Toby Fulwiler's statement that composition people are populists. I think we are. I think we care deeply about teaching large numbers of people a craft that they must have in order to participate and thrive in our society. We believe in a broadly literate and informed citizenry, and we think it is our responsibility to find a way to achieve that goal. Who else is going to do it if we do not?

In contrast, I think specialists in literary studies in major research universities tend to be elitists. They do not think literacy for the general public is their concern. They want to focus on educating a comparatively small group of students and on initiating those students into a narrow circle that defines literature narrowly, and reads it in a special way. Now I say "tend to be." Not all of them are, by any means, and we have great literary scholars whose goals have been to broaden, not narrow, access to great literature: Wayne Booth, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Scholes, and Carolyn Heilbrune, to name just a few. How fashionable these scholars are in the current environment may be a question, of course. But that does not diminish their stature.

Nevertheless, I believe that English departments in most major research universities today are dominated by highly specialized, elitist scholars who do not value the teaching of expository writing and think it has no place in English studies. Their way of getting rid of it is to redefine the mission of their departments by saying, "We should refuse to teach writing. It is the job of the high schools. When students get to college, they should already know how to write." The fact that they do not seems irrelevant to these academics.

Is it possible for us as professional rhetoricians to change this attitude? For two reasons I do not think so. First, there is a Mandarin mentality at

work in many academic departments that makes some people relish growing their intellectual fingernails so long that they cannot do anything useful. The more precious and impractical what they do is, the more they glory in not doing the necessary, useful work of their society. The fewer people who can understand or appreciate what they do, the more they value their product. They do not want to communicate with ordinary people.

This tendency is not limited to the scholarly world. The aristocrats and upper classes of Europe and England have felt this way for centuries and, for the most part, still do. A gentleman does not work. A gentleman certainly does not do anything that serves someone else. Now this is not a strong attitude in the American culture, but I think it crops up frequently in the academic world for interesting reasons. Often the person who is drawn to our world is the reclusive, unworldly type who does not like to cope with pragmatic concerns and the demands of practicality. In colleges and universities, too often, they turn this handicap into a virtue by glorifying abstract studies and narrow specialization. Such specialization is necessary of course to advance a discipline, but it does not have to be pursued at the expense of educating students. A person can do both.

Nevertheless when faculty of this kind dominate an English department, they look on teaching writing as a service function and thus relegate the activity and those who do it into an inferior position forever. As long as they see writing in that way, they will not change. As Fred Crewes put it in a recently published talk given in Texas, the division between composition and literature in many places is not a gap, it is a wall. And nothing is being done on the other side about breaking it down. As rhetoricians, we have not made much progress in persuading the guardians of that wall to see things our way. Perhaps when we have our own departments and graduate programs, we will.

Recently I was reminded of another belief of the traditional twentieth century literary scholars that convinces me more than ever that we need to start planning separation. In her essay "The Reader in History" that concludes her anthology, *Reader Response Criticism*, Jane Tompkins points out the sterile and essentially static nature of most of the major theories about literary studies that have dominated English departments for the last several decades. Her central point is that through most of history, literature, particularly poetry, has been valued (and feared) for what it does, for its effects on people, not for what it means. Literature was valued for its power, and seen as a force acting on the world.

For complex reasons I will not go into here, but which have much to do with the modern literary critics wanting to remove their discipline from competition with science and assert its privileged status, the modern

literary establishment has declared that, "The first requirement of a work of art in the 20th century is that it should do nothing." These scholars want to view poetry only as an ordering force that provides a "stay against the chaos in a world of confusion." To serve this function, poetry must remain detached from the world. Thus they maintain that poetic language is special and inherently different from scientific or referential language. Ordinary folk cannot understand it and college professors have to explain it to them. Thus the justification for graduate studies in English. A text is an object rather than an instrument, it is an occasion for investigation rather than a force that acts on the world.

Now if the Tompkins view is accurate, and to me it resonates with truth, I do not see how expository writing programs can long exist in a healthy condition within a department whose power structure holds this value. The very essence of rhetoric and composition is that it is worldly, pragmatic, contingent, and dynamic—changing, always situational, always adapting. Above all rhetoricians see writing as for something—it does something, and writing teachers are engaged in the practical, everyday work of teaching large numbers of people a craft they think is going to be useful for them.

I see some new hope for change in the current situation from the new interest in reader response criticism. If that approach could become really influential in English departments, I think it could affect the whole discipline because there is a strong connection between rhetorical theory and reader response criticism. But somehow I do not think that change is going to happen. It is too proletarian. So I am not optimistic about a happy compromise in certain literature departments between what we in rhetoric see as our interests and what literary scholars see as theirs.

I am not going to deny that a split between literature and composition means major problems and involves major risks. For political and economic reasons it may be very hard to pull off. Writing courses everywhere bring a lot of money to departments, and they also provide a lot of graduate students to fill graduate courses. Not only that, it is going to be difficult to establish a division of writing and rhetoric as a politically effective and academically respectable unit in a university community. Anything new is always suspect—American literature had the same problems not less than twenty-five years ago.

But I think it can be done and it must be done for the future of the profession. Robert Scholes of Brown University, a recent convert to this view, outlined an intelligent, scholarly and respectable plan for doing this in a speech he gave at the 1985 MLA called "The Case of Divorce." In it he called for a broad redefinition of literature and a new kind of department that took communication as its province. He also called for a strong graduate program within such departments.

For me the key point is that we must keep our graduate programs in the division of writing and rhetoric. This is absolutely essential. A great deal of the vigor in composition and rhetoric is coming from our graduate students. They are energizing the profession by investigating new areas for their dissertations, initiating much of the research that is being done, and giving many of the papers and publishing many of the articles that are advancing the profession. Look at the number of them on the next CCCC program if you want confirmation. And they have the special advantage of doing their teaching in the subject they are studying so that each one reinforces the other. Literature students do not have that advantage.

Without our graduate programs, rhetoric as a discipline will decline, and composition as a discipline will virtually disappear. I am convinced that it is almost impossible to have a vigorous composition program that is both based on scholarship and contributes to scholarship if that program is shunted off from the mainstream of the academic enterprise and becomes a kind of lower division community college to "serve" the rest of the university. It will not serve the university very long or very well. And it will be suicide for the people who try to run it—they will get neither the respect nor the attention of the rest of their academic colleagues.

So separation can be a trap and we must be sure we do not allow ourselves to be cut off from the scholarly enterprise. We have to build programs that incorporate research, publication, teaching, and interaction with the rest of the university community, and bring recognition and respect nationally to our own institutions. It is risky to challenge the status quo, but in some institutions I think we must if we are going to become established professionals with high standards and high self-esteem. Both are necessary for ourselves and for our students, and they are necessary for the larger community who need what we have to offer them.

Writing program administrators themselves must be more than administrators. They have to be scholars, publishers, researchers who bring in recognition and respect to their discipline and to their institutions. They must also be leaders, politicians, and risk takers, bold and enterprising in working to change. The future is uncertain, but it is also promising. I believe that if we act with confidence and determination we have an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen the teaching of writing in our universities and colleges.

