Writing Across the Curriculum: The Program at Third College, University of California, San Diego

Gesa Kirsch

In the last decade, many new writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs have emerged in universities across the country. Two kinds of programs are typical: one integrates writing into discipline-specific courses with faculty in all disciplines teaching writing; the other offers courses for different majors with faculty in English as teachers. Both kinds of programs are usually offered at the upper-division level. In this article, I describe a third kind of writing-across-the-curriculum program—in place at the University of California, San Diego—one that is implemented at the lower-division level and has, to our knowledge, unique features. Here, I report on the program's design and administration, summarize how students assess the program, and discuss administrative issues particular to the program.

In order to differentiate the program at UCSD from the two more typical ones, I will briefly examine each program's assumptions about writing and learning. (For a fuller description of "the two philosophical approaches to writing across the curriculum" (19) see Susan McLeod's recent article "Defining Writing Across the Curriculum.") The one kind of WAC program integrates writing into discipline-specific courses, assuming that faculty across the disciplines can best assess and teach writing typical in their field because they are experts, engaged in the research and debates of their field. The other kind of WAC program, usually taught exclusively by English faculty who offer writing courses with a focus on discipline-specific discourse, assumes that English teachers, because of their training in interpretation, discourse analysis, and rhetorical theory are best qualified to analyze and teach writing in the disciplines.

Despite the different assumptions about who best teaches writing, the two types of WAC programs share the premise that writing can enhance learning. Yet, exactly how writing can contribute to learning is disputed by composition scholars. As Anne Herrington argues, definitions of "writing to learn" tend to fall into two categories: "the perspective of a school community" and "the perspective of a disciplinary community" ("Classrooms" 404). The former perspective, Herrington explains,

encourages expressive, exploratory writing in order to engage students in thinking processes relevant to different disciplines. The latter perspective encourages more formal writing, assuming that by writing in and about their disciplines, students learn about current issues in their field, learn the reasoning processes whereby members of the discipline identify problems and go about researching them, and finally learn the conventions that govern written work in different disciplines.

The Design of the Program

Against this background of other WAC programs, I will now describe the program in place at Third College, University of California, San Diego and contrast its assumptions about learning, teaching, and writing with that of other programs. The program at UCSD combines the two perspectives described by Herrington. Writing is "used as a medium for students to engage in the *process* of thinking" (Herrington, "Classrooms" 404) and to anticipate future academic writing, the approach characterized by Herrington as the "perspective of the school community." Writing also familiarizes students with the "kinds of issues that the discipline considers it important to try to resolve [and] the lines of reasoning used to resolve those issues" ("Classrooms" 405), the approach Herrington calls the "perspective of a disciplinary community." Such a combination of perspectives, according to Herrington, provides "a more adequate approach" [than either of the two approaches separately] because it "recogniz[es] that a classroom is situated at once in both school and disciplinary communities" ("Classrooms" 405).

The program at UCSD is unusual, though not unique, in that it is integrated at the lower-division, general-education level. Some institutions have begun implementing WAC at the lower-level division, C. W. Griffin reports in a recent survey of WAC programs, by offering "'linked' or 'coregistered' course[s], where students enroll for a writing course linked with another required course" [401]. At UCLA and the University of Washington, for example, writing adjunct courses exist at the lower-level division, yet they are different from UCSD's program in two important ways: students earn separate units and separate grades for those courses, both of which is not the case with the courses at UCSD. (For a fuller description of UCLA's program, see Robert Cullen's article in the *ADE Bulletin*, Spring 1985.)

Officially called the Third College Societal Analysis Writing Adjuncts Program, the program at UCSD was established in the fall of 1985. It is taught in connection with up to 13 general-education courses in four areas: Third World Studies, History, Communications, and Urban Studies and Planning. Most students take these courses in their

sophomore year, after they have had a two-quarter sequence of freshman writing. The Societal Analysis courses are structured like many introductory, lower-division courses: they have three weekly lecture hours, given by the professor in the discipline, and one hour of discussion, led by a teaching assistant, a doctoral student in the field. All students take a mid-term and a final exam, read about 80 pages of course material a week, and write an average of two papers for the course.

Students who sign up for writing sections in order to complete Third College's Writing Adjunct requirement engage in a pattern of work different from that of other students in the course. Students in writing sections are required to attend two additional weekly hours of writing sections, taught by specially trained teaching assistants (TAs). These teaching assistants, like their counterparts leading the regular discussion sections, are doctoral students in the discipline of the course. They are selected for their extensive and successful teaching experience and are trained by a composition specialist (see "Administrative Issues" for more details about the training). In the writing sections, students engage in a range of activities: they discuss course material from the lectures and the readings, they do in-class writing tasks, work in pairs to critique each others' drafts, and collaborate in small groups in order to synthesize course material and present their findings to the class. Students usually write additional and longer papers than in regular sections, as well as many informal, short writing assignments. They receive 6 instead of 4 units for the course and earn one cumulative grade.

In some sections, students are also asked to respond to academic journal questions about the readings. For example, students in Comparative Urban Studies and Planning may be asked to respond to journal tasks like the following:

> *Journal 1.* Reread and annotate Chapter 6 in the book by Ivan Light (*Cities in World Perspective*), paying particular attention to the description of modernization and dependency theories. For this journal entry, draw a vertical line through the middle of a piece of paper, writing modernization theory on the top left and dependency theory on the top right. Underneath each heading, list the causes each theory proposes to explain Third World overurbanization. Once you've compiled this list, write a paragraph comparing and contrasting modernization theory with dependency theory.
>
> *Journal 2.* Reread and annotate Chapter 19 in Abu-Lughod and Hay's book (*Third World Urbanization*). List the different effects of overurbanization that shape the life of the Jakarta street trader, such as under- and unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, social structures, and legal aspects. Using the list you just generated, write a page illustrating the effects of overurbanization with examples from the life of the Jakarta street trader.

The first journal task helps students understand that in many disciplines there exist competing theories. By listing the elements of two theories

next to each other, and then writing about these elements, students have a means of comparing, analyzing, and assessing the value of each theory. The second journal task requires students to reconstruct and examine the case studies they have read about. Using examples from case studies to illustrate the effects of overurbanization, students may see how theories and examples are related. Such examples and cases are essential in writing convincingly about concepts of urbanization. By writing about specific cases, students build up a ready store of illustrations they can use to support extended arguments. For example, students can make use of cases recorded in journal entries when asked to respond to the following task, a more formal essay assignment completed in class:

> Write an essay explaining the causes of Third World overurbanization and describing its effects. Imagine a reader who knows enough to realize there are problems with Third World cities but needs help in analyzing their causes or characteristics.
>
> In explaining the causes, use material you have read in Light's book (chapter 6, "Modernization and Dependency Theory"), in the Soft Reserve articles (Abu-Lughod & Hay, chapters 9 & 10), and material you have heard in lecture (colonialism, the rise of capitalism, industrialization).
>
> In describing the effects of overurbanization, you should try to describe categories or kinds of effects and then, for each kind of effect, give examples drawn from several case studies.
>
> You might begin by defining "overurbanization," then move to discussing its causes, and finally describe its effects. To understand the causes and effects of overurbanization, your reader will need many specific examples and concrete details.

Other writing assignments for the Urban Studies and Planning course—assignments completed by all students whether or not they are in the special writing sections—include two essays based on first-hand field research and a final cumulative project that requires the application of theories discussed in lectures to the findings from the field research.

As the examples above illustrate, students in the writing sections are asked to write in a variety of discourse types and in varying degrees of formality. Instructors are encouraged to assign a range of writing because research shows that different types of writing make different demands on writers (see Langer and Appleby, 130-151; Britton, et al. 175-203). Furthermore, as Susan Peck MacDonald, the composition specialist who coordinates all writing sections, explains in her *Report on the First Year* of the program, "writing allows [students] the repeated rehearsals, the opportunity to apply concepts, and the opportunities to gain feedback that are critical to their mastering . . . new ways of thinking" (6). MacDonald classifies "three facets of academic thinking which are crucial to the academy and yet very difficult for the beginning

undergraduate student: 1. perceiving arguments as arguments, 2. using evidence, and 3. perceiving and using varying codes in appropriate contexts" (6). The range of writing that students engage in and the support they receive throughout their writing process in the adjunct courses are designed to foster students' facility with academic discourse, to help them overcome the difficulties described above, and to encourage them to learn course material and synthesize knowledge through writing.

In a memo to the Third College Curriculum and Academic Affairs Committee, Cooper and MacDonald outline some of the program standards:

> a. Writing must be viewed as a means of learning and of participating in the discipline under study, not solely as an instrument for testing what has been learned.
>
> b. Students must meet regularly with their instructors for tutorials on work in progress.
>
> c. There must be ample class time for TAs to work with students on alternatives for organizing their writing. . . . [Students] may then need to spend at least 1 hour of classroom time in peer workshops.
>
> d. Students must be required to revise key assignments. Revisions must involve reconceptualizing, reorganizing, and adding material—not merely correcting spelling and punctuation.
>
> e. Students must keep an Academic Journal in which they write regularly (preferably daily) about assigned readings. . . . [Journals] must be designed to teach the strategies of inquiry, reading, and writing in a discipline; and they must prepare students for major assignments.
>
> f. TAs' major writing assignments must be discussed with the SAWA Coordinator and revised with care so that students understand what is being asked of them and have a good chance of succeeding at it.

Students' Evaluation of the Program

After the first year, MacDonald surveyed students, asking them about their learning and writing experience in the new program. Here is what she reports:

> One of the questions we ask is "Do you feel your writing has improved?" In the Spring Quarter, 70% of the students answered "yes" to this question, and a high percentage of those answering "no" followed up with comments like these: "No, in fact, I got into a bad rut in this class because I was concentrating on the content of the paper rather than the writing" or "I don't feel my writing improved but I did learn how to write a good research paper." These seemingly negative comments appear to result from misconceptions about what writing is—from the mistaken idea that "writing" and

"content" are separate. We are happy to have students concentrating upon "content" when they . . . learn to write research papers—even if they themselves conceive of those forms of learning as separate from "writing." Furthermore, most of the students who answer "no" to the question about whether their writing has improved answer "yes" to the following question: "Do you feel that you have understood the course material itself better through having to write about it?" In the Spring Quarter [of 1985], 92% answered "yes" to that question. (15)

The majority of students respond positively to the writing sections, although they occasionally perceive writing as a separate activity from learning the course material. While some students were disappointed not to receive instructions in such matters as sentence structure and grammar, almost all students say they better understand the course material because they frequently write about it.

Administrative Issues

A number of administrative issues have emerged as crucial in launching the program at UCSD. Here I will address actual and potential difficulties that a program like ours faces.

Training and Workload of Teaching Assistants

For teaching assistants from different disciplines to succeed with the teaching of writing, a training workshop and follow-up meetings are of utmost importance. At UCSD, teaching assistants attend a three-day training session before the beginning of the term. They discuss current methods of teaching writing, analyze and evaluate sample student papers, and develop a sequence of writing assignments that ask for a variety of discourse forms. They also discuss ways of conducting in-class workshops, discussions, and peer-group collaboration. Training sessions are structured much the same way successful faculty workshops have been conducted, workshops described by Toby Fulwiler ("The Personal Connection"), Anne Herrington ("Writing to Learn"), and Ann Raimes ("Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum"). In addition to introductory training sessions, teaching assistants (like all teachers) need feedback regarding their teaching performance. Class observations by a composition specialist and follow-up meetings can provide the support necessary for new instructors to succeed. At UCSD, teaching assistants are observed at least once a quarter by the composition specialist and meet with her to discuss their teaching techniques and goals.

The workload of TAs of writing sections needs to be monitored carefully so that it is fair and attractive when compared to the workload of TAs teaching discussion sections. Although the program tries to adjust the teaching load for the TAs of the writing section by keeping the enrollment limited to fifteen students (about half the size of the discussion sections), there have been exceptions to the rule. Consequently, some teaching assistants carry a heavier work load than their counterparts teaching discussion sections. While most of the teaching assistants are enthusiastic and successful instructors, some are disgruntled about the workload. Furthermore, some teaching assistants feel coerced into teaching writing sections when they would have preferred to teach discussion sections. This last problem arises from a related one: the relative lack of autonomy of the program coordinator.

Autonomy of the Coordinator

The composition specialist and program coordinator of the writing sections needs to have *full autonomy* in the hiring, training, and supervising of teaching assistants for the writing sections. Unless the coordinator possesses such autonomy, teaching assistants may experience a conflict of loyalty: to the professor lecturing the course on one hand and to the coordinator supervising the writing sections on the other. In our program, the teaching assistants for both writing and discussions sections are selected by the lecturing professor. Consequently, some teaching assistants feel more loyal to the professor in the discipline than to the program coordinator. As a consequence, TAs sometimes regard the training session as a burden and resent it when the coordinator—who did not hire them—requires work and cooperation. Also, TAs occasionally receive contradictory messages about the purpose of writing assignments. For example, while professors in the disciplines may regard writing assignments only as a means of testing what students have learned, the coordinator encourages writing to learn and explore ideas, writing that takes on a variety of forms and purposes.

The only solution to these problems, as far as we can tell, is to increase the autonomy of the coordinator. Currently, the Curriculum and Academic Affairs Committee at Third College is considering a proposal—submitted by Cooper and MacDonald—that would allow the coordinator to select and then train and supervise TAs for the writing sections. In order to mollify departmental fears of losing TA fund allocations, the coordinator would give first priority in the hiring to TAs in the disciplines of the lecture course and second priority to TAs with previous experience in the teaching of writing. Increasing the coordinator's autonomy, Cooper and MacDonald argue, would alleviate the problems described above because teaching assistants would be hired with a clear understanding of their duties and be provided with training that would enable them to achieve the program's instructional goals.

Cooperation Among Faculty

For any sizable program to succeed, cooperation among faculty from different disciplines, teaching assistants, and the composition specialist/coordinator are of the utmost importance. All parties involved must be willing to meet on a regular basis (bi- or tri-weekly) in order to discuss course goals, assignments, the reading load, and exams so that students can understand course objectives and receive clear, non-contradictory messages. In the program described here, cooperation sometimes fails, and consequently, deadlines for different projects conflict and the reading/writing load is distributed unevenly. Not surprisingly, at times students feel confused and overwhelmed.

Cooperation requires careful planning and work. Syllabi, for example, need to be prepared well in advance of the first week of classes so that the coordinator and the TAs can plan writing assignments around lectures and required readings. This coordination is particularly difficult at the onset of a new program. At UCSD, after the program's three year existence, however, the lecturing faculty have become familiar with the writing adjuncts courses and begun to recognize the benefits for students' learning, and the coordinator better understands the lecture materials and has collected a sizable repertoire of successful writing assignments and journal questions. Consequently, cooperation is now achieved more easily. All problems described here can be solved, as we are attempting at UCSD. But more importantly, they can be avoided if a new program is designed carefully, if the workload of TAs is monitored closely, and if the coordinator is bestowed with full autonomy in the selecting, training, and supervising of teaching assistants.

Conclusion

WAC programs have been growing in number and size across the nation in recent years. While this growth is encouraging and offers hope that educational reform can have a lasting impact, it would be foolish to underestimate institutional resistance to such programs. David Russell, who reviewed the rise and decline of two early WAC programs, warns us that "WAC programs must be woven so tightly into the fabric of the institution as to resist the subtle unraveling effect of academic politics" (191). Like other programs before it, the program at UCSD could fail if we don't heed Russell's warning and manage to "weave" the program "tightly" into the institutional structure. There are three main steps to institutionalize programs, according to Russell: setting realistic goals, establishing permanent funding, and having patience to "change century-old university priorities and classroom practices" (191). These three issues still have to be addressed and resolved at UCSD. We believe we have a *conceptually* sound program, but only time will tell whether it is *institutionally* sound.

Works Cited

Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod and Harold Rosen. *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18). London, MacMillan Education, 1975.

Cullen, Robert J. "Writing Across the Curriculum: Adjunct Courses." *ADE Bulletin* 80 (1985): 15-17.

Fulwiler, Toby. "The Personal Connection: Journal Writing Across the Curriculum." *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum.* Eds. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982. 15-31.

Griffin, C. W. "Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum: A Report." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 398-403.

Herrington, Anne. "Classrooms as Forums for Reasoning and Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 404-413.

Herrington, Anne. "Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines." *College English* 43 (1981): 379-387.

Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Research.* Urbana, IL: NCTE and ERIC/RCS, 1986.

Langer, Judith A. and Arthur N. Applebee. *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of Teaching and Learning.* Urbana: NCTE, 1987.

MacDonald, Susan Peck. "Third College Societal Analysis Writing Adjuncts Program: A Report on the First Year, 1985-86." *Third College Writing Program Evaluation Studies # 14.* La Jolla, CA: University of California, San Diego, 1986.

McLeod, Susan. "Defining Writing Across the Curriculum." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 11.1-2 (1987): 19-24.

Raimes, Ann. "Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum: The Experience of a Faculty Seminar." *College English* 41 (1980): 797-801.

Russell, David R. "Writing Across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1987): 184-194.