

Teaching Writing in the Two-Year College

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Two-year colleges are the largest single sector of higher education in the United States, enrolling more than half of all first-time freshmen and over forty percent of all undergraduates. A 1988 report from the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges also states that 1,224 accredited two-year colleges serve over five million college credit students and that at least one-third of those responding to a national survey of community college students indicated that their primary reason for enrolling in a community college was to prepare to transfer to a four-year school.¹ The significance of community college English departments is apparent if approximately one half of college students take composition in two-year colleges. Similarities and differences between community college writing programs and those in other areas of higher education need to be explored if we are to understand more about the teaching and learning of writing.

Two-year-college professionals note with dismay the infrequent and limited attention paid their institutions. For instance, in a presentation at the 1987 ADE Eastern Summer Seminar (published in the Spring, 1988, *ADE Bulletin*), Sylvia Holladay expresses concern about the Conference on the Future of Doctoral Study in English. She observes that, while the papers mentioned all other levels of writing instruction, "the participants in the conference seem unaware that two-year colleges exist" (ADE 51). This lack of attention may be due to the fact that most community college instructors' first allegiance probably is to the group Stephen North describes as "practitioners" whose principal mode of inquiry is practice and whose form of knowledge is lore (North 22). As North points out, lore receives little attention from scholars and researchers. Nonetheless, North's argument for the re-establishment of practitioners as the "center of the field's knowledge-making explosion" is one of several signs that composition studies may begin to value more the work of those who have been on the fringes of the writing/teaching community (371). Full participation by representatives of two-year colleges, as well as elementary and secondary teachers, in the English Coalition is another of these signs. Other examples include the success of the journal *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, the establishment of committees on two-year schools within professional organizations such as ADE and CCCC, the NCTE regional conferences for two-year schools, and the encouragement of

two-year college professionals to discuss their work at meetings and submit their findings to journals. These pieces of a larger picture are perhaps best framed by an increasing emphasis on articulation and dialogue within the entire community of teachers of writing.

This article provides information which will suggest differences in the contexts in which writing courses are taught in two-year colleges as compared to four-year colleges and universities. Such a discussion will necessarily examine the way the very term "writing programs" is used in two-year colleges as well as examining the structure of those programs. The purpose of the article is to promote understanding of two-year college contexts in order to foster improved dialogue among teachers at all types of institutions.

Problems of Definition

When first invited to participate in a Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association special session on writing programs, my response was that we didn't have a writing program at Casper College. After thinking about it, I decided that the number and variety of writing courses and students were reason enough to consider part of our department a writing program. However, my initial response made me question exactly why I hadn't envisioned a writing program at Casper College and whether my view was unique. Those questions, as well as the need to broaden my knowledge about other two-year colleges, led me to conduct a telephone survey of eight community colleges.² In addition, ten members of the Casper College faculty who teach primarily writing also completed a questionnaire. Because of discussions following two presentations based primarily on that initial survey, I designed a second survey to which I have received responses from two hundred thirty junior, technical/vocational, and transfer-only two-year schools located in forty-seven states.³ From my interpretation of these materials, I conclude that the term "writing program" is not the one most frequently used to discuss writing courses in two-year colleges. Several reasons may explain this phenomenon.

Writing as the Focus of an English Program

In most community colleges, the people who teach writing also are the people who teach literature, and so, we see ourselves as a program in English where we teach *primarily* writing and a little literature. In fact, if I use Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" as a metaphor for higher education, people in two-year programs would say that in their English Departments the center *is* writing and that center has held in the past and will hold in the future. Actually, for a long time many of us were unaware

that anarchy had been loosed upon the profession since we have experienced no breach between literature faculty and writing faculty because the writing teachers *are* the literature teachers. In addition, our departments are often so small that English teachers also may teach speech or journalism, or foreign language teachers may offer a section or two of composition.

Second, we don't see our programs as writing programs because, although we teach primarily writing, we do not teach these courses as part of an English major or writing emphasis curriculum. Rather, we teach both writing and literature courses to a cross-section of students in the college. Writing courses, then, may be housed in a Division of Humanities or Languages and Literature, along with foreign languages, speech, and journalism.

Purposes of English Programs

Common responses to the survey questions about the purpose of writing programs suggest that teachers in two-year colleges emphasize writing as a service skill. Although the survey responses demonstrated that two-year college purposes are multiple and diverse, three "service skill" purposes were designated most frequently: 1) academic discourse, to prepare students to write for other courses and/or for transfer degree programs; 2) technical or business writing, to prepare students for employment and to advance professionally or to satisfy requirements in terminal degree programs; and 3) developmental courses to improve basic skills. While a few respondents articulated a responsibility to help writers develop expressive writing or writing for life-long learning, most demonstrated the strongest commitment to the service component of their department's work. While having varied purposes does not necessarily weaken the accomplishments of the programs, it does perhaps blur our vision of our identity. However, all respondents were very clear that their English programs are anchored in what most teach most of the time, writing. This focus is verified by the courses offered within these programs.

While the majority of the 230 colleges responding to the survey offer Freshman Composition I and II, plus at least one level of basic writing, technical writing and creative writing, fewer than ten per cent offer advanced composition, honors writing courses, or sophomore composition. Nonetheless, randomly choosing seventy-five of the surveys from comprehensive colleges only, I found that three-fourths offer at least five different writing courses. On the other hand, fewer than forty percent of the same schools offer more than five literature courses. In addition, as is true of most colleges, the vast majority of students are in writing courses,

with composition sections accounting for most of these. Definitely the focus of English departments in two-year colleges is on writing.

Furthermore, the focus of two-year college faculty is on teaching. Of the responses to questions about teaching loads, the average number of writing classes taught per term per faculty is three while the average number of all classes is five. Since the average number of writing students per section is between twenty and twenty five, most English Department faculty teach between 60 and 75 students in writing courses per term.

In addition to similarities in curriculum and in teaching loads, a strong similarity in administration also exists. Among the eight schools surveyed by telephone, six of these report that writing and English are a discrete unit which is part of a larger division of Humanities or Languages and Literature. Two of the colleges have a Writing Coordinator who volunteers for the position and is given a slight load reduction. Two others of the eight do have a Chair of English or a Coordinator of Writing. All eight colleges also report that committees decide major departmental issues. Often the English Chair or Writing Coordinator is responsible for organizing meetings, for developing in-service training and perhaps for setting schedules. Budgets, final personnel decisions, and liaison to top administration are responsibilities of Division Heads. A few very small schools even settle budgets, schedules, and detailed administrative matters by committee.

In the larger sample, the responses reflected similar structures to those already described. For instance, seventy-eight percent of the colleges surveyed have a chair or a head of a division that includes English. Only six per cent indicated that they had a Writing Program Director or Coordinator. About one half of those responding to a question on the way administrative decisions were made indicated that they work primarily by committee. Furthermore, narrative descriptions of administration revealed a high percentage of faculty involvement in curriculum and program decisions.

Reasons for This Structure

The reasons for structures that have few administrators and give significant representation to faculty are fairly apparent. First, the number of people teaching in a program make administration by committee feasible. In addition, of course, none of us has graduate students, so we have few inexperienced teachers to supervise. In fact, the most obvious reason for administration by representation is the age and experience of the majority of community college faculty. Information from the extended

survey indicates that sixty per cent of the faculty in English Departments are between forty and fifty, and seventy-three per cent have over ten years of experience, almost identical figures reported for all community college faculty by the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (12). An older, more experienced faculty does not want, need, nor will it tolerate, excessive supervision.

Democratized Administration and Decentralized Structures

While faculty in my division believe it is an advantage to have fewer administrators, we also sometimes feel we are overloaded with administrative responsibilities. Adding administrative hours to a heavy teaching load makes it difficult to find time to design and implement new programs, particularly if committees do not have adequate power to gain acceptance for decisions. In addition, when the Division Head is from an area other than English, programs that committees or individuals devise simply may never come into existence. It is discouraging to find that among community colleges where the administrative arrangements are so frequently cross-disciplinary, only twenty-seven percent of over two hundred responding to the question indicated that they have a writing-across-the-curriculum program. Almost all, however, indicated they were anxious to develop this area.

Directing by committee does satisfy the faculty desire for control of curriculum and autonomy in decision-making. Indeed, in those schools with strong committees, faculty members are truly represented in the decision-making process, a process which is minimally hierarchical and authoritarian. Everyone at least has a voice if she wishes to use it.

Closely related to more democratized administrations are the decentralized structures in many community colleges. In a program such as the one at Casper College, which does not have common course outlines or texts, committees determine only a minimal set of guidelines for composition classes. For instance, we recommend that students write 5,000 to 10,000 words per semester, but some instructors may require ten, two-page essays while others have four or five papers that arise from strategies such as developing and organizing ideas, multiple drafts and written and oral critiques from other students.

One concern, then, is that students cannot move readily from one instructor to the other where there is so much diversity in texts, methods and course structure. And the students may be confused when exposed to many different methods, going, let's say, from a process-oriented classroom to a product-centered course. Some faculty, however, claim

this variety in approach is actually an advantage. Indeed, when we compare notes at Casper College, we find in general that students seem to improve from course to course in the composition sequence regardless of the approach used by the previous instructor. Furthermore, our faculty thoroughly enjoy and appreciate autonomy in course preparation and curriculum design.

However, although the abbreviated recommendations for conducting freshman composition courses may work well with an experienced faculty, they do not provide any focus for a cohesive writing program or even for a unified composition sequence. This fact may explain why so few schools in the survey claimed a theoretical basis for their entire program. The two or three schools whose purposes suggest a theoretical structure were all larger urban schools that also employed a high percentage of adjunct faculty. The absence of a carefully considered theory or theories in two-year colleges can be a limitation for both the program and for the faculty. The advantages of autonomy may be overshadowed if practice is based solely on random choice.

The Two-Year College Mission

Because of the mission of community colleges, these institutions emphasize excellence in teaching more than success in research. However, the lack of prestige given to two-year teaching institutions often is reflected in the way we are funded by legislatures. Limited budgets restrict travel money, sabbaticals, in-service training programs and other forms of professional development. Heavy teaching loads also mean that even those who are interested in doing research may not and therefore often do not articulate to the wider community what practitioners discover, investigate and create. However, many of my colleagues believe the emphasis on teaching, even to the exclusion of research, is a strength. Many feel more effective without the stress of publishing. Nonetheless, more dissemination of practitioner knowledge would serve the whole teaching community.

Many advantages exist for teaching and learning in the two-year college. The priority given to teaching has significant implications. The freedom to experiment without being bound into a rigid program usually is positive since it means we can spontaneously make changes without waiting for departmental approval. As long as we don't end up with random disorder and meaningless chaos that would weaken the strong teaching center, this diversity is positive. And the diversity does lend itself to experimentation, even among the most conservative. As one colleague says, whenever you teach large numbers of students, survival becomes the mother of invention. Faculty in community colleges often

believe that the writing instruction students receive with experienced teachers may be superior to instruction in large colleges and universities which employ less experienced teaching assistants, teaching fellows and adjunct faculty and where the professorial staff teach writing infrequently, reluctantly, and sometimes ineffectively. Furthermore, we do take pride in our teaching, and we think more times than not we do a good job. Overall, I believe it is fair to say that if the beast is slouching toward Bethlehem, we either are too far from Bethlehem to care or we just don't recognize a beast when we see one.

What, then, is the future for the community college English Department and what effect does the community college writing program have on the University program? Overall, I think the future is good, although I must admit some "images...trouble my vision." On the bright side, we have for some time had the newest market in college enrollment, the older student. Most of these people are motivated and dedicated, and I believe their presence in growing numbers in our regular day classes improves the performance of our younger, more typically disinterested, 18 year olds. I believe that universities will see well-prepared students emerging from community college programs, at least those where teachers have reasonable teaching loads.

On the other hand, according to the Community College Commission, "Within the next twelve years, approximately 40 percent of all community college faculty who now teach will retire" (12). This situation certainly could have damaging effects on two-year colleges since the best and the best-educated graduate students probably will teach in four-year schools and universities. Because we failed to secure a large number of Ph.D.'s and A.B.D.'s in English when they were more readily available, we are unlikely to get them in the future. It also is unlikely that we will secure many new faculty with formal education in composition and rhetoric. Furthermore, it is possible that some four-year schools may hire away from the community college to augment their faculty. Many schools are planning for the loss of experienced faculty with programs to insure continued excellent teaching.

Effect of the Emphasis on Composition and Rhetoric

Finally, the new emphasis on scholarship in composition and rhetoric seems to be both positive and negative for two-year colleges. It has brought more attention to what we have long known: the most important work in the academy is in the classroom with people who are attempting to develop reading, writing, and critical abilities. However, as

already discussed, even though community college writing faculty most frequently are excellent and experienced teachers and even though many do devise innovative and effective methods for teaching more to more students, we infrequently publish or promote our findings. Since we are primarily concerned with the practical rather than the theoretical, we have not developed the language with which to disseminate what we know. Without the power to name, without the power to create an impressive language for what we do and what we know, our work may seem less impressive. Of course, we understand that without naming things precisely, we may not do the thing as precisely as we should. However, over the years, my colleagues and I have reflected that what we frequently have done under one name is now being touted with a new label: group activity is collaborative learning; reading papers in class is publishing; working with sentence structures is sentence combining; evaluating files of revised papers is looking at a portfolio. And these, of course, are mild examples of my point. When our texts are dominated by "dialogics," "heuristics," and "hegemonies," the profession may be consciously or unconsciously creating a language of exclusion.

Enhancing the Dialogue

For a dialogue to exist, colleges and universities must first recognize that students who have taken composition in good community college writing programs are being well-served by those programs. Furthermore, the instructors in two-year colleges must be respected as equals, people who teach in programs that are significant to the overall work of the writing community. If two-year college instructors are given full status in the writing community, we will enrich the endeavor. If we are excluded from the club or made second-class citizens, the entire profession suffers. The ironies and implications of this point are compounded in a field which itself is often marginalized in the larger academic community.

I would like to suggest several specific ways to enhance the dialogue. One way is to increase what already is being done in collaborative projects between university and community college faculty. In the community college, we deal directly with numerous and diverse writing students. Our opportunities to collect data and to observe and interpret that data from an experienced perspective in collaboration with those in universities who have more expertise in theory, less demanding teaching loads and more access to grants should produce significant scholarship. This collaboration also should extend to faculty exchange programs between community colleges and universities, a system which we are exploring with the University of Wyoming/Casper College Center. I applaud Sylvia Holladay's suggestion that universities consider a newer model for teaching assistants that would relieve them of teaching and

studying at the same time. Such a program would include internships, many of which could be carried out in community colleges (53,54).

Finally, one way we can improve the value of the community college program to the university is by presenting our material at conferences. Having the opportunity to talk to writing teachers and administrators as equals may lead to more collaboration, but, more importantly, it surely will lead to an enriched community of writing teachers. In addition to such presentations, more publication of the work of community college faculty in journals which reach beyond the community college audience also could develop an extensive and substantial dialogue. Sharing information surely is one good way to "maintain our passion" and to "increase our conviction" for the thing we all attempt to do—helping others discover and express meaning through writing. Sharing also is one more way to keep writing at the center of all levels of higher education.

Notes

¹This information comes from *Building Communities*, "Foreword," vii and 37. The transfer figure cited here is lower than Sylvia Holladay reports for Florida where 80% plan to transfer and 62% actually do. At Casper College, a recent survey indicated that 85% plan to continue their education at a four-year school and 60% of our graduates are in a transfer program.

²These colleges included the College of Alameda in San Francisco, Edison Community College in Fort Myers, Florida, Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, Kansas, Prince Georges Community College in Prince Georges, Maryland, J. Sargeant Reynolds in Richmond, Virginia, Northwest Community College in Powell, Wyoming, Western Wyoming in Rock Springs, Wyoming, and Casper College.

³Alaska no longer has a community college system. The states which are not represented are Idaho, Louisiana, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Works Cited

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