

Teaching Basic Writing: The Community College on the University Campus

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Colleges and universities in the United States have developed a variety of familiar ways to provide basic writing instruction for students eligible for admission but not adequately prepared to succeed in the typical English 101 course. Two years ago, Arizona State University took a new approach of which all WPAs should be aware: inviting community college faculty to campus to teach basic writing.

ASU's approach to offering basic writing was described by Richardson and Bender in a recent book for educational administrators on the roles of urban universities and community colleges in minority education (71). Word about the program is spreading among administrators nationally, and we have been getting frequent inquiries about it. A few universities have now developed similar programs, and still more institutions are, or will be, considering this approach to providing basic writing instruction. WPAs at medium to large public institutions—the kinds of schools most likely to try this approach—may find a discussion of our experience useful.

As Director of Composition at ASU, I find myself in a difficult position. I have been outspokenly opposed to offering basic writing in this way—for reasons that will be detailed at the end of this article. At the same time, because my opposition has been unavailing, I have had to cooperate in implementing effectively an arrangement I thoroughly disapprove of. Something of that near schizophrenia is reflected in this article. In what follows, I will describe the ASU program in detail, review the problems we have encountered, and suggest how most of those problems can be avoided. In so doing, however, I am not recommending that the experiment be tried. I will conclude with some reflections on the disturbing implications of this approach to teaching basic writing.

I recognize that the interface between community colleges and universities is sensitive territory where the arrogance of universities often provokes defensive responses from community colleges, and issues get lost in bad feeling. I want to make it clear at the outset that the issue is not who can provide the better basic writing course. The community college

is providing as good a basic writing course as we could provide ourselves. I object to the ASU program because it represents unacceptable administrative interference in matters of curriculum and is, moreover, symptomatic of our administrators' refusals to face the writing needs of students qualified for admission to the university.

The Program

ASU has contracted with South Mountain Community College (SMCC), one of 9 campuses of the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD), to send full- and part-time faculty to the ASU campus to teach ENG 071, a three-hour basic writing course. ENG 071 is listed in the ASU schedule of classes, and students may register and pay for it along with their ASU courses. ENG 071 is not, however, an ASU course. It is an MCCCD course governed by system-wide competencies and taught on all MCCCD campuses. Students in ENG 071 are listed on two sets of rosters, one set at the community college and one at ASU. Students pay ASU for the course at ASU tuition rates; ASU then compensates the community college at the community college tuition rate, which is roughly one-third of the rate at ASU. South Mountain Community College claims the credit-hour production. The university does not acknowledge the arrangement with SMCC in the university bulletin or the schedule of classes; thus the course is perceived by students and parents as an ASU course taught by ASU faculty.

Students admitted to ASU who score under 17 on the ACT English test or under 390 on the SAT Verbal are required to enroll in ENG 071. Students enrolled in the course do not receive degree credit at ASU, although the three hours do count toward full-time enrollment and eligibility for financial aid. The course is graded on a "Pass-No Credit" basis. Students who place into ENG 071 must pass it to progress to ENG 101. Those who do not pass can retake the course indefinitely.

Problems

Most of the logistical problems with the ENG 071 program stem directly from the way in which it was instituted. In response to a 1985 mandate from the Regents (reversing their long-standing opposition to developmental education), the university administration asked the English Department to develop a basic writing course. A course proposal was developed, approved, and sent forward through channels. Subsequently, the Academic Vice President (who has since left ASU), without consulting with me or other writing experts in the English Department, tabled the English Department course proposal, negotiated the ENG 071 arrangement with SMCC's administration, and presented it to the English Department as a *fait accompli*.

The Rhetoric and Composition Committee and I objected strenuously. We and other members of the Department, even those who opposed our teaching of basic writing, saw the arrangement as inappropriate administrative interference in matters of curriculum. Thus, the course did not start off well politically, and neither the course nor the SMCC instructors were initially welcomed into the English Department.

But politics aside, administrators, in their haste, did not anticipate practical problems in "rounding out" ASU's composition program with a course that is not an ASU course taught by faculty employed by another institution. Thus, in addition to political difficulties, the program has suffered from problems relating to 1) administration, 2) curriculum, and 3) staffing. Other problems have resulted from hastily chosen placement procedures.

Administrative Problems:

No ASU administrative unit was initially identified as being "in charge" of ENG 071. University administrators apparently assumed (no other arrangements were made) that the English Department would provide offices, telephones, supplies, copying services, and general administrative back up—handling complaints, ordering textbooks, scheduling classes, and so on. The Department, however, received no supplement to already meager operating funds and could not afford to provide support services for non-departmental faculty and courses. As a consequence, the Vice President's office, although reluctant and ill-equipped to do so, was left to handle support services. Because the students in ENG 071 perceive the course to be part of ASU's First-Year Composition program, virtually all inquiries about the course and challenges to placement come through the First-Year Composition Office. Although seriously understaffed, my office has handled this traffic—simply for lack of an alternative. But student grievances remain a more serious problem. Neither I nor the Chair of the Department—nor the Vice President, for that matter—has any administrative authority over SMCC faculty. Thus grievances have to be referred to the SMCC faculty themselves or to their chair located at a campus ten miles away. Established ASU grievance procedures do not apply to ENG 071 students.

The real victims of this lack of planning are the faculty from SMCC, who now find themselves geographically isolated from colleagues at their home campus and politically isolated from English Department faculty at ASU. Only the Chair and I know who the ENG 071 teachers are.

Curriculum:

The curriculum of ENG 071 posed a more serious problem. In expressing to the Associate Vice President (who also has left ASU) my concerns about ensuring that ENG 071 had an appropriate curriculum, it became clear that our administrators assumed that a "remedial" writing course was simply a course in mechanics, grammar, and spelling. The Associate

Vice President thus could not understand why I was concerned about curriculum.

ENG 071 is part of a sequence of developmental writing and reading courses at MCCCDC designed to prepare students for ENG 101. The Rhetoric and Composition Committee and I felt that the MCCCDC curriculum for ENG 071 alone would not do what was necessary to prepare students to succeed in ENG 101 at ASU. Consequently, the SMCC faculty and I worked together to develop a basic writing curriculum coordinated with ASU's writing program. This was a tricky negotiation, requiring much bearing and forbearing on both sides. In addition to being an outspoken critic of the ENG 071 program in the first place, I was, in effect, questioning the value of MCCCDC curriculum. Since the ENG 071 faculty were not ASU employees, they were not obliged to attend to my wishes. They were, in fact, obliged to adhere to the MCCCDC competencies and curriculum. Nevertheless, for the last two years, we have been able informally to hammer out an acceptable curriculum and to select appropriate textbooks.

The SMCC faculty at ASU are now teaching a version of ENG 071 different from the course as taught on their own campus and on the other MCCCDC campuses in the Phoenix area. Thus, ASU will not accept ENG 071 taught anywhere but at ASU as preparation for ENG 101, thereby creating tension among the MCCCDC campuses. Class sizes on the two campuses are also different. On the community college campus ENG 071 sections enroll up to 30-35 students. We insisted that ENG 071 classes at ASU not exceed 20, a class size commensurate with the curriculum we have developed. This class size difference was used by community college administrators to justify teaching loads of up to eight sections per semester, one of the staffing problems we confronted.

Staffing:

During the first year of the program, SMCC committed none of its regular faculty to the ASU program. The course was staffed by faculty on one-year, half-year, and part-time contracts. We thus faced the possibility of having no continuity in the ENG 071 faculty from year to year. This situation was partially rectified when, in response to my raising this issue, SMCC requested and received two tenure-track lines dedicated to the ASU program. I still anticipate annual turnover in the other four or five faculty assigned to teach the course and have only informal input into their selection. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the same tenure-track faculty will continue to be assigned to ASU. Because the SMCC faculty are isolated from both their SMCC and ASU colleagues, it is not an especially desirable teaching assignment. (The SMCC Department Chair who coordinated the program has recently become an assistant dean of a new campus, and one of the two faculty hired to teach in the program requested a transfer to another campus. Of the faculty and

administrators originally involved in ENG 071, one SMCC instructor and I are the only survivors.)

A different problem with staffing has yet to be resolved but may be only a local issue. The normal course load for MCCCDC faculty is five courses per semester. Their contract agreements, however, allow them to teach up to fifteen hours of overload courses annually. In the first semester of the program, two of the ENG 071 instructors were teaching eight sections each, a teaching load that far exceeds national professional guidelines proposed by the NCTE and the ADE. Because of the nature of community college contracts in our area, there is nothing we can do about this.

Placement:

A final problem is the method of placement adopted by the Vice President's office: relying on standardized test scores alone. I do not know who chose the procedures or the cutoff scores or why. I do know that we have reason to be concerned.

Institutions demographically similar to ASU place a much higher percentage of students in basic writing courses than we do. During the first year of the ENG 071 program, we did an informal study to check accuracy of placement. All students in ENG 071 and ENG 101 wrote in class on the same relatively easy diagnostic prompt. The instructors holistically scored writing samples for their own classes using a common scoring rubric accompanied by anchor papers to illustrate each rating category 0-4. However, instructors were not formally calibrated or conformed. Of over 500 students placed by test score into ENG 071, only 8 (1.7%) were moved up to ENG 101. Predictably, 70% of ENG 071 students received a score of 1 or 2. The performance of ENG 101 students, however, suggests that our cutoff score is too low: over 500 students (19%) who placed into ENG 101 scored a 1 on the diagnostic essay; nearly 1000 (37.2%) received a score of 2.

The advantage of the current placement procedure is that it costs the university virtually nothing. Most of our students have taken either the SAT or the ACT at their own expense in high school. The University Testing Service does offer the ACT English test free to the small number of students who have not had the test or who wish to try to improve their scores.

Our experience has been that the ACT, which most ASU students take, is a reasonably accurate predictor at the extremes but is mushy in the middle—in that area where cutoff scores are established. White reminds us that a score on a multiple choice test like the ACT is actually the midpoint of a band of scores (232-233). Indeed, the shift of a point or two on the ACT English test has an enormous impact on the numbers of students placed into basic writing courses. Approximately 15-16% of incoming freshmen now place into ENG 071. If we were to raise the

cutoff score from 16 to 18, 31% of new students would place into ENG 071. We might be able to place students more accurately if those who scored in the middle range of the ACT also provided a writing sample that would show how well they could do the kind of writing tasks we expect them to be able to do in ENG 101 (White 233).

These then are the major problems we have encountered in subcontracting basic writing to the community college. With a little foresight, most of these problems could have been solved or ameliorated in some way.

Solutions

One solution, of course, is to avoid this kind of arrangement altogether. Wherever it is proposed, WPAs should protest vehemently. But (and this is where the schizophrenia comes in) they should also prepare a backup plan to make the arrangement as workable as possible. My major strategic error was in not gauging accurately the depth of our administrators' commitment to the arrangement they negotiated. I continued to protest beyond the point where I should have understood that the arrangement was inevitable. I did not develop a backup plan. Drawing on our experience, I have recently proposed the following measures, which are generally applicable wherever this arrangement may be tried:

1. In order to ease most political and administrative problems and to create a desirable collegial situation, the English Department or other unit responsible for teaching writing should make a home for the course and its faculty. As a condition of doing so, however, the department should receive an addition to its operations budget sufficient to cover the costs of providing support services. The costs of office space, telephones, supplies, duplicating, and secretarial support should be taken into account.
2. Rather than extracting an existing course from the community college literacy curriculum, the university and community college writing faculty should design a new course specifically to meet the needs of the university students, to coordinate with the university writing program, and to be taught only on the university campus. Competencies, objectives, and class size should be clearly stipulated. Developing a unique course offered only on the university campus also eliminates the questionable practice of charging university tuition for a community college course.
3. The community college, as part of the agreement, should submit a plan that will insure reasonable continuity in the staffing of the course. At the very least, there should be a core of tenured or tenure-track faculty regularly assigned to the program. The

university WPA should be involved in the hiring process. The use of part-time faculty should be discouraged. Efforts should be made, if necessary, to establish a reasonable maximum teaching load.

4. The university should study placement procedures used at similar institutions and adopt procedures that are theoretically sound and practically effective. The university and community college should also cooperate in developing assessment strategies for ongoing evaluation of the basic writing program. Because students are being required to pay for a non-credit course, the institution must be able to defend both the accuracy of placement and the effectiveness of instruction.

If these measures are accepted here, most of the logistical difficulties and bad feeling that we have experienced can be smoothed over. If measures like these are enacted at the very beginning in other places where such an arrangement is attempted, most problems can be avoided altogether.

Then why isn't this plan the ideal way to offer basic writing? The quality of instruction that students receive in ENG 071 has not been in question except when instructors were teaching as many as eight sections each. The faculty assigned by SMCC to the ENG 071 program have been very good. And certainly the primary objective of all concerned should be that students receive a high quality basic writing course that will help them to succeed in ENG 101. If this objective is being achieved and the "bugs" in the program can be worked out, what grounds for objection can be left other than trivial "turf" issues? What does it matter who signs the paychecks?

Implications

The conflict here is not between the university and the community college. The "turf" issues are intramural, and they are not trivial when the contestants are university faculty and administrators and when curriculum is the contested ground. In this instance, administrators largely uninformed or misinformed about the field of composition and the writing needs of students have made decisions that have an enormous impact on the composition curriculum in itself and as an integral part of the larger university curriculum. A quality basic writing program for ASU students is the central issue, of course. But teaching is an opportunity for faculty as well as for students. Our administrators fail to understand that teaching composition—in particular, teaching basic writers—has become an academic specialty of scholars and advanced degree candidates in English, a specialty complete with respected professional journals and well-established professional organizations. Administrators share with some members of the English Department the notion that teaching composition is the literature teacher's burden. They

do not understand that rhetoric and composition specialists may well be engaged in essential research when they are in the basic writing classroom.

Furthermore, subcontracting basic writing instruction has implications for graduate education in our department. Our teaching assistant program is an important part of the career preparation of our M.A. and Ph.D. students. While some of them may get jobs at large research universities where the faculty do not usually teach composition, most will teach at smaller universities or community colleges where the typical semester teaching load will be three to five courses, one or more of which will be composition. Because the English Department does not offer the basic writing course at ASU, our TAs do not have an opportunity to learn to teach basic writing or to study basic writing students. Ironically, some of our best recent graduates could not be considered for the SMCC tenure-track positions dedicated to teaching ENG 071 at ASU because they lacked experience in basic writing (I was an *ex officio* member of the hiring committee). Both graduate students and faculty who are interested in studying how adults acquire academic literacy do not have access to basic writing students. The university is turning away from an opportunity for important research.

Our administrators denigrate the study of adult literacy, the community college, and basic writers themselves when they say that teaching basic writing is inappropriate in a university but quite proper in a community college. But my major objection to subcontracting basic writing instruction lies in the "mind set" implicit in the action. Our administrators have told me, explicitly, that they do not want to commit institutional resources to "remediation." That is, they do not want to make long term commitments, especially tenure-track faculty appointments, to addressing a "temporary" problem that they are certain will be eliminated shortly through "enrollment management" (new admissions standards) and improvements in primary and secondary education. This is a classic instance of what Mike Rose has called "the myth of transience," a favorite belief of college and university administrators that "serves to keep certain fundamental recognitions and thus certain fundamental changes at bay" (355-356).

There is evidence readily available that "enrollment management" will not eliminate the need for basic writing. Recently-approved, higher admissions standards (and they are reasonably high—3.00 high school GPA, or top 25% of graduating class, or composite scores of 21 ACT or 930 SAT) would—if enforced—reduce the demand for basic writing by about 65%, but a significant demand would remain. However, the new standards would also eliminate one-third of the students enrolled in ENG 101, a fair reflection of what they would do to the whole freshman class. These admissions standards, in addition, would devastate ASU's already

meager minority enrollments at a time when the University is under pressure to attract and retain more minority students. Consequently, the University will continue to admit "provisionally" those students who fall between the old and new standards. Thus it seems that the new admissions standards will not in any case eliminate the need for basic writing and that a significant demand for basic writing will persist among students provisionally admitted.

Will improved primary and secondary education make up the difference? The gloomy results of recent, state-wide testing show that only 17% of Arizona high school juniors can write at an "acceptable" level and only 37% of junior high students wrote "acceptably." (The decline in writing ability from junior high to high school is a typical pattern.) This gives us a pretty good portrait of the future.

Conclusions

The arrangement ASU has with the community college to teach basic writing can be workable, if not desirable. Other institutions that attempt it can benefit from our mistakes and avoid the problems that have developed at ASU. But in saying this, I am not recommending the experiment, for the implications of this program are troubling.

As most WPAs know too well, a lot of lip service is paid to the importance of teaching students how to read and write, but few institutions are willing to devote sufficient resources to the task, even while eagerly collecting tuition from students who are poorly prepared as writers. The basic writing program at ASU is just another instance of how universities avoid devoting adequate funds to composition programs. More importantly, the arrangement reminds us that uninformed or ill-informed administrators continue to make curricular decisions that have been and continue to be detrimental to composition programs. First of all our administrators seem to remain almost willfully unaware that adult literacy consists of more than "a good dose of grammar" and has become a focus of professional scholarly interest and research. For composition and adult literacy specialists, teaching basic writing is not "teaching the rudiments of their field"; it is at the heart of their enterprise. Secondly, adherence to the "myth of transience" allows our administrators to "keep at bay" the recognition that, at institutions such as ours, basic writers are a large and persistent constituency who will not be eliminated by "enrollment management," whose existence must be acknowledged, and whose educational needs must be addressed by some means other than temporary expedients. The ENG 071 program serves only further to marginalize basic writers and their instructors, to exclude them from full admission into the university community, making the promise of access to higher education a cynical hoax.

Works Cited

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