Finding Out What They Are Writing: A Method, Rationale and Sample for Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Research

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Typically in our composition classes we are told by freshmen or sopho-mores that they do little or no writing for their other courses. From conversation, anecdote, and writing-across-the-curriculum literature, we know that these statements about the dearth of writing in other disciplines is unfounded. However, English teachers' knowledge about the kinds of writing demands and expectations students face in various disciplines is sketchy at best. Most English faculty have little or no idea what kind of writing engineering, biology, or social work students are asked to do. To bolster this knowledge about writing in other disciplines, I propose a systematic means for talking to faculty and administrators across campus about what their students are writing, what purpose this writing has, and what expectations students are asked to meet as they write across the disciplines. Such a discussion assumes that there is a hidden writing curriculum in each department, college, or school. The purpose of this article is to detail a method and rationale for unearthing these hidden curricula to provide the information necessary for informed decisions about the teaching of writing throughout the university.

Rationale

Reasons for gathering information about the writing students complete in their disciplines can be related to the general mission of a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program. The growth and popularity of WAC programs are well known to writing program administrators. Using writing as a tool for learning and emphasizing writing skills through writing-intensive courses are answers to those who lament the lack of writing skills in college students. WAC programs assume that we cannot separate form and content in language any more than we can isolate learning from the language used to communicate or display it.

The movement known as WAC has been organized at the college level for over ten years, and schools with such programs number over 100 (Griffin; Haring-Smith and Stern). The literature available in scholarly articles on WAC is fairly extensive (Anson, "Writing Across the Curriculum"). However, much of the work merely describes what has been done at other colleges or is "discursive and testimonial" (Anson, "Toward a Multidimensional Model" 3). Nevertheless, WAC literature does cover a wide range of topics and concerns. There are articles about the role of a writing center within a WAC program (Griffin), and articles detailing the importance of using writing to learn across the discipline (Fulwiler, "Writing"; Emig; Cooper). Griffin describes the many WAC programs that are in place and outlines the essential components of a successful WAC program. Fulwiler ("Showing not Telling") and Herrington ("Writing to Learn") write about the most effective ways to conduct faculty workshops, and Eblen reports research concerning the resistance of content-area faculty to WAC programs. There is also some interesting research describing the use of writing within specific disciplines (Herrington, "Teaching Writing and Learning"; Johnstone; Williamson). However, scant information exists about the types of writing students are expected to complete within various disciplines, nor are there detailed methods for gathering such information.

To establish WAC programs sensitive to the needs of a specific college or university, we should not rely on the descriptions and testimonials of programs established elsewhere. We should base decisions on information about the role of writing within specific disciplines at particular institutions. No catch-all plan of action is appropriate for all disciplines, schools, and students. Before we can begin to build courses sensitive to the needs of various disciplines or to advise schools or colleges about writing in their areas, we first need to know what writing skills students are expected to possess, what skills faculty across the disciplines are attempting to teach, and how successful students are in learning to write for their chosen disciplines. This information involves knowing what assignments students are writing, in what sequence, and for what purposes. To conceptualize the writing demands of various areas requires first determining what writing tasks are part of a school or college's curriculum, how these tasks become progressively more difficult, and what skills students should possess in order to be successful writers within their respective disciplines.

The reasons for conducting such research are simple. English faculty and administrators seek to prepare students in composition courses for the writing demands they will face in their disciplines. To serve the needs of faculty and students across a university campus, a WAC program needs information about the curriculum its students are being prepared for. WAC program planning and development can and should be informed by input from all schools and colleges, so that decisions are based upon the needs of the entire university community.

In addition to providing an inventory of writing activities for each school, college or department, this research details faculty expectations and student performance, creating the beginning of a dialogue between disciplines and the WAC program. In previous experiences with inventorying writing tasks, I learned a great deal about the students, mission, and goals of each discipline. As well, college or school representatives gathered much information about the WAC program and the English Department. All involved in this conversation discovered that we had much in common with our colleagues throughout the disciplines. We shared our assessment of students and our vision for better student writing through cooperation and increased attention to the reading, writing, and thinking skills necessary to produce effective academic texts.

Not only did this research begin dialogues between the disciplines and the WAC Program that we hoped would continue, we also saw the beginning of a new dialogue within the colleges and schools themselves. As faculty members talked about courses, writing assignments, and students, other faculty heard such information for the first time. We witnessed faculty talking to each other and being surprised at the activities that were taking place in other areas of the curriculum. Teachers were supportive of each other and genuinely impressed with the wealth of writing activity. In at least two instances, faculty initially critical of our desire to talk to them later admitted how informative the session had been and how much they had learned about what others were doing in their school or college. These conversations among faculty fostered interest and participation throughout the university, strengthening the role of writing in their respective disciplines.

Methodology

Good WAC programs recognize and celebrate the diversity of university communication. To get at the "hidden writing curriculum" in a department, school, or college, a measure that preserves the individual nature of each discipline's curriculum had to be devised. The method "focused

dialogues" refers to a group interview conducted with informants knowledgeable about a specific subject. This research technique combines the direction and control of an interview with the openness, flexibility, and conversational quality that characterizes a dialogue and encourages informants to volunteer unsolicited information, usually considered to be valuable and insightful (Miles and Huberman). The group of informants for focused dialogues on writing usually consists of four to six faculty members and administrators from a particular college or school. These interviewees are chosen for their curricular knowledge and expertise. The interview focuses on the writing tasks assigned within a curriculum. The questions are designed to ascertain what tasks students are being asked to complete, in what order these tasks are assigned within the curriculum, and what skills students need to complete the writing assignments.

The research team consists of three members. A primary interviewer gives instructions and asks the majority of the questions. A secondary interviewer records the writing tasks and descriptive information on a flip chart or chalkboard, so it can be seen by the informants (a flip chart allows the research team a portable record). Interviewees provide feedback as to the accuracy of the information written down. The secondary interviewer also assists in asking questions and getting clarifying information when necessary. A third member of the team takes notes during the interview (preferably in shorthand), so that the other two team members can focus on interviewing and interacting. The three members of the research team meet immediately after the interviews to compile a comprehensive and consensual record of the meeting.

After the team agrees on the accuracy and completeness of the list of writing tasks, the list is sent to individual interviewees, who are asked to amend or correct it. After getting feedback from the informants, the research team can conclude that they have a representative picture of the "hidden writing curriculum" within a particular discipline. Collecting information about writing within the disciplines allows an institution to contextualize its WAC program and create courses, workshops, and agendas relevant to particular institutions, departments, faculty, and students. To provide a clearer idea of the kinds of information an inventory of writing tasks can furnish, I will focus on the data collected from one specific school. I have decided to use information gathered from the School of Social Work because it represents an area about which English faculty and writing program administrators typically have little knowledge and because the data clearly show a "hidden writing curriculum." The writing tasks outlined by the interview with Social Work faculty and administra-

tors depict a strong developmental theme, wherein freshmen and sophomores are introduced to the writing, thinking, and research skills they will be expected to use in tasks of greater complexity and sophistication.

School of Social Work

The School of Social Work scheduled its focused dialogue for one of its normal curriculum committee meetings. Five faculty members and the school's dean attended. From previous experience, I was aware of the importance of having at least one administrator for each dialogue, since he or she seemed able to provide information across the curriculum and beyond the scope of most faculty members. The interviewees presented their material by classes, and they made a point of showing the connections from one class to another, not only in terms of the writing that students complete but in all class requirements and activities.

Freshmen social work students take a limited number of social work courses, and consequently they have a limited number of writing tasks. They are assigned a ten-to-twelve-page paper on a social issue or problem, must have their topic approved and use library sources and APA format. Students are expected to explore the topic and connect it to the profession by using scholarly sources. The emphasis is on having students discover ways to address problems in social work. Freshmen also make a presentation to the class based on interviews with professional social workers, sometimes including written handouts. Finally, freshmen write essay examinations with short answers based on field experience and observations.

Sophomores are given a much wider range of assignments and a variety of essay examinations. In one type of essay exam, they display knowledge about historical facts and their application to the development of the discipline. In another, students write an exam in response to a video interview, drafting short answers to specific questions. Sophomores also keep a journal or log of their experiences in a practicum lab course. Their experiences can take the form of interviews, observations, group processing or comments about the agency or organization where they conduct their fieldwork. These journal or log entries report what happened and also include a student's reflections in preparation for summarizing their experiences at the end of the course. Sophomores also complete a census assignment, examining numerical data for the purpose of interpreting it for

clients and community. Students are expected to move from graphs to tabulations and to describe the overall trends from the census data. Lastly, sophomores write two kinds of papers. The first is a social problem paper requiring them to describe an issue and to compare specifics within the context of the problem. The second paper entails the analysis of a major social policy. Students must use outside sources and show an understanding of theoretical policy. In this paper, they must move from simply describing a situation to offering a viable analysis of the social context portrayed. This paper also marks students' introduction to the conceptual framework that will be an important part of the writing they do as social work majors. The conceptual framework is a standard set of straightforward guidelines used to organize social work analyses and to solve problems.

Juniors also write the analysis of a social problem paper using the conceptual framework as well as essay exams applying theory to specific cases. Using a one-page summary of a case with particular problems, students choose one of the problems and describe what they would do and why. Juniors write a two-to-three-page social interview paper using supporting data, such as quotations, to tease out themes they can identify. Students are furnished with outlines and review models. In these papers, instructors ask for problem solving not reporting. Student groups of ten to twelve also keep field-work journals in which they review what is going on in their field work assignments. Students are asked to pick one or two concepts and enter their thoughts in their journals, connecting the discussion with their own field work experience. The purpose of the assignment is to integrate course work, field work, and discussion with their personal and professional selves. Lastly, juniors write two critical reviews of existing literature in social work. Based on course material, students are given guided questions about a particular article, asking, for example, whether the article tests a hypothesis or whether its data warrants the presented conclusions. Sometimes an entire class will write on the same article, and sometimes students are instructed to choose their own articles, which requires them to use library and research skills. This assignment promotes the ability to read and understand professional research.

Seniors write case assignments of twelve to fifteen pages containing full citations. They are expected to know what information is necessary and how to collect it and to produce a clear statement of the problem. Using the appropriate concepts from the scholarly literature, students analyze the problem and propose a viable solution. This writing task requires that students assess the situation, recognizing and coping with complexity.

Students use the conceptual framework learned and practiced in earlier assignments to organize and focus their thinking. This writing assignment furnishes a way for students to bring together their experiences and to apply theory to a practical problem. Seniors also write a critique and assessment of a field case in which they describe the treatment and assess the outcome. They are expected to evaluate their use of the model rather than the success of the treatment. Seniors analyze the process of working in the field by articulating the theoretical background for professional decisions. Seniors are also required to write field placement notes. The format of the notes varies according to the agency at which students are doing their field placement work. Students have to write measurable goal statements and practice professional record keeping, which demands concise style and the avoidance of evaluative or value-laden language. Seniors are expected to articulate their assessment, application, follow through, decision making, and planning. They are supposed to record their process of thinking and to document why they made specific decisions. Students produce treatment plans and assess the risk to the client or clients. Finally, students are given a follow up of the census assignment first assigned in the sophomore year. Using the library, students review census information and choose the track they wish to research. Seniors use this information to produce a fifteen-page written and verbal presentation for a specific audience, usually a community board or other pertinent agency. In this presentation, students synthesize data (so that the audience can make social work decisions based upon their presentations) and analyze their demographic description with the help of computer-supported graphics and overheads.

The Social Work School's list of writing tasks exhibits a fairly clear sense of the role of writing within the social work profession as well as within the school itself. Writing is used as a professional tool for the observation, assessment, and solution of social work problems. Students learn how to record relevant information and how to use their theoretical knowledge of the profession in application to practical situations. Writing is also used to initiate the student into the profession's scholarly activity. Social Work students learn how to read and write the academic prose that reports on the research and develops the theory practitioners depend upon.

The school's inventory of writing tasks displays a strong developmental thread, first teaching students to understand and describe social phenomenon. Early on, students are given the opportunity to practice the type of writing they must master as professionals. Many of the assignments given to sophomores and juniors harness writing as a learning tool,

encouraging students to reflect on the process of their decision making. In the junior and especially the senior years, students utilize their ability to describe as they become responsible for analyzing and solving social work cases. Throughout the curriculum in the School of Social Work, writing is used as a vehicle for discovery and exploration, not just as a product to display knowledge. The senior year contains many opportunities for students to use writing as a professional tool. The wealth of writing tasks and the varied role of writing within the school's curriculum reflect not only the importance of writing in educating Social Work professionals but also in the Social Work profession itself.

Summary

In terms of a WAC Program's mission to the university, the data the team gathered affirm the initial assumptions that the schools and colleges across a university campus have a firm commitment to fostering their student's writing skills. More importantly, I was impressed with the integral role writing plays in all the curricula examined, and especially in the School of Social Work. This knowledge will not only help an institution to design basic and upper-division courses taught within the university, but can also help us to impress upon students that they will face a complicated set of writing requirements no matter which discipline they choose. I would hope that a partnership grounded in sharing information across programs could foster a comprehensive approach to writing that will enrich our students and our programs.

In addition to the inventory of writing assignments described above, it seems logical to include an examination of course syllabi, individual interviews with faculty and students, and perhaps a questionnaire to a large-scale student and faculty audience. This additional information could confirm and enhance the data gathered with the focused dialogues. The information generated by this research clearly indicates that there is, indeed, "a hidden writing curriculum" in departments, schools, and colleges beyond English or liberal arts.

Note

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