

Teachers *and* Writers: The Faculty Writing Workshop and Writing Across the Curriculum¹

Rebecca Blevins Faery

I'd like to begin by telling a story about a turning point in my own life as a writing teacher.

On a cold January day, more than a dozen years ago now, I sat in a large seminar room at the University of Iowa with nineteen other teachers, all of us Fellows of the NEH-Iowa Institute on Writing and directors of writing programs at colleges and universities around the country. We had gathered in Iowa City for six months of professional development—reading, talking, writing, designing courses and curricula. Some of us were planning ways to initiate programs of writing across the curriculum, still a pretty new idea at the time. We were in the first week of the six-month grant program, and this was the first meeting of what was to be a weekly activity: a writing workshop in which we would share our writing in progress with the group. On that particular afternoon, we were waiting for our first submissions to be returned and discussed.

I still remember the tension in the room as we sat there, anxious about what responses our writing might elicit, worried because we didn't yet know the workshop leader or each other very well, remembering all the other past moments when pride and pleasure had been bestowed, pain or humiliation had been inflicted, with evaluations of our writing. This, we were all silently realizing, is what students must feel each time we circulate among them to return papers we have so laboriously and meticulously "corrected" with our vivid, admittedly sometimes livid, red ink.

To understand our students' experience, of course, was the point exactly, or one point at least; another was to enact the belief that the best writing teachers are teachers who write. The directors of the Institute, Carl Klaus and Jix Lloyd-Jones, agreed with that premise, and along with the rest of the Institute staff, they had wisely decided that experiential learning would be an important part of the Institute; thus, the writing workshop, and they had wisely asked Cleo Martin, a wonderfully gifted teacher in the university's rhetoric program, to lead the workshop. Cleo had welcomed our tentative first pieces of writing, taken them away to read and respond to, and now moved around the room returning them to us. To our astonishment, we found not red but *green* ink sprouting on our pages into

plus marks and marginal comments to indicate pleasure in the reading, praise for work well done, questions, suggestions for further reflection, revision, refinement. The only red in the room was on the faces of the participants, flushed with surprise and pleasure.

Then Cleo distributed the workshop copies and told us how we were to begin the discussion of each piece; the writer was to ask, "What do you like about my paper?" It was another revolutionary moment. You can imagine how enjoyable the workshops were for both writer and readers as a result, how much easier we found it to bring our writing to the workshop when we knew we'd hear first about what we had done well and then about how we might revise a piece to make it better. What's more, we left each workshop session eager to sit down and write more.

We worked very hard during the six months of the Institute. We read and debated theories and pedagogies; we designed new writing courses, seminars on writing pedagogy for colleagues at home, and new writing curricula for our home institutions; we wrote grant proposals for funding faculty development projects and curriculum revision. We learned a great deal from all of that reading, writing, talking, arguing, planning. But I think we all agreed that the writing workshop was where everything came together, where we saw in action, and where we *felt*, a potential for real change in our lives as writers and as teachers. I know for sure that the writing workshop was what we most looked forward to each week. We read each other's work with the utmost care, seriousness, and respect. We offered each other suggestions for improving our work. We celebrated our achievements as writers. The workshop was the place where we got to know each other through writing, where we constructed our identity as a community of professionals with common concerns and aspirations, where our individual identities as writers were called forth and affirmed, and where we continued to learn from the inside out how to create an environment that would best facilitate our students' development as writers. I wrote more in those six months than I had written in the previous few years, when teaching loads and administrative responsibilities had obscured my connection to the activity that had brought me into this profession in the first place.

Being invited to scrutinize my own writing habits and practices and to "put my money where my mouth was," so to speak, by actually *writing* and offering that writing to readers for response—all that changed forever how I teach writing. When the Institute on Writing ended and I went back to my home institution, I didn't want to lose the support of the workshop; I wanted to find colleagues who were willing to spend some time each week reading and discussing our work in progress, willing to encourage and support each other's writing. I also wanted to foster writing across the

curriculum; I knew that a writing workshop would give other teachers, as it had given me, the incentive to reflect critically on their teaching as well as their writing. I announced a faculty writing workshop and invited anyone who was interested to participate. I also made sure that every workshop began with the writer asking the magic question: "What do you like about my paper?"

The workshop was a grand success. The group continued to meet every Friday afternoon during the school year for the next five years. We gathered in a comfortable lounge adjacent to the faculty dining room, not around a seminar table because that, I decided, suggested an atmosphere too reminiscent of a classroom, but cozily ensconced on sofas and easy chairs. I wanted the workshops to feel more like a gathering of friends than a committee meeting, and the informal setting helped. Coffee and tea were always available, and the writing program budget provided cookies or sherry on special occasions like the end of a semester or an academic year. Unlike participants in the summer seminars on teaching writing, the writing workshop participants did not receive a stipend for being in the group, partly because of budgetary constraints, but partly also because I wanted the emphasis in the workshop to be on the personal benefits gained by those who took part. I wanted participants to think of the workshop as something provided *for them*, rather than seeing it as work they did for the writing program or for the college.

Five years after I convened that first workshop, I left the college, but a colleague and workshop regular eagerly volunteered to step in as the workshop facilitator, and the last I heard, the group—and not incidentally, the WAC program—were still going strong.

I subsequently convened similar writing groups at two other institutions where I have directed writing programs. What I have found in all three institutions is that providing a forum for faculty to focus on themselves as writers is richly productive in a number of ways: encouraging and supporting scholarly activity among participants²; helping to create a sense of community among faculty engaged together in the common activities of teaching and scholarship; and increasing participants' willingness to include more writing in their courses. Participants in faculty workshops on their own writing are, I have found, eager to consider ways for their students to experience writing and response as they have. Faculty writing groups are thus a crucial corollary to faculty development programs that address writing pedagogy directly. I believe they are the single most effective way to change faculty attitudes about writing and to build support for writing across the curriculum.

A college or university that decides to develop a writing program across the disciplines faces a number of challenges. First of all, faculty must

accept that they themselves will be implicated in the process of change that launching a comprehensive writing program entails. The first common assumption that needs to be challenged is that students' writing "problems" rest with students alone and thus that students will be the sole focus of the writing program's attention. Those of us in composition studies know, though some of our colleagues in other fields still do not, that the ability to write, for students or for anyone else, is not a fixed or static quality but is instead profoundly context-bound. A writer who writes perfectly well, or even exceedingly well, in one situation may write not particularly well in another as a result of a number of factors: the assignment, the student's familiarity with the discipline, the kind of response she has gotten before both in the particular course and in her whole history with writing, and so on.

Second, the chasms that have traditionally divided divisions, departments, and disciplines must be bridged in order to build a sense of shared enterprise. This means providing opportunities for faculty across disciplines to talk together about discourse conventions, what counts as "good writing" in their disciplines, and what the differences might be between students writing to get acquainted with a discipline, or novice writing, and students writing to enter the discipline, or apprentice writing. Novice writing, appropriate for beginning students and introductory courses, may depart from or ignore the usual conventions of writing in the discipline because its function is to provoke interest and to invite engagement, exploration, and experimentation. Apprentice writing, appropriate for students majoring or concentrating in the field and for upper-level courses, is where students begin to master the discourse conventions of a discipline and to stake out a place for themselves within the field. Discussing these distinctions enables faculty to see themselves as thinkers and writers whose years of work have embedded them in a particular discipline and to see students as people who are initially outsiders to that discipline. Learning to situate their teaching within these distinctions powerfully affects how teachers see their role, not so much as guardians of their discipline but rather as people whose privilege it is to introduce newcomers to the discipline and initiate them into its conventions.

Another challenge is to prevent the program from devolving into "correctness across the curriculum." Every writing director who has tried to recruit faculty to participate in a cross-curricular writing program has heard statements like this: "I don't think I have the skills I need to teach writing effectively; I recognize when something goes wrong in a sentence, but I don't know what to call it. I'd have to relearn grammar if I'm going to teach more writing." The task is to redefine what it means to teach writing, to convince colleagues that writing across the curriculum doesn't

mean everybody should "teach writing" in that outmoded, narrow, correctness-oriented way. Instead, everybody understands that writing is learning, meaning that faculty in all disciplines are better able to use writing to achieve the goals of every course they teach. Teachers need to understand the writing process and learn how to take that process into account when they assign and respond to their students' writing. They are then more likely to give assignments that stress writing to learn—to use frequent, short, informal, exploratory writing along with or at times instead of the usual school "papers" and to offer ample opportunities for revision. They also are more likely to give responses that facilitate students' continued intellectual engagement with the subject, rather than responses that criticize in a way that inhibits or arrests students' interest in further thinking and writing.

Finally, faculty need to find out that there's something in it for them, both as teachers and as writers, when they choose to take part in writing across the curriculum. They need to experience the renewal of energy for both writing and teaching that a WAC program can offer.

A faculty writing workshop is ideally suited to address all of these issues. It supports the comprehensive nature of the writing program and avoids the frequent impulse of fledgling programs to focus only on students and their "inadequacies" because the workshop is focused only on *faculty* and *their* writing. It builds alliances among faculty from many disciplines through the activity of sharing their current scholarship and their struggles and adventures with writing; the result is a multi-disciplinary community of scholar-teachers open to and experienced in conversations about writing. The workshop also helps to avoid the pitfall of teachers who place excessive or inappropriately timed emphasis on grammar and correctness. The group learns quickly that editing matters are sometimes appropriately incidental to discussing the substance of work in progress, that any piece of writing has many more interesting things to talk about than how the sentences parse or how the punctuation looks, and that editing is a last-stage activity in the evolution of a piece of writing. In the process of discussing the substance as well as the style of their own and their colleagues' writing, group members also learn a vocabulary of response that is rhetorically based.

If, then, building a successful cross-curricular writing program depends on faculty from all disciplines becoming familiar with the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the writing process for how they think about the writing that their students do, how they assign writing, and how they assess and respond to that writing, what better way than to invite faculty across disciplines to write for and with each other; to become more aware of what goes into producing a piece of writing and how writing both

is similar and different across disciplines; and to learn from both getting and giving response what kinds of comments are most helpful to writers at different stages of the writing process?

So much for a writing program director's perspective on the value of the faculty writing workshop. What do workshop participants themselves have to say? I asked people in one faculty writing workshop to tell me how participation has influenced them as both writers and teachers; influenced their own writing as well as their ways of assigning and responding to writing; their understanding of the role of writing in their courses and their programs; and their awareness of how both they and their students fit into the discourse communities of their disciplines, their departments or programs, and the institution as a whole.³

Most participants recognize and value the group's focus on them as scholar-writers, as well as on the ways the group helps to forge connections across departmental and disciplinary lines. The workshop meetings are, as one colleague put it, "time out" from teaching, grading, advising, committees, and so on, and offer a pleasant chance to get to know colleagues across the campus with whom we might otherwise have no more than nodding acquaintance. Here is what some of them had to say about the cross-disciplinary collegiality in the workshop:

I most enjoyed the interchange among disciplines. . . . I would add that after a week of struggling through students' essays, it was wonderful to read and discuss scholarly writing of real quality.

The interaction with other group members was important. [My program] is structurally, socially, and intellectually isolated from the rest of the college. The writing group provided me an opportunity to engage with members of the community in a meaningful way.

I . . . really enjoyed and benefited from the chance to talk with colleagues from different departments. I felt much more part of the larger [college] community as a result of the group.

I very much appreciated the workshop when I could attend. It gave me a chance to hear what my colleagues were up to.

For me the most rewarding part of the group was reading and hearing about other people's work and having a chance to see how people in other disciplines write.

Participants were expressly grateful for the opportunity of time to concentrate on their own writing. As a result, their interest in writing was renewed, and they wanted to do more of it, even in some cases to think of doing different kinds of writing, outside the confines of traditional scholarship in their discipline. One respondent spoke directly about how the workshop had initiated a change in how she thought about and experienced her own writing process:

I used to think of the first draft as the major hurdle, or barrier, or accomplishment . . . and the revising process as that "other" much simpler process that came after. Now I no longer see the writing process as a big step (first draft) followed by one or more littler steps (revision). Now I see the reverse! The process of revision has assumed a much more prominent place in the whole of writing.

Other respondents also wrote about how the writing workshop supported them as writers:

[The group] taught me something about my own writing and it was very encouraging. Sometimes when the semester catches up with me . . . I forget I also have this other life. It has always seemed to me that writing was and is a luxury.

I admit to having been rather self-serving in my approach to the writing group, in that I used it more in terms of improving my own writing.

More than anything else, I benefit from the opportunity to talk with people about my work.

I like the idea of showing colleagues a draft—the excitement of the risk, I guess. Since we were all more or less in the same boat, it made it easier to be vulnerable and to value the process of writing and of honing an idea, instead of hiding behind a finished product.

. . . the most valuable aspects of the writing group were getting a chance to think about my own writing and hearing others' reactions to it. It helped me to take more risks in using my own voice and to break away (somewhat) from the tyranny of the academic style. . . . I really liked having two hours each week in which practical concerns were set aside and we got a chance to talk about our work—a rare opportunity! My participation in the group

helped me to think of myself as a writer and to fantasize about doing different kinds of writing—someday.

I have been reading *Wild Mind* by Natalie Goldberg and experimenting with writing short descriptive pieces that avoid abstract formulations. After writing about theory . . . for the last ten years, it has not been easy to accept the metaphors that appear on the page like uninvited guests who turn out to be the life of the party. My interest in writing was sparked by the discussions in the faculty writing group The opportunity to talk about and share written work with colleagues is so rare, that the very fact of its existence made the writing group exceptional I enjoyed being in the group and came away wanting to spend more time writing.

In the workshop, teaching is only rarely a direct topic of conversation, although it is always implicit in our collegiality. Rather, as the passages above demonstrate, the focus is on supporting and encouraging faculty members' identity as scholars and writers. This makes the group meetings a place where a facilitative model of writing pedagogy can be enacted, where the social or communal aspects of writing can be emphasized, and where faculty can become more aware of their own writing process and can experience what it is like to have one's work read and responded to seriously but supportively, with a heightened awareness of writing as embedded in contexts—of discipline, genre, rhetorical purpose, immediate or potential audience—and as an extended, complex, and multifaceted process. One respondent admitted that she hasn't yet changed how she deals with writing in her courses, instead relishing the workshop time to focus on her own writing:

The group has not had a direct impact, so far, on my work with students. I think in a way I wanted to use the time to think about my own development and goals, not to rush into my teacher mode. However, over time, I think that it will have an impact, especially if I can go to some workshops on using the writing process with students.

Yet the workshop experience inevitably raises questions for many participants about the writing in their classes and about their teaching practices. Several other participants were specific about how the experience of the group had already inspired concrete changes in their teaching:

Receiving feedback on my own writing has been very helpful in learning how to give better feedback to students But just as

important is knowing the experience of receiving feedback—what kinds of comments and suggestions are helpful and what is simply discouraging; the importance of hearing what's good about a piece before hearing about what's confusing or what puts the reader off; the effect that the tone of the feedback might have.

As a writer and teacher of writing, the group has helped me to open up. [I've learned that] by viewing the writing assignment as an experience between writers, revisions and resubmissions extend and complement, rather than just show comprehension of, the lectures and the textbook.

Having had my own work productively criticized and experiencing firsthand the importance of hearing a word of praise mixed in with stern words of criticism, I could better formulate my own comments to my students on their papers to reflect their accomplishments and progress, and, at the same time, challenge them to improve their style, tighten up their arguments, and better situate their voices. The discussions and readings strengthened my commitment to making writing central to my teaching. I realized that I could apply some of the same concerns discussed in the writing group to my own seminars. I developed group writing exercises that encourage students to talk to one another across disciplines and to gain more confidence in their own particular approaches, while at the same time recognizing the constraints of any seminar and any subject maintained by conventions, historical context, and the limits of time and space.

I'm more likely now than before to assign more frequent writing projects in my classes, more likely to make revision an integral part of those projects, and more likely to suggest different types of writing projects. Gone are the days of the 15-page paper that was turned in on the last day of class! Now I assign 5 or 6 short papers throughout the semester, each of which is revised at least once and is shared with the larger writing community (either a group of students in the class or the whole class, plus me). As far as what form the writing takes, I'm much more open to permitting the student to choose: I'll choose the topic . . . and the student is free to choose whether she writes a "traditional" essay, a letter to the editor, a letter to her congressional representative, a diary entry, etc. This freedom to choose has met with enormous enthusiasm in the class—and I get more interesting pieces to read!

These changes, significant and welcome as they are, need not be the end point in how the faculty writing workshop can affect the practice of writing and teaching writing on a campus. If I have so far emphasized the near-term results of the faculty writing workshop—support for faculty writers and incentive for critical review of the use of writing in their courses—it is not because I think those things will be the most we can hope for from such a program. The potential of the group is for ongoing reflection and discussion about the work we do together—thinking, writing, teaching. The process of collaboration across disciplines in the workshop can be the foundation or seedbed for curricular evolution. Postmodernism has destabilized and blurred the traditional boundaries between disciplines; just as the college or university curriculum a century ago looked very different from the ones we live with today, so the disciplines of tomorrow will certainly differ from those we know now. Defining education is a process that can never be finished, but it seems safe to predict that interdisciplinarity will be increasingly important in educational arrangements and public life in the coming decades. Two members of the workshop addressed the group's potential for such re-vision:

[One thing] of value is the interdisciplinary nature of the group. I am more interested in questioning traditional disciplinary boundaries than in remaining comfortably within them. Perhaps it is a sign of the times, but I think interdisciplinary discussions are key to future research agendas and policy proposals for our society.

By reading other colleagues' work, I became more interested in how we actually talk across disciplines and how the way we write keeps us separate. By talking about the writing and having the opportunity to ask questions about approaches, statistics, conclusions, and examples, we could almost glimpse what an interdisciplinary curriculum would look like.

That glimpse toward an interdisciplinary curriculum is titillating, but it is only a glimpse; writing across the curriculum is too new for us to know what effects it will have on institutions in the long run. I like to imagine a campus where teachers and students alike think of themselves as *writers*, and both understand and respect the writing process, their own and others'; where no one owns knowledge, but it circulates freely and everyone is willing to share it; where everyone understands that knowledge is not finished and fixed and passed down from one generation to the next but that teachers and students alike are active in the process of remaking and

producing knowledge; and where teachers learn as well as teach, students teach as well as learn.

A faculty writing workshop cannot alone produce such transformations, of course, but I believe it can contribute to them in important ways. I am convinced that encouraging teachers to focus on themselves as writers and on their own writing must lie at the heart of the process to develop college-wide writing programs if those programs are to thrive and bear fruit. Teachers are best qualified to make good use of writing in their courses—and to follow through on the curricular promise of that kind of teaching—when they understand the experience of writing from the inside out. The faculty writing workshop is indispensable in helping teachers acquire that understanding and, thus, in developing a successful program of writing across the curriculum.

Notes

1. I am grateful to my colleagues Karen Hollis, Deborah Schifter, Lucas Wilson, Patricia Ramsey, Karen Remmler, Jena Gaines, and Jean Grossholtz for their assistance with this essay and also to the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa, where I spent a developmental leave in spring 1992 and where the research and writing were done.

2. It's reasonable to assume that participants publish more as a result of their workshop experience; it would be difficult to assess that with any accuracy, however, because of the many variables that would be impossible to control for, such as, who came to the group year by year; how active they were as publishing writers before or after, as opposed to during, their participation in the workshop; whether, indeed, they brought to the workshop writing that they intended for publication. One participant, a chemist nearing retirement, began to write poems again when she joined the workshop, something she had not done since her undergraduate days; while writing poetry gave her enormous pleasure and she produced a number of occasional poems for people or events within the college community, she had no desire to publish them. Other members of the group brought grant proposals, clearly not meant for publication, or papers that they intended to deliver at conferences but did not expect to publish. I do have anecdotal evidence that publishing increased somewhat among participants, including my own conviction that having an audience of careful and supportive readers to respond to work in progress and to give suggestions for revision made me more willing to submit my writing for publication and more successful in placing my work. Another member of the first workshop group, untenured during the five years I was part of the group, later said to me, only half jokingly, that she was sure that she never would have gotten tenure without the workshop group's support and encouragement, enabling her to publish more than she felt she could otherwise have done. Other participants have offered similar comments over the years.

3. All quotations are from participants' written responses to my questions about the effects of their taking part in the writing group. I have excerpted freely but edited with restraint, only to fit a passage gracefully into my own text. Some respondents asked that their names not be used; for the sake of consistency, I have used no one's name. Respondents were from departments of psychology and education, economics, politics, history, mathematics education, and German.

