

A Modest Proposal

As histories of Rhetoric and Composition demonstrate, the development of first-year composition has not been linear even in recent iterations. Rather, it has taken various forms, in the last thirty years, for instance, ranging from process pedagogy to cultural critique. Likewise, given the diversity of institutional type—two-year schools, liberal arts schools, comprehensive universities, historically black colleges, and research one institutions—and the influence of institutional type on what is taught, composition has seemed almost kaleidoscopic in nature. Accordingly, it is easy to see how both members of the public at large and our colleagues in the academy might be mystified as to what it is that we do in the first-year composition classroom.

What in fact is it that we do? In the spring of 1997, this question was taken up by a working group of faculty from across the country. The aims of the group were several.

First, the “Outcomes Group,” as we began to be called, wanted to determine what it is that we do teach in first-year composition.

A second aim was to determine if there was sufficient commonality among programs and courses for a common programme to be defined.

A third aim was to articulate this programme, if it existed, as a way of understanding what we do and establishing a set of common outcomes for postsecondary students, that is, a

WPA Outcomes Statement For First-Year Composition

statement of what students know and do as a function of having completed first-year composition.

Such an agenda carries with it, of course, both risk and opportunity. On the one hand, as the first meeting of this group made clear, such a document could be employed by others to serve ends that we might not endorse. On the other hand, to the extent that faculty and administrators can identify the central goals of first-year composition, we could have a common ground on which to build both intellectual work and support for that work.

The following, then, is a penultimate draft of the Outcomes Statement. It was developed by a group of faculty whose membership shifted somewhat over time, as the list of participants below suggests. The Outcomes Statement was presented at sessions and workshops at CCCC, NCTE, WPA, and C&W from 1997-1999, with feedback from presentations incorporated into each successive draft. It was presented to the Council of Writing Program Administrators Executive Board at its meeting in Tucson in July 1998, and the Board endorsed the document in principle. The Board also asked that this document be published widely so as to gather response. The document has been posted on the web at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~outcomes>. *Writing Program Administration* provides another venue.

Introduction

This statement describes the common knowledge, skills, and attitudes sought by first-year composition programs in American postsecondary education. To some extent, we seek to regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition; to this end the document is not merely a compilation or summary of what currently takes place. Rather, the following statement articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research, and theory. This document intentionally defines only "outcomes," or types of results, and not "standards," or precise levels of achievement. The setting of standards should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions. Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance. Therefore, it is important that teachers, administrators, and a concerned public do not imagine that these outcomes can be taught in reduced or simple ways. Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students actually learn to write. For this reason we

expect the primary audience for this document to be well-prepared college writing teachers and college writing program administrators. In some places, we have chosen to write in their professional language. Among such readers, terms such as "rhetorical" and "genre" convey a rich meaning that is not easily simplified. While we have also aimed at writing a document that the general public can understand, in limited cases we have aimed first at communicating effectively with expert writing teachers and writing program administrators.

These statements describe only what we expect to find at the end of first-year composition, at most schools a required general education course or sequence of courses. As writers move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, students' abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge. For this reason, each statement of outcomes for first-year composition is followed by suggestions for further work that builds on these outcomes.

Rhetorical Knowledge

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The main features of writing in their fields
- The main uses of writing in their fields
- The expectations of readers in their fields

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including

finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources

- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The uses of writing as a critical thinking method
- The interactions among critical thinking, critical reading, and writing
- The relationships among language, knowledge, and power in their fields

Processes

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Learn to critique their own and others' works
- Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
- Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- To build final results in stages
- To review work-in-progress in collaborative peer groups for purposes other than editing
- To save extensive editing for later parts of the writing process
- To apply the technologies commonly used to research and communicate within their fields

Knowledge of Conventions

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation in their fields
- Strategies through which better control of conventions can be achieved

Response

Clyde A. Moneyhun

As the WPA Outcomes Statement has evolved, I've heard (and expressed) many opinions about what it should or should not contain, what specific language should be used, what points should be emphasized over others, and so on. For example, I side with those who wish that the document had more to say about teaching writing to heighten social and political awareness among students, about writing as a civic act. However, I also understand that as a compilation and synthesis of opinion in our field, the document (like all such documents) is necessarily and inevitably conservative.

While others may continue to discuss the content of the document, I'm going to assume that it's a finished product and turn my attention instead to the possible uses and misuses to which it has been put and may be put in the future. I'll illustrate what I mean with a bit of personal experience.

As a tool in the many struggles a WPA wages on a campus, the document is useful in many ways. It carries the endorsement of the only national organization of writing program administrators, which gives it the kind of clout you get from a directive issued by the American Medical Association.

It is comprehensive and therefore open to interpretation, a good thing if WPAs are doing the interpreting. We may choose to emphasize this or that aspect of the document depending on our agenda in a given situation. It

expresses many of the most cherished tenets of our field: that global issues of audience and evidence take precedence over local issues of mechanical correctness; that writing is best taught as process; that faculty across the curriculum must continue the work begun by the composition class or sequence. Though these ideas are now our tradition, they are news to many faculty outside the field.

As a participant in the revision of the general education curriculum at a previous school, I used the document in all these ways. I was the only writing specialist on the university's general education committee, for example, and when pressured to concede points that I knew ran counter to the fundamentals of writing pedagogy, I would sometimes pull rank by using the full weight of my professional group to support my points. When I wanted to redefine the first-semester composition course as a "critical thinking/reading/writing" course for approval by the committee, I pulled out relevant language from the document. As the committee developed criteria for writing intensive courses in the disciplines and turned to me for guidance, I highlighted the ways in which the document says that faculty from across the curriculum can build on the preparation students receive in first-year composition. Together with colleagues from the composition program, I quoted the document many times in memos to the committee during the several years that the curriculum revision was in progress.

At the same time, I worried about giving my colleagues from across the campus direct access to the document. They might have ignored the warnings of the Introduction that the document defines only "outcomes" and not "standards," and that the document is intended for a specialized audience of WPAs who understand its jargon and will interpret it according to conventions of the field. They might have chosen to emphasize the material on "control of surface features" over material on rhetoric, critical thinking, or process. They might have made mischief with phrases such as "flexible strategies for revising" in ways that gutted the meaning of writing as a process. If I happened to endorse certain "outcomes" that were not covered by the statement (for example, fostering a sense of the political or ethical purposes of writing), they might have accused me of violating the intentions of my own professional group. In the end, though, even with these worries, I sometimes appended a copy of the statement to memos that quoted it, and it never came back to haunt me.

My current school is also in the process of revising its general educational curriculum, and I have injected myself into discussions of the

place and purpose of writing on the campus. I will no doubt continue to put the Outcomes Statement to good use, and I will feel ethically bound to give colleagues access to the full document to make of it what they will.

So far its usefulness has outweighed its possible misuses, and with luck this will continue.

Response

Keith Rhodes

I have been asked to write in favor of the Outcomes Statement. It is natural to assume that someone who has worked actively on its creation would be in favor of it, and I am. One can only understand my support in terms of "fuzzy logic," however. That is, on most days, and to the largest extent, I favor adoption of the Outcomes Statement by the Council of WPAs. For me, what started with a bang of outrage is ending with a shrug of acceptance. In a few short strokes, I want to persuade others that my attitude of support with ambivalent enthusiasm is most appropriate.

Most importantly, the original outrage remains justified to this day. The discipline of composition and rhetoric is entirely founded upon the first-year composition sequence, and yet we have studiously, even aggressively avoided giving this existing foundation a public definition. I am currently teaching an undergraduate course in composition theory, and if one thing is clear to these novice scholars, most of whom are mainly interested in their own writing or that of K-12 students, it is that nearly everything they are reading assumes that "composition" means writing in a required first-year college course. We have expanded and diversified our work, but without the foundational course we have no discipline, not even an "interdiscipline." Our diversity and interdisciplinarity makes it even more important that we make a conscious effort to define what students can expect from a first-year college composition course. We have many fine excuses, ranging from fear of ignorant accountability police to love of elegant postmodern problematizations, but none of them outweigh the basic decency of telling students and their high school teachers what they can generally expect from our courses.

When it comes to actually defining the course, the emotions end up being less extreme. To our fairly universal if mild surprise, we found a very general statement of goals to be much less controversial than we had feared. The course already had more inter-institutional coherence than common opinion suggested, at least in terms of the imagined and desired results. This

realization cemented in the term “Outcomes” to describe our work. After generating more detailed descriptions in our favored professional language, we found that the terms translated more readily than we might have imagined into fairly common language. As an aside, perhaps the “jargon” that remains—terms like genre, rhetorical, and text—indicates the most satisfying areas for focused professional inquiry of the most rigorous kind. But in general, deeper and broader work with the statement, in workshops of many kinds in many places for many audiences, demonstrated that it was all, in the end, rather mundane.

This is not, then, a great moment in the history of composition. It is an ordinary moment, done (we hope) well enough to pass with only minor tweaking. Those of us who did the work certainly appreciate its difficulty; those who have already been using the document as a touchstone for local, more specific articulations appreciate its quality; but to the general public it both is and ought to appear to be a fairly simple and sensible bit of administrivia; and among ourselves, we should mostly just admit that it was about time.

Response

Mark Wiley

The desire to articulate what every student will know and be able to do after his or her first year of college-level writing instruction was initially expressed as a question on the WPA listserv in March of 1996. Several of us voiced our worries over the increasing political pressure to be accountable for what we do in our composition classrooms and to justify the resources used for maintaining huge writing programs. Participants in that listserv conversation were gravely concerned over having the goals of our composition programs defined *for* us by others who knew little of the relevant scholarship and current thinking in the field, but who, nonetheless, had the power to tell us what we ought to be teaching and holding students accountable for in our writing classes.

This fear of getting done to us before we could do for ourselves was additionally fueled by the standards-setting efforts that were taking place in a variety of disciplines at various educational levels. Many of these discipline-specific standards in K-12 were being formulated by small committees often convening in large states (such as my state of California) where extensive discussion over these standards’ integrity, relevance, and pragmatic value didn’t happen. Better to be proactive than to stand by

passively complaining about encroachments on academic freedom and having a standardized curriculum imposed on us. At least that was my view.

Undeniably, the Outcomes Statement is a political document, a negotiated document, one of compromise, one articulated at a sufficiently general enough level to allow local interpretation and implementation. But the conservative right and the radical left may both agree over what it lacks. The right may find it inadequate or too vague; the left at the least may find it too timid, and at the worst an unnecessary imposition. The document’s “middle-of-the-roadness” I fear may render it one more of those proclamations issued by professional organizations that sound, well, “official,” but lack any pragmatic value because no significant consequences follow its adoption.

I hope the Outcomes Statement becomes a “living” document, one subject to continual inquiry, debate, and revision. I hope it is not interpreted as a mandate to standardize a given curriculum in some local context in order to justify regimenting and disciplining adjunct writing faculty or to justify some wrong-headed assessment instrument. I hope the Outcomes Statement encourages diversity in how it is interpreted locally and in how student writing is read and evaluated. I hope it begins a national scholarly conversation among writing teachers, administrators, and, yes, even the wider public. But most importantly, I hope these outcomes serve as promises to our students that we, their teachers, will help them develop into rhetorically savvy, critically aware, versatile writers.

Response

Kathleen Blake Yancey

At first glance, the Outcomes Statement seems such a short document—and hardly revolutionary. It talks about the more non-controversial of our practices in first-year composition, writing process and rhetorical knowledge, for instance, and it doesn’t prescribe. Let me break that line out so we don’t miss it: it doesn’t prescribe. Faculty are not required to practice liberatory pedagogy, the curriculum doesn’t mandate portfolios, and students are not obligated to write expressivist prose or engage in service learning—although a class might include any these elements. According to this document, what students do, more or less, is write.

That’s it.

The Statement, it seems to me, then, is a manageable document that uses the language of rhetoric and composition to describe what it is that

most of us, in one way or another, do day in and day out, with our students.

Some of us will never need such a document. Others of us will find such a document useful—to contextualize our own programs for faculty and students, to develop our programs, to connect our own programs and classes to high schools and WAC programs and co-op experiences, and not least, to defend our programs.

Can such a document be mis-used? Yes. Will it be mis-used? Probably. Is that a reason not to endorse it? No. You have to ask yourself, Are you better off with a document that provides a foundation and a language, or are you better off working without such articulation? It's a curious thing when teachers of language prefer silence on curricular issues. Less philosophically (and perhaps more to the point, you'll say), the history of reform documents within composition studies suggests that in the main, our documents are not used against us: quite the reverse. The CCCC Position Statement on Assessment, for instance, has helped many, and to my knowledge, hasn't been used against a single program in the country. (Neither, admittedly, could it save certain programs.) The Portland Resolution is another case in point, and the Intellectual Work Document is in similar process. In sum, we have a history here, and it bodes well.

The history of this particular reform document also bears comment. Ordinarily, within our field at least, an organization understands that a need wants to be met, it charters some group within it to draft a document and to present it to members and/or the leadership, and thus policy is born. The Outcomes Statement developed almost in reverse: a number of people who were electronically associated agreed that it would be useful to have a statement of what we do. A few years and a couple of in-person meetings later, members of what became a "group" brought the statement to the WPA for endorsement. Is this process of development itself revolutionary? That seems a large claim, and yet, I want to consider it:

The Statement was neither mandated nor developed by official leaders of any group. The exigence, rather, was defined and responded to by a myriad group of faculty and program directors and graduate students, some of whom knew each other, some of whom became acquainted electronically. Electronic media, in fact, have been central to the development of the Statement.

The Statement has continued to change; there is an assumption that the Statement is a living text and thus will change. Necessarily, then, questions will arise as to how to accommodate change once/should the

document become "official," and precisely because of the role of electronic media in creation and distribution of texts, all organizations will need to address them.

We'll be in good company.

I defer to others who know their history better than I, but to my knowledge, this is the first time in composition studies in recent memory that a national group of teachers and students and program administrators have come together on their own to articulate a first-year curriculum that can speak to the needs of students in a range of institutions anywhere in the country. At the least, then, such a document provides something to argue against; at the most, it provides a foundation; and regardless, it provides an occasion for dialogue.

So, you see, I think that we might be witnessing a revolutionary moment, after all.

The Outcomes Group Requests Readers' Responses

At its April 2000 meeting, the WPA Executive Board will consider formally adopting the Outcomes Statement. Until then, we invite comment and response, addressed to the Outcomes Group Steering Committee (Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Rita Malencyzk, Irv Peckham, and Kathleen Blake Yancey).

Susanmarie Harrington, Steering Committee Chair

Department of English

Indiana University Purdue University

425 University Boulevard

Indianapolis, IN 46202

The Outcomes Statement Authors

The Outcomes Statement was drafted by a group known as the Outcomes Group who in July of 1998 became an ad-hoc committee of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The Outcomes Group, as this committee is still known, has been comprised of many members over time, some of whom have participated throughout the process, others who have been active for more limited periods of time. Members have included: Linda Bergmann, Glenn Blalock, William Condon, Patricia Ericsson, Ruth Overman Fischer, Emily Golson, Susanmarie Harrington, Veronica Keane, Patricia LaCoste, Barry Maid, Rita Malencyzk, J. L. McClure, Irvin Peckham, Nancy L. Peterson, Chet Pryor, Keith Rhodes, Duane Roen, Betty Shiffman,

Karen Vaught-Alexander, Edward M. White, Mark Wiley, Stephen Wilhoit, Donald Wolff, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. The Outcomes Group thanks the many people who have responded to discussions of the Outcomes Statement online and attended sessions and workshops about the evolving Outcomes Statement at the meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English, The National Writing Project, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, as well as at the Computers and Writing Conference and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference.