

Beyond First-Year Composition: Not Your Grandmother's General Education Composition Program

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GROUNDING POINTS: THEORY MEETS PRAGMATICS IN PROGRAM REFORM

In *Composition as a Human Science*, Louise Wetherbee Phelps titles her preface “Theory is Autobiography.” Our collegial journey toward program reform begins with our belief that a fully realized college composition program can be an effective vehicle for advancing the goals of critical democratic literacy. Many times throughout this process we were tempted to throw up our hands in communal resignation as we faced yet another challenge, yet another obstacle, yet another blockade on the road to reforming our program. However, after the bouts of anxiety and frustration passed, we would inevitably return to and reaffirm our belief in the value of literacy instruction for educating a critical democratic citizenry. Our “autobiography” is a performance of theory.

Our journey begins with our experiences as tenure-track composition and rhetoric faculty at a comprehensive state university in southeastern Pennsylvania that serves about 9,800 undergraduates. We mark the start of our journey with an event that actually occurred outside of the English department. This event was our university's reaccreditation process and our academic policy council's response—first the council's closed-door examination of the composition requirements, followed by several controversial and ill-considered proposals for changes from that committee (which included at various times both eliminating one writing course and increasing the number of writing courses), and finally with our insistence that we be allowed to define the terms of reform for ourselves.

Within these actions by the academic policy council, we see evidence of lack of knowledge, ambivalence, and even hostility toward college composition and those who teach it. The first-year nature of our courses (marked by the 100-level course numbers) and the prevalence of temporary faculty as instructional staff ensured writing instruction's restricted place in the general education curriculum (and in the English department as well). Our reforms were designed to enhance the teaching of general education writing by improving it from the viewpoint of student motivation as well as faculty interest. We were guided in this effort by what we think is valuable about a campus-wide writing requirement, namely its ability, as James Berlin describes in *Rhetoric and Reality*, to advise students "in ways to experience themselves, others, and the material conditions of their existence" (189).

In addition to composition's marginalization across campus, there were departmental factors that influenced the course of our journey. Like many other English departments, ours is organized in a hierarchical manner, dominated by literature. If we take the degrees conferred by the department as a guideline, then the study of literature (articulated in a BA in literature and a BA in comparative literature) and the teaching of literature (codified in the BS in English education with courses almost exclusively in literature) rank at the top of the hierarchy. The department certifies students in a number of minors as well, including African/African American literature, linguistics, business and organizational writing, creative writing, film studies, and journalism. Composition and rhetoric faculty teach only a minimal number of courses in the minors. While we do offer a few advanced courses, such as tutoring writing and essay workshop, the composition program is essentially associated with first-year writing.

In addition to departmental politics, the beginning of our journey was also marked by significant developments in composition and rhetoric hiring. Traditionally, the majority of our general education composition courses were taught by temporary faculty, a situation unfavorable both to adjuncts and to the composition program. Temporary faculty are required to sit out every fifth semester at West Chester, and many don't qualify for benefits. Being unable to vote on departmental issues and having little influence among regular faculty, their numbers weakened the composition program's ability to push for a more equitable share of departmental resources. However, in 1999 our faculty union, APSCUF (Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty), identified over-reliance on adjunct faculty as a labor issue and negotiated clause 11h, which required that full-time positions perennially filled by temporary faculty be converted into tenure track positions. This initiative has led to three straight years of multiple-position searches in composition and rhetoric and an increase in our ranks from eight tenure-track composition-trained faculty in the fall of 2000 to

fifteen by the fall of 2003. This larger number of compositionists required a program with greater diversity in advanced course offerings, providing an additional motivation for the work of curriculum reform.

Theory and the autobiography of our composition community directed our approach to these challenges. Having previously committed to radical reform of our writing program's administrative structure by introducing a collaborative model of writing program administration underwritten by post-masculinist theories, we applied this same principle to curriculum revision. We had already recast the content of our courses (albeit not the structure of the curriculum) to recognize "composition as a cultural practice," to quote the title of our colleague Alan W. France's book. Our texts and model syllabi foregrounded the teaching of discourse as a process of promoting critical consciousness and democratic practices and reforms. Building on our intellectual commitments and taking advantage of our new collaborative model of administration, we began the process of restructuring our fairly typical-looking two-semester course sequence into a two-year course sequence that would expand the writing requirement beyond the stigmas often associated with first-year one-size-fits-all courses: "introductory," "preparatory," "service-oriented," and even "remedial." In other words, our reforms aimed at getting us beyond the concept of "first-year composition" itself but without giving up what we collectively affirm as valuable in that enterprise.

Our reforms involved colleagues from a variety of disciplines in the process of designing the new courses and identifying new topics for the future. As we increased the number of stakeholders in the composition program, we simultaneously reduced the temptation of what Gerald Graff decries as the "course fetish": the stultifying "conventional picture of 'the classroom' as an autonomous entity, a 'course' taught by a single teacher with no regular or functional contact with other courses or teachers" (281).

First-year composition's troubled history as a gatekeeping enterprise shaped the context of our efforts at reform. Prominent voices in our discipline have, over the last decade or so, advanced strong arguments for the abolition of general education composition. The crux of this argument is that the courses mechanistically impose a narrowly-defined hegemonic literacy on new students, which divests FYC of the intellectual agency that validates academic disciplines. As John Schilb summarizes this argument, "Composition studies will never be ranked with Shakespeare studies as long as writing programs are charged with teaching basic human language to alleged Calibans" (66). The problem is well-rooted in history. Berlin, for instance, has summarized the nineteenth-century origins of writing instruction as an enterprise devoted to inculcating inadequately-literate students of the aspiring classes with the written voices expected of gentle-

men (*Rhetoric and Reality* 23-25). This history persists in the current institutional definition of composition as a “basic skills” course. Sharon Crowley (among others) has argued that the gatekeeping function of FYC denies the field’s long history of rhetoric and eschews opportunities for engaging students (or practitioners) in intellectual inquiry. Thus, useful production of discourse, for academic or life purposes, is subjugated to mere linguistic hazing, with continuing classist implications (“A Personal Essay” 155-76). Our reforms do not, by any stretch of the imagination, solve these complex problems. However, they demonstrate some potentially useful alternatives to a purely electivist model of college composition.

We would like to characterize our reforms as answering some of the charges of the abolitionists by reclaiming (some might say, usurping) a measure of disciplinarity for composition. What we have done, in effect, is redefine our program as “beyond FYC.” We have made three small changes that have created a more significant ripple effect throughout the campus than even we anticipated. Each of these changes is discussed in detail later, but for now it will suffice to list them. First, we expanded the time frame for students to take the courses; instead of requiring students to follow a two-semester, first-year sequence, our program allows the second course to be taken in the second or third year. To dislodge the one-size-fits-all model common in FYC, we expanded the course options. We resisted the pressure to design these new courses around disciplines, which would reinforce the “service” nature of composition; instead we reaffirmed the value of cultural critique by designing a number of non-discipline specific culturally-oriented topics for the five new courses, each beginning with the heading “Critical Writing.” And finally, we changed the course prefix from ENG to WRT, giving them a distinct identity as *writing* courses and nuancing them within the broader concept of “English,” which on our campus is synonymous with literary studies. We have begun to see evidence that these changes are challenging preconceptions about “college composition” among students, English department colleagues, faculty in other disciplines, and administrators.

More keenly than before, we recognize that the curriculum must respond to a range of on-campus constituencies, including the administration, campus-wide curriculum committees, students, and our colleagues (both tenure-track and temporary, compositionists and non-specialists). It also must respond to external bodies such as the regional accreditation agency, the state system’s board of governors, and the state legislature which, in their increasing conservatism, have stepped up the rhetoric of accountability concerning the state’s publicly-funded universities. Under such conditions, our

new administrative structure—stressing collegiality and democratic decision-making—has enabled us to engage these powerful hierarchical influences while resisting the move toward hierarchy ourselves.

Ultimately, then, the most radical components of our revisions are not structural but intellectual and ideological. In re-forming the general education writing course in light of a cultural studies commitment to critical discourse and agency, we have further incorporated an open call for ongoing curricular revision, encouraging all interested parties to collaborate in the process—compositionists, faculty in all disciplines, and students, who select courses (and who thus determine which ones live, die, or evolve)

These reforms, however, also created unanticipated problems and have brought new forms of resistance to the surface. What's more, our courses have not transcended all of the constraints of FYC. They must still meet a university-mandated slate of outcomes for assessment, although these outcomes can certainly be made to suit our pedagogical aims. In fact, our reform of the program to meet assessable outcomes has provided a basis for making more explicit our program's progressive, social-epistemic, cultural-studies emphasis that, to quote two members of our team, "steps forward as the social praxis of (too often empty or unrealized) rhetorical theory and cultural criticism" (Fitts and France xi).

The remainder of this essay explains how theoretical and pragmatic considerations converged as our decision-making process unfolded, how the decisions we made opened up new possibilities for us, and how they made us aware of new threats. To many our journey will seem like compromise, and on some levels it is. Institutional reform cannot escape the institutions themselves; however, we feel strongly that these are indeed "steps forward," illustrative instances of autobiography as the performance of theory.

CURRICULUM REFORM AS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

The purpose of first-year composition is frequently and strenuously debated. Some argue that it is to prepare students for later course work or a career, familiarizing them either with general conventions of academic discourse or the more specific signifying practices of particular disciplines—i.e., the "service" course. Others claim it should refine students' aesthetic sensibilities by exposing them to important cultural texts—i.e., the "belletristic" course. In her overview of these debates, Crowley classifies such goals as either pragmatist or humanistic (*Composition in the University* 9). We frequently returned to this question of purpose in deliberations about the new program, its courses, their content, and our pedagogical practices. In this section we describe how our reforms of the curricular and administrative

structures challenge the status quo of knowledge-making practices and institutional relations..

A cultural studies writing program is designed to raise students' awareness of the make-up of discursive worlds: their construction of truths, mis-truths, perceptions, and deceptions along economic, social, political, and cultural demarcations. It provides schooling in the critique of and creation of "what is," as encountered in texts of all kinds—the artifacts of everyday life. Our curriculum description mandates that we teach students "to see the 'big picture'—to question common sense and to be suspicious of the obvious." This mandate is an effort to provide students with critical strategies that make visible the ways in which "business as usual" is constructed of values: biases, hierarchies, and privileges, as well as the patterned inconsistencies of bigoted discourse. It calls for students to be critical in both method and attitude and to see their role as interventionists in the search for ways to create a more just society. Such strategies might enable students, for example, to consider the extent to which we can accurately describe the U.S. as a democracy, or its people as "free," and, given one's answers, what a person's "patriotic duty" might be.

We, in our cultural studies writing curriculum, foreground the conflicts and contradictions encoded within texts, literary and non-literary, in consistent efforts to create classrooms in which distinct voices may be heard. Such a curriculum affirms the basic interestedness of all language and explores the ways in which language practices create "ideological prescriptions" about what exists (Berlin, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 86). Ultimately, the goal is to enable students to use their awareness of how knowledge is constructed in discourse as the basis for democratic action of their own. (See Candace Spigelman on writing pedagogy's commitments to "counterbalanc[ing] rhetorics of injustice with humanitarian rhetorics" [324].)

Our composition program's collaborative model of administration, mirroring this commitment to the democratic construction of knowledge, rejects the authoritarianism of more traditional leadership models. Our administrative model seeks *stasis*, or the level of discussion where there is basic agreement among parties, that is essential to the recognition of constituency, or of one's place among similar but different others. This means that, at the department and university level, the group, not one or two individuals, represents the program. Many faces and intellects are able to speak authoritatively about it. This is especially important for a composition and rhetoric program because its campus contacts are interdisciplinary, affected by and mattering to faculty and students in a range of other disciplines.

What began three years ago as the possible death of one of our courses has led to a far more interesting and collaborative program for students, composition faculty, and interested colleagues. “Learning to invent in communities,” Karen Burke LeFevre says, “will do more than enable success in classrooms or careers. It is absolutely essential to achieving peace and, indeed, maintaining life on this planet in the twentieth century and beyond” (129). Though we cheer LeFevre’s global claims for collaboratively-created composition, our contention here, for the present at least, is a smaller one: that in our local institutional community, a democratically-invented transformation of general education composition has produced some degree of institutional democratic reform both in classrooms and in meeting rooms.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: RECOGNIZING EMERGING DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITIES IN INSTITUTIONAL FLUX

It’s probably not unusual for institutional regional reaccreditation to cause a degree of panic on a college or university campus. Past reports had cited incoherence in the general education curriculum as a weakness on our campus, and now was the time to address this weakness. Two years before the reaccreditation visit, the administration began preparing the campus by taking several steps: forming a strategic planning and accreditation council charged with writing the University’s new strategic plan, mandating outcomes assessment from every program on campus for the first time ever, and initiating review and revision of the aging general education curriculum. Many of the effects of these preparatory measures appeared, at first, to close off opportunities for democratic participation, as changes were being driven from the top down. The task we faced was to turn these obstacles into opportunities. During the events described over the next few pages, we felt at times as if a funnel cloud was bearing down on us. Our attempts to create curricular and administrative reform were as much an effort to keep our existing program from being caught in the vortex as an effort to establish something new.

The larger political and economic scene was not rosier. Then-Governor Tom Ridge made quite clear his desire to reduce state spending on public higher education. The rhetoric of accountability was summoned to aid the shrinkage of the state system’s budget. Assessment mandates were partially an outgrowth of this larger political context, and many faculty were concerned that it would ultimately result in abstract performance mandates for individual programs beyond those already active in the full-time-equivalent credit-hour driven “FTE economy” that runs the university. The rhetoric of accountability also plays well in the largely conservative mind-set of the

surrounding communities, where many individuals are suspicious that universities harbor secretly liberal agendas that are a detriment to the students, the economy, and the broader culture.

In such a political climate, it is difficult not to feel oppressed and overwhelmed. Many faculty were leery of the administration's motives and resisted the new mandates for assessment and curriculum revision. Although the composition and rhetoric faculty were less recalcitrant than some, we were nonetheless very concerned about the influences these changes would have on our program. The main curricular body on campus—the curriculum and academic policy council (CAPC)—formed a subcommittee charged with reviewing the current general education curriculum and proposing a new model. No one from among the composition and rhetoric faculty was chosen to serve on that committee. Adding to the mystery around this process, this committee did not make regular reports to the faculty on their progress, feeling that secrecy would allow them to conduct their work more efficiently. Subsequently, rumors about proposed changes circulated around campus. One such rumor involved abolishing ENG 121, the second course in our first-year writing sequence, on the grounds that it was not well-liked by students or faculty. Meanwhile, the university assessment team awaited each program's plan, which involved selecting general education goals from a list they provided and designing instruments to measure students' learning for each one. The confluence of factors (reaccreditation, assessment, general education revision, the 11h hiring clause of the union contract, state policies and local politics) converged to bring about the curriculum revisions described in the next section. Suffice it to say for the moment that in this context, where the composition and rhetoric faculty were feeling the squeeze from many angles, our commitment to democratic reform was reaffirmed.

“Assessment” is an unpopular word with many academics. It conjures up images of multiple choice tests, exit exams, functionalist educational philosophies, and bureaucratic administrative procedures. The composition and rhetoric faculty worried that assessment might bring with it abstract performance measures from the administration or state legislature. On the other hand, we were also very much aware that assessment could yield useful information consistent with the cultural studies pedagogy that informally guided our curriculum. For instance, we were well-versed in the use of portfolios for assessment and the type of qualitative data it yields, but felt overwhelmed by the volume of reading which this approach would entail. We were also concerned about maintaining the academic freedom of faculty teaching general education writing courses and wanted to design an assessment plan that would not erode this important privilege. Consequently, we resisted the idea of imposing specific writing assignments on all

sections of our courses or taking other similar steps that would make assessment easier to conduct but would be invasive of classrooms. We also felt very strongly that, while there are many legitimate ways of achieving the same educational goals, any one approach was bound to undermine those efforts, creating a “teach-to-the-test” mentality.

Developing an assessment plan began with our choice of four general education goals from the list of seven provided by the administration. The process of choosing, defining, and articulating goals for the first-year writing courses began a long and intensive examination of our curriculum. What are the goals of our courses? How do we know if we are meeting them? Ultimately, we chose the following goals and revised their definitions (in italics below) to more directly address our courses:

- “The ability to communicate effectively through writing effectively:” *In order to learn to communicate effectively in writing, you will be asked to examine the uses and effects of various types of writing, noticing how different contexts for writing call for changes in tone, syntax, and genre. Feedback from your instructor and classmates will guide you as you write, rewrite, and revise your work.*
- “The ability to think critically and analytically:” *Thinking critically requires you to recognize and analyze patterns of argument. To analyze arguments you will locate and evaluate writers’ claims, the supports for these claims, and the counter arguments. You will also assess the credentials and authority of the writers.*
- “The ability to respond thoughtfully to diversity:” *Responding thoughtfully to diversity calls for careful attention to the language in which categories like race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. are represented. Since writing is a social and cultural act, WRT courses examine how discourse can perpetuate unexamined and sometimes prejudicial assumptions about the character and value of diverse groups.*
- “The ability to lead productive and contributing lives:” *These intellectual activities have the larger objective of preparing you to lead productive and contributing lives. By honing your skills of communication and analysis, this course will further your understanding of your place among others in a democratic and diverse society.*

These definitions focus on important features of the philosophy that underlies our curriculum, emphasizing that writing is a complex social and intellectual ability not easily mastered through rote practice, even as publications in our own discipline continue to assume the opposite (see, for instance, Stanley Fish’s recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*). Our curriculum is designed to produce rhetorically-adept and literate

citizens rather than competent but docile writers. The assessment process helped lay the groundwork for the more sweeping curriculum revision we undertook as a result of the general education revision process that was already underway.

Meanwhile, the CAPC general education subcommittee had been meeting to review and revise the curriculum. Near the end of the process, it became known that the committee would recommend deleting ENG 121, our research writing course. It was argued that the benefits of this change would be twofold. It would help to address the pressures from the board of governors to reduce graduation credits, and it would reduce the level of dissatisfaction with the first-year writing courses. Anecdotal evidence (in the form of second-hand reporting of casual conversations with students and faculty) suggested that students were unhappy with the course and that faculty perceived it as doing little to improve students' writing. Clearly, these assertions could be made about almost any course at the university, and not all committee members were swayed. In fact, other members of the CAPC subcommittee actually argued for *increasing to nine* the number of required writing credits as a way of addressing students' apparent weaknesses as writers.

The composition and rhetoric faculty were both stunned and frustrated by the hierarchical nature of this process. All of the proposals were ill informed, lacking a foundation in composition theory and pedagogy in general as well as specific knowledge about the effectiveness of the general education writing courses on our campus. Even a campus-wide assessment of sample student essays from 100-level composition courses and 300-level WAC courses proved too problematic for any conclusions to be drawn. After considerable turmoil and debate, CAPC approved language that changed the general education writing requirement to "ENG 120 and any other Department of English writing course," maintaining the six-credit requirement in a radically transformed condition. This new language posed unexpected challenges for the composition and rhetoric faculty since the Department of English had a series of upper-division writing emphasis courses that were discipline/career specific or that were part of the creative writing and journalism concentrations, but no other actual writing courses that could fulfill the same general education goals as ENG 120 and ENG 121. For instance, few instructors of advanced writing emphasis courses taught research or included the rhetorical practices foregrounded in ENG 121. In some subdisciplines, such as creative writing, doing so would be pedagogically inappropriate.

People in a position to make decisions about general education writing lacked knowledge about our courses and imagination about how they could be successfully revised. It seemed from their perspective that the only

solution was to eliminate the course. Other faculty, who wanted general education writing courses to serve the narrow disciplinary interests of their programs, began requesting courses specifically designed for their students. Here, a functionalist and careerist mentality prevailed that proved to be a difficult stumbling block for us. Realizing we were dealing with a runaway horse, we went outside the university's committee and reporting structures to develop our own proposal for revising ENG 121.

Both the lack of knowledge about composition as a subfield of English and the recalcitrant pragmatism that dominated the rhetorical scene led to the need for a definition of a general education writing course that would distinguish it from other types of writing courses. We composed the following, which stresses heavily that these are *writing* and not writing emphasis courses:

A writing course is first and foremost a course about students' writing. Unlike a writing emphasis course that must cover disciplinary course material, the most significant and substantive portion of a writing course are the texts being written by the students themselves. Writing, then, is both the main activity and the object of study in a writing course. In writing courses, students are given the opportunity to write and conduct inquiry in at least two different genres or modes, and attention is paid to the principles of effective written communication, including, but not limited to, the connections among purpose and audience, self and audience, grammar, style, syntax, and punctuation. Writing courses treat writing as a process by providing students with substantive written and verbal feedback on their writing and requiring revision of students' texts.

Writing courses also assist students in understanding the complexities of written communication by investigating the relationships among language, thought, and culture. Writing persuasively requires that students learn the social and cultural contexts of the claims they make—the interestedness of all writing in public forums—in order to anticipate counterclaims to the positions they take (for *refutatio*). Writing as a liberal art requires students to see the “big picture”—to question common sense and to be suspicious of the obvious. In an academic setting, it also means that students will learn to conduct research, including learning how to locate, evaluate, use, and cite sources. (“WRT 120 and 121 General Course Guidelines and Principles”)

Our commitment to critical cultural studies has been inscribed into the very definition that we presented to CAPC in that we identified discourses as already and always “interested.” Thus, our new general education writing courses are not open to conservative skill-and-drill approaches, such as those advocated by Fish and others; for even when students are studying grammar, they are doing so as part of their attempt to understand how this “interest” is inscribed in the very structures of language. At this point, we decided that the disciplinary distinctiveness of our new “critical writing” courses would be best articulated by changing our course prefixes to WRT.

The converging influences that threatened to diminish and further disempower composition on our campus instead became an opportunity for critical intervention into the operations of the university; this intervention bears the potential for transforming how the work we do is understood by students and colleagues across campus. One of the most significant components of the curriculum revision was signaling the rigor of the critical writing courses by offering them at the 200-level, where students would be challenged to see the writing they do as part of their university studies rather than as mere preparation for them. Colleagues in English and other disciplines are similarly challenged to reimagine the roles that our courses play in students’ educations. The new curriculum has also proven itself to be an effective recruitment tool for new tenure-track colleagues, who find attractive both the teaching opportunities it offers and the collegiality of the composition and rhetoric faculty. In this way, we addressed the concerns of the campus abolitionists, who saw our courses as providing students with inadequate instruction, and of the instrumentalists, who wanted to co-opt the general education curriculum to meet their own program-specific ends. Our autobiography shows that, even though the moves we made were informed by the critical pedagogies that we value, the specific shape of reform was contingent upon local material conditions.

THE NEW WRT CURRICULUM: EXPANDING THE CIRCUMFERENCE OF GENERAL EDUCATION WRITING

In transforming the curriculum “beyond FYC,” we acknowledge that writing for college requires students to deepen their understanding of diverse formal and informal approaches to knowledge-making. We believe that such an understanding is likely to help students achieve crucial curricular goals related to critical literacy, and that this learning will serve the students well not just in their short-term academic lives but in their longer-term pursuits as citizens. In other words, we take seriously Berlin’s conclusion to *Rhetoric and Reality*:

Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants. [. . .] [T]he writing course empowers students as it advises in ways to experience themselves, others, and the material conditions of their existence—in methods of order and making sense of these relationships. (189)

The reforms we undertook are a working out of this philosophy. It is our belief that the ambitious goal of democratizing the composition program for faculty and students alike is best achieved through giving faculty and students choices of course offerings and of times during which to take them. Broadened access strengthens student agency and provides for philosophical coherence within the composition program: we seek not only to introduce our students to discourse practices that will democratize our society; we seek to do so within a democratized composition program.

To appreciate how much our critical writing curriculum differs from the basic, preparatory, and mechanistic conception of composition it replaces, one need only examine fragments of the philosophy statement section of the *English Composition at West Chester University: Policy Handbook for Effective Writing I and II*, last published in 1995. The passage below communicates the impression that writing is ultimately little more than the skillful manipulation of prefabricated elements:

Composition is the process of selecting, combining, arranging, and developing ideas in effective sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of discourse. The process requires writers to control many variables. Among them are the following:

- deciding on and implementing a method of development [. . .]
- modulating tone [. . .]
- determining form [. . .]
- achieving a purpose [. . .]
- adjusting writing to a particular audience

The verbs in this passage are key, creating as they do an impression of writing as a mechanical act. Ontology shapes epistemology: it's easy to see that this atomistic "Legoland" conception of writing harms students and faculty alike. It signals to the student that writing is like any mechanical activity requiring the polishing of a skill, not unlike changing a flat or fixing a meal. Within this "small picture" conception of writing, students blame themselves for not becoming good writers and non-writing facul-

ties blame the writing teachers for failing to instill in their students that which—as this approach suggests—is easy to teach and straightforward to apprehend.

In our new “big picture” configuration, Effective Writing I and II continue to offer first-year students a range of composing strategies that can be adapted to the more discipline-specific genres they will work within as they advance in their majors. Typically, although not exclusively, the first course focuses on expository genres while the second provides more experiences with argumentation, persuasion, and writing based on formal research. While these courses retain their 100-level status, their underlying content (along with that of the new 200-level courses) has been altered. These courses create conditions in which students reflect critically about rhetorical matters and practice the problem-solving strategies that experienced writers employ when they wish to report, analyze, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate information and ideas.

Regardless of level, WRT courses are all informed by critical cultural studies. This fact is underscored by our selection of “developing thoughtful responses to diversity” as one of our four general education goals. This emphasis on responding to diversity puts writing students and their teachers in a particularly strong position to interrogate issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, spirituality, and so forth, as they are negotiated across a wide range of discursive contexts. Each course provides frameworks for interpretation and dialogue that respect students’ status as culturally-defined knowers while supporting their growth as critical writers.

To complement the more broadly-defined approach to composition represented by Effective Writing I, in the new curriculum students may substitute any of the following courses in the critical writing series for Effective Writing II to fulfill the university’s six-hour general education writing sequence, or they may choose these courses as electives at any point in their undergraduate studies:

Approaches to Popular Culture (WRT 204): This course starts from the premise that popular culture confers different qualities and worth on groups in our society, and that these differences are inscribed in language. Students in this course use a variety of critical methods (textual analysis, examination of personal experience, and theoretical explanations of social meaning, such as semiotics, feminism, queer theory, Marxism, or Afrocentric criticism) to interrogate social and cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions textualized in such pop culture forms as movies, song lyrics, cartoons, advertisements, etc. Writing assignments ask students to participate in cultural production through the lens of cultural critique.

Investigating Experience (WRT205): This course invites students to explore texts that foreground contrasts in the experiences of people (including themselves) who represent diverse viewpoints and cultures. The course examines social, political, and economic influences on descriptions and uses of experience. Writing assignments ask students to pay particular attention to the ways that different topics, contexts, purposes, and audiences construct experience differently, thus influencing their own and others' thinking and writing choices.

The Multidisciplinary Imagination (WRT 206): Whether we choose to define it as *vision, creativity, inspiration, inventiveness*, or something else — imagination is credited with enabling us to rethink conventional explanations and narratives. This course examines how one's perception, value, and use of imagination is changed by such circumstances as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age. Students in this course use writing both to critique various roles that imagination plays in academic achievement and gain insight into their own use of imagination in addressing disciplinary issues.

Entering the Public Sphere (WRT 208): The “public sphere” is a metaphorical arena where competing groups engage in defining issues, values, and themes that are important to the public interest. This course investigates the theories and contexts of a variety of public discourses—and their positive and negative consequences in the lives of communities—from social, historical, disciplinary, and critical perspectives. As writers, students are asked to participate in this inscription of the public sphere in class publications and/or service-learning projects.

Special Topics (WRT 220): Although the theme will vary by instructor, this course will always attend to the ways that different topics, contexts, purposes, and audiences influence an individual's thinking and writing choices. The first topic developed for this course, “Writing in the Information Age,” focuses on analyzing and producing writing that takes into account emerging writing technologies. Other topics will be developed through ongoing dialogue with faculty from across the university and students in WRT120.

Students in critical writing courses conduct inquiry in multiple genres, learning to more accurately assess the contexts for which they must write and developing strategies to improve their writing proficiency. These courses offer students alternatives that are normally off-limits in a college composition classroom. Working with alternative discourses and knowledges also calls into question that which is more traditional, making the entire enterprise of academic literacy available for inspection.

From the standpoint of classroom pedagogy, this series is intended to act as an invitation for students to take their learning seriously. It is an effort to move critical literacy from the margins of the academy to the center of students' lives and in this way create what Patricia Bizzell describes as a "center reconceived as expanding the circumference" (41). We are also trying to broaden the circle with our colleagues in English and other departments by inviting them to act as partners in the new program through ongoing dialogue. Collectivity, rather than aggressive defense of intellectual turf, is our objective.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As we implemented the new curriculum in Fall 2002, we found ourselves continually redefining and articulating this critical cultural studies pedagogy for ourselves, students, and colleagues across campus. Recognizing these groups as distinct constituencies, albeit with overlapping interests and needs, assists us in reflecting on the effectiveness of the new curriculum for achieving the goals of critical literacy. One of our chief aims, to maintain an open democratic posture, is challenged almost on a daily basis. The following sections describe these challenges and our efforts to turn them into opportunities as we work to refine the new curriculum.

For the Compositionists, Whose Collective Action Was the Basis Of Reform

In making the pronouncement that we are "democratizing" our curriculum and committing to a critical cultural studies pedagogy, we are of course compelled to carefully examine what it means to enact democracy and critical consciousness among ourselves and within an increasingly pluralistic university community that has not always honored or celebrated its diversity. We must take great care to ensure that the theories within which we operate truly support our work, mindful of Diana George and John Trimbur's observation that the cultural studies movement, with its origins in white male heroic narratives since the 1950s and 1960s, focused largely on class identity, tending to marginalize, even omit, the impact of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and spirituality.

The growing number of students and faculty of color in our program, for instance, has made it imperative that the structure of our curriculum, the substance of individual courses, and the agenda of our faculty development initiatives all push against the institution's white male hierarchical biases.

For Writing Students, Whose Need to Be Addressed as Full-Fledged Intellectuals and Citizens Is the Main Motivation behind the New Curriculum

Our curriculum is based on choices for students and for faculty; however, students, especially, may be unused to having such choices. What's more, they may have grown apathetic in the face of an alienating education. Ira Shor remarks that students act out the internalization of that alienation by moving to "Siberia" (the back of the room) physically and/or mentally. Shor cautions us to not see student withdrawal as "mere passivity," but to recognize that it is a "complex way to construct oneself socially in relation to authority" (25). Apathy thus can be understood as an active form of resistance. On the first day of the semester, our classrooms are already overwritten with the discourse of an alienating education to which the students have developed responses.

One possible way to address this apathy is to convince students that the choices our courses present are genuine and that their decisions regarding them will be consequential to their lives. Shor calls this negotiation "power sharing," which involves breaking the expected routines of the classroom (23). In our case, it also involves enfranchising students in the university by encouraging them to raise their voices in shaping the curriculum.

Given the constraints of their previous educational experiences, students may approach this partnership with suspicion. As Berlin notes, "those of us who have experienced the dialogic classroom know how reluctant many students are to engage in public debate. Their years of enduring the banking model of education, the model of teacher as giver of knowledge and student as passive receiver, have taken their toll" (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 102). We need to be prepared to coax, encourage, convince, cajole, and even push the students into taking more active roles.

For Faculty Teaching the Curriculum, Whose Labor and Commitment Are Essential to Its Success

Not unlike the students, many faculty are apathetic toward composition instruction. They, too, have been alienated by a functionalist curriculum that mandates instruction in classical forms and practice in surface correctness. Burdened by this routine, faculty have come to believe that there

is no intellectual spark in a general education writing classroom. Matters are further complicated by the fact that some have developed institutional identities that are hinged to a knowledge hierarchy, where consuming texts is the far better activity than producing them. Apathy, conservative pedagogies, and intellectual elitism make it difficult to enact our vision.

The curriculum is designed, however, to begin to address these long-standing difficulties by shifting the ground upon which some of these attitudes are based. Most obviously, by moving away from the generic construction of general education writing to a slate of courses with interesting topics, we generated attractive teaching options. Not long after the new courses were announced, non-composition faculty began inquiring about when the courses would be available to teach.

There is, however, a lot of room for misinterpretation of the courses, especially with a large faculty (our department numbers fifty tenure-track members and about twelve temporary members) trained mostly in literary areas. Our non-composition tenure-track faculty are more knowledgeable about theories that inform composition (from semiotics, rhetoric, poststructuralism, discourse studies, and so forth). Still, they seem largely unaware of how those theories translate into composition pedagogy. Rather than building their composition courses around writing generated by their students, these faculty typically focus on the appreciation of texts by professional writers. These conditions place a tremendous burden on faculty development to maintain coherence in core themes across multiple sections and to help the department develop a shared discourse and understanding of the new courses. These workshops can generate useful discussions about composition theory and pedagogy, as well as generate new ideas for ongoing curriculum revision.

For the Larger Campus Community, Whose Support for the New Curriculum Was a Vital Part of Its Successful Development

As we have described, an uninformed response to composition prevailed at one time across campus and underwrote proposals for general education reform. We recognized that we needed interdisciplinary partners, rather than adversaries, in the reform process if we were to effect democratic change. We extended our own internal collaborative approach to the campus community by inviting representatives from each program and school to attend meetings to discuss the new curriculum in draft form and to provide input on their students' needs as writers. This process smoothed the way for passage before the university curriculum committee.

We designed WRT 220, “Critical Writing: Special Topics,” to function as an on-going invitation for faculty from any discipline to participate in the development of new composition courses. English department faculty who are interested in teaching a special topics course are charged with the responsibility of initiating a dialogue with colleagues in other disciplines about that topic, looking for suggestions of issues or debates, readings, writing assignments, and approaches to the topic. This component provides the composition and rhetoric faculty with an opportunity to keep the dialogue (and the education) about our discipline going, both disrupting the reflex toward disciplinary territorialism and creating the potential for substantive dialogue about the teaching of writing.

A FINAL THOUGHT ON ENACTING THE DEMOCRATIC VISION OF THE CRITICAL WRITING CURRICULUM

Our autobiography is really an auto-ethnography in the sense that Mary Louise Pratt describes as a “contact zone: “ a space in which competing, conflicting forces —represented here by students, our colleagues in English and other disciplines, the university administration, and outside agencies —vie for influence over the writing curriculum. The text we have written to transform the ideological conditions of writing instruction at our university is itself a record of these conflicts. This is a lesson worth carrying away: that writing program revision is not about fixing problems any more than writing instruction is about fixing mistakes. It is about incremental progress, in sometimes planned and sometimes unexpected ways. In other words, it is a continuation of the journey.

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