

## **Revisiting College Composition within a Local “Culture of Writing”**

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For the past four years at Miami, we have been engaged in the process of rethinking and redesigning our first-year writing curriculum. As a testament to the important and complicated role writing plays across the university, we worked in response to both external and internal pressures to collaborate among our whole faculty—literature, creative writing, and composition/rhetoric teachers alike. Through these years of review, assessment, collaboration, piloting, testing and revising, we have struggled with different kinds of assumptions about what the courses should and should not be or do. We have conducted extensive focus groups to assess what our constituencies and stakeholders inside and outside the department consider essential. And we have performed several elaborate pilot projects to test the viability of the master syllabi designed by teams representing various instructor ranks and specialties.

Midway through our attempts to collect campus data, redesign curricula, and please everyone from the university president to the parents of our first-year students, we engaged David Bartholomae and Andrea Lunsford as consultants to review our focus group summaries and come to campus for discussions with the department. In response to our focus group data, Bartholomae suggested that the “culture of writing” on our campus was problematic, perhaps even absent (“Report to Miami”). His recommendation that we should define and develop a campus-wide culture of writing became a particularly helpful mantra for us all as we struggled to keep our collective minds on a common goal. We also found it to be a particularly useful metaphor to guide our thinking. Even though we were finding out quite explicitly just how different the various stakeholders’ notions might be

about what constitutes “good writing,” and what we as a department and the university as a whole thought the composition program should provide by way of writing instruction, we could all agree to pursue the building and enriching of a culture of writing both within the department of English and across the entire university. One example of the usefulness of Bartholomae’s term surfaced when we addressed Andrea Lunsford’s recommendation that we develop a writing center that would differ substantially from our learning assistance center, which offers tutorial services for students encountering writing difficulties in their classes. While this idea had received mixed support in the department for years, we found our goals somewhat simpler to articulate once we associated a center with building a culture of writing across campus and emphasized faculty development in our requests for support. Of course, “culture of writing” also became something of a wry inside joke in the English department itself, where our struggle with first-year writing brought us at various times to dissent among ourselves, common indignation with outsiders, clear commitment to collaborative program-building, and exasperation at the amount of time and energy this effort asked of us.

This article attempts to give voice to some of the processes and the personal stories that emerged throughout the course of this multi-year project. Certainly others can say “been there, done that”: our story is one that many readers will recognize. Yet we hope to offer certain insights about how teachers learn to teach and how English departments negotiate the choppy and contested waters of defining ourselves to ourselves, as well as to others. We intend to highlight some of our most important struggles, give examples of valuable curricular ideas, and describe both the positive and negative outcomes of this complex endeavor. We also want to highlight the multiple perspectives of our design and implementation process, in the hope that we may have learned things worth sharing.

### **THE LAY OF THE LAND: SOME HISTORY AND CONTEXT FOR A JOURNEY OF RE-VISION**

It’s a familiar story: discontented faculty, campus criticism (especially from the then-new president), internal self-doubt, lack of confidence in our results, inconsistency across sections, new instructors learning to teach on the fly, conflicts over ownership of writing on campus, political questions about expertise and shared responsibility for student writing, conflicting views about the actual needs and competencies of our students, demands to teach standard edited American academic English, and hopes to encourage student voices and autonomy in student writing both inside and beyond the classroom. Some people called it a PR problem, others said we were too

faddish, while one quoted us terrible student prose that had appeared in the campus newspaper. Many wondered why we didn't seem to be teaching "writing" anymore (and when pressed, defined that term in a myriad of inconsistent ways). The issues were not unique or new. But the clamor would not be quieted easily this time. Bartholomae's and Lunsford's reports resonated with our situation and we took it quite seriously. We had to answer some initial and obvious questions for ourselves. What is/constitutes our campus writing culture? How can we invent/exploit/improve such a culture? Can or should curricular development influence the writing climate? Who should be responsible for envisioning, creating, and developing Miami's writing culture? We tried to address as much of this as we could by incorporating the concerns of various stakeholders across campus and by attending closely to the most powerful scholarship in our own field.

Now, several years since we received our initial focus-group input (from faculty outside the department as well as English faculty, graduate and undergraduate students), we have piloted several versions of the ENG 111 and ENG 112 curricula and have adopted revised syllabi for both, incorporating some modest connection between the two courses. We have received internal funding for an emerging writing center that focuses exclusively on university-wide faculty development projects on using writing in content area courses. We believe some of these big ideas are beginning to work, though we are less sure about others.

The contributing authors to this article represent several of the constituencies that we knew must be involved in this project from its inception. They represent views from some of our most important internal stakeholders: both developers and instructors of the reinvented composition curriculum, the two composition directors who convened the steering committees, and individuals who come from several ranks and specialties in the department. Alphabetically, by first name they are:

DIANA—Director of College Composition for later stages of the process

JENNIE—Director of College Composition in early stages; two-time pilot instructor; current Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences

MARY JEAN—Director of Graduate Studies; member of the ENG 112 design team; pilot instructor

MEREDITH—Graduate student; two-time pilot instructor; ENG 112 pilot revision team member; ENG 111 revision team member

MOIRA—Graduate student; two-time pilot instructor

PARAG—Graduate student; Assistant Director of College Composition in early stages; member of the ENG 111 design team

RHODA—Graduate student; three-time pilot instructor

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? THEORY, ASSUMPTIONS, TRADITIONS

In English studies, we have experience struggling to devise curricula that honor the role first-year writing courses play both in the field of composition and in the university. But members of the field have rarely agreed on the ideal focus for a curriculum. Should a composition course focus on forms—as in the modes of discourse, or specific genres invented for the course; or should it emphasize traditional literary genres—the memoir, the personal narrative, the academic essay? Should a composition course emphasize purposes—an author's aims, an audience's needs, persuasive occasions; or should it reflect our heritage in literary scholarship—interpreting texts as models and examples? Should it build on students' personal experience, or highlight personal and social conflicts to inspire student-centered assignments? Since many of these approaches have proven useful to both instructors and students, and no one ideal focus seems to work for everyone, our department, like our field, tends toward eclectic methods that juxtapose the theoretical, the practical, and the experiential.

Miami's experiments with "process models," portfolios, sentence combining, multiculturalism, and feminist models of teaching have been visible in national discussions (even prominent at times) thanks to the work of Miami faculty such as Don Daiker and Max Morenberg on sentence combining (1985), Susan Jarratt on multicultural classrooms (1994) and feminist pedagogies (1998), Kate Ronald on reasoned inquiry and romanticism (1998), and Paul Anderson on audience-centered communication (1987). We also have long experience with the Ohio Writing Project, an early portfolio evaluation project for admitted students, and fifty years of publishing *College Composition at Miami* as a classroom supplement for all composition courses. Given the variety of backgrounds represented here and the strong opinions and experiences of our faculty, our composition group has consistently avoided doctrinaire approaches to composition in favor of experimentation, teacherly autonomy, and tolerance of widely divergent approaches. Use of a teachers' guide containing course goals, skeletal syllabi, and suggested assignments rather than rigorously controlled daily lesson plans has offered us the ability to combine flexibility with consistency. However, the teachers' guide system depends on adequate supervision and guidance for

new instructors as well as good faith on the part of experienced ones. We also maintain a relatively conservative program structure focused on a two-course sequence: “College Composition” (ENG 111) followed by “Composition and Literature” (ENG 112). Scheduling these courses in the fall and spring consecutively creates a two-semester track for most students.

Since writing for Miami students after the first year consists of courses in journalism, creative writing, and technical communication, our advanced writing instruction is built on particular specialty areas. This specialization has been a mixed blessing for us: we’ve claimed enough expertise to control the primary writing instruction site for all students, but we’re also held accountable for writing all over campus—a status that makes us easy targets for criticism when students write carelessly in courses outside English and complain to their instructors that writing belongs in English, not in a history or geology class. Both the department and the campus have been cautious about embracing upper-division writing requirements or WAC initiatives; our specialist ethos and our concerns about difficulties we’ve observed in curriculum-based WAC projects elsewhere have kept that option at arm’s length. The writing center idea is also late coming to Miami, thanks to the location of most developmental writing courses on our regional campuses and the excellent work with student writers by our modest academic skills center on the Oxford campus. So Miami’s internal writing culture, with its traditional form and its specialist atmosphere, was ripe for internal criticism, and Bartholomae’s and Lunsford’s assessments of our focus group data from across the three campuses were generally accurate.

The motivating goal for our curriculum revision was to revitalize the place of writing in the university, not only because writing is central to the learning practices in all disciplines, but also because we wanted to emphasize the need for more attention to writing outside the composition program and the English department itself. Thus our campus discussions examined the role first-year composition plays in the academic development of individual students across the university community. As we began this journey, the question for us, implicitly and explicitly, emerged: how could we create a larger, more inclusive sense of the importance of writing instruction and the need for university-wide involvement in students’ growth as writers? We certainly wanted to create buy-in for the revised curriculum from as many people as we could, so in addition to extensive polling of the perceptions and needs of internal and external faculty, writing instructors, and students, we consciously designed broad departmental representation into the organizing committee and the curriculum development teams. The “Ad Hoc Committee on Composition” that took on these tasks included people from different ranks and specialties: part-time instructors; graduate students and faculty; literature, creative writing, and composition/rhetoric

specialists. The curriculum design teams had similarly broad representation, even though they were much smaller for efficiency and convenience. Each of these groups would then be involved in the revision process from day one, and we hoped that this strategy of inclusion, besides helping to assure that all voices were heard and that the dialogue would be as rich as possible, would encourage wide commitment to the project.

## DEVELOPING PILOTS: RECURSIVITY AND COLLABORATION

During the development of the various courses we piloted during this period, in addition to maintaining the vision of building a “culture of writing” across the university, we learned to value the collaborative nature of meaning making that emerged directly from the process itself. For instance, we quickly saw that in addition to the process elements that we wanted to design into the class, we should rely upon the idea of recursivity within course design. In much the same way, we ourselves were working recursively with course content and the input of the multiple voices that we had included in our redesign conversations. As part of practicing the meaning-making that we were implementing into courses and that we were asking students to adopt as a transportable writing strategy, we also solicited students’ input about the pilot. One year, more formal surveys were completed by students of all sections of ENG 112, but individual instructors also invited student feedback and commentary, sometimes during the semester and often at the end of the course. In the following sections, we’ll highlight some of the most important recursive, call-and-response, revision-oriented moments.

Not surprisingly, faculty members outside English were concerned about how well the first-year writing courses prepared students to write in their courses. They reported student problems with syntax, clarity, succinctness, paragraphing, and the accurate restatement of arguments in reading material. Concerned with more than mere correctness, faculty from across the campus seemed to understand competence in academic argument as a primary goal as well. Learning the conventions of academic writing and of standard academic English was expected to serve students in any discipline or writing situation, and therefore should comprise the pedagogical goals of first-year writing instructors. University faculty members generally agreed that writing instruction should continue past the first-year sequence, and that first-year composition should be seen as the beginning of that four-year process. But they also tended to expect that once students received the proper instruction in the basics, they should easily assume the writing roles they were asked to perform in other courses and disciplines. Thus the external focus groups seemed to expect a high degree of transferability from writing classes to the other disciplines.

Working to integrate the concerns of these faculty, we strongly agreed that writing instruction should not end with the first-year courses; however, we also recognized that writing entails much more than basic mechanics and that syntax, clarity, and grammar cannot be separated from purpose, audience, and context. Scholarship in the field shows that writing is always situated and variable, more complicated than a study of mechanics and academic forms alone can effectively address. But we also knew that the input from faculty across the campus needed to be taken quite seriously. We certainly also believed that the first-year writing sequence does have the responsibility to help students understand the transferability of writing strategies into various disciplines and situations. In this sense, we agreed that writing instruction serves not only the rest of the university, but also the writing lives of students well beyond the university.

Our focus groups with English faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students revealed more specifically that we needed to build a stronger bridge, not only from first-year writing to students' subsequent writing responsibilities, but also among the varied writing tasks they were assigned across the sections of the composition courses. One of our clear imperatives from the focus groups was to work toward creating greater continuity of content and approach across sections, with particular attention to concerns expressed in some quarters about the styles, strategies, and skills of relatively inexperienced teachers. Everyone understood that graduate-student instructors were not only an important internal audience for our work of curricular revision, but also those most likely to be directly affected in their teaching practices by our deliberations (and, in the worst-case scenario, to be scapegoated both within and beyond the department for not teaching Jennifer and Johnny how to write in two semesters). At Miami, new GAs (masters' students in composition/rhetoric, creative writing, and literature) and TAs (doctoral students in composition/rhetoric and literature) are required to teach the standard syllabus for both courses in the sequence; beyond that first-year group, more seasoned graduate-student instructors have traditionally had greater latitude in determining how and what they teach. Tenure-line faculty members are free—too free, some believe—to teach what and as they choose. Thus, persuading graduate students beyond the first year and full-time faculty to sign on to whatever new courses we designed was crucial in building consensus for change across the department. As we redesigned ENG 111, mindful of the outside consultants' reports, we felt we needed a set of core principles and goals that all teachers would work within, though some of us also wanted teachers to retain the freedom to individualize the course with their own readings and assignments.

For the development of ENG 111 during the first pilot semester, the issue of transferability was handled by adopting the language of argument and emphasizing issues of audience. Although it was acknowledged that all disciplines have different kinds of argumentation practices, it is also true that a single discipline or school of thought will use various argumentative strategies. The first ENG 111 pilot design team (along with Parag, its members were Tim Melley, Pegeen Reichert Powell, and Kate Ronald) thus developed a syllabus in which students would practice various forms of argumentation using writing sequences as described by Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986). While placing student writing as the central component of the course's work, this pilot group was also concerned that students encounter complex and challenging ideas in their first semester. As a vehicle for introducing such ideas, the group chose a variety of perspectives on education for the supplementary reading and court decisions on the Ohio school funding debates to stimulate student engagement in a public issue. The "course overview" for the new ENG 111 pilot read: "English 111 teaches students to write as a means of critical inquiry. It stresses the centrality of writing to intellectual life and encourages students to see writing as a powerful tool for civic action." In later years, in response to various committee work and feedback from advisors and stakeholders, we thought long and hard about using "topics" or "themes" (or "genres" or "forms" or "argument"). Yet regardless of the principle around which we organized the courses, vital to our decisions would be keeping students' interest by including them in decisions about the where-why-what of their writing; ensuring that the texts they analyzed would be compelling and rich; and providing them with the transferable strategies that would be most valuable to their academic, personal, and civic lives.

The ENG 111 curriculum design generated a good deal of discussion in the department, yet this phase of the project was achieved in a single calendar year. Beginning in the summer of 1999, the design team created a sample syllabus that was piloted the subsequent fall. About twelve of us taught that first ENG 111 pilot, and we split into two groups that met as regularly as possible throughout the semester, usually every other week. The pilot groups included members of the literature and composition/rhetoric faculty and graduate students in literature and composition/rhetoric, as well as a recent graduate of our creative writing masters' program who was working in a temporary faculty position. The pilot syllabus was revised in the spring of 2000 in response to teacher and student feedback, then presented to the department in the late spring, when it was adopted as the official ENG 111 curriculum that all instructional staff were *strongly encouraged* to use. This language was specifically addressed to faculty and to experienced graduate students who often departed from the standard syllabus as soon as they left

their first-year mentoring sessions. New instructional staff would use the teachers' guide as part of the four-credit mentoring sequence required of all new graduate instructors in their first year. The course was also presented to the chairs of the college of arts and science, the president and provost, and members of the focus groups. Its focus on argument, close reading, and sequenced writing assignments received general praise from these groups.

The course presumes . . . that the best way to become more adept at writing is to write frequently. Students will write almost daily and will revise their writings throughout the semester. They should also be prepared to share their writing with others, because student writing is itself a vital "course text" in this class, one that will be analyzed and critiqued like other course readings. Above all, English 111 aims to cultivate a critical habit of mind through writing, asking students to devise and pursue meaningful questions and to position themselves in relation to important philosophical and social debates. ("ENG 111 Pilot Guide")

As the discussion below will show, the second- semester course, "Composition and Literature" was a much more contested space than was the first-semester course.

### **NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN: DEFINING A TWO-SEMESTER WRITING PROGRAM**

The ENG 112 design team started out with a variety of imperatives, inherited from the committee deliberations of the year before, the information we'd gathered from the focus groups, and most importantly, the shape of the new ENG 111 syllabus. In trying to articulate ENG 111-112 as a two-course sequence with significant features in common, the design team for ENG 112 (along with Mary Jean, it included Susan Jarratt, Pegeen Reichert Powell, and Melisa Summy) decided to repeat some of the central principles in both courses: emphasizing student writing as the site of meaning-making; presenting writing as a recursive process by way of sequenced assignments and revision; redefining research as a negotiation between self and others; and promoting student awareness of audience as a key factor in the varied rhetorical situations of academic and public writing. All these elements of the ENG 111 pilot made their way into our first version of the new ENG 112 with a minimum of fuss. Questions about the place of literary texts were more complicated, however.

Redesigning ENG 112 to put student writing at the center of the course meant we had to reposition reading in some way. The design team needed terms that would honor ENG 112's grounding in the expertise and interests

of literature specialists and its longstanding emphasis on critical reading and textual analysis. But the course also needed the means to emphasize the particular elements of literary and rhetorical study we perceived as transferable for reading and writing across the disciplines. Thus the design team's first problem could be loosely termed an issue of translation. We settled on narrative, point of view, figure, and dialogue—derived from but not limited to elements of fiction, poetry, and drama—as the reading and writing practices that organized the four units of the course. We intended the units to be interchangeable, teachable in any order depending on a given teacher's interests and pedagogical sense. In the words used at the time, "all of these rhetorical structures can be understood as elements of the central modes of written communication within the academy": our effort here, as elsewhere, was to create a new organization for the course that would be internally persuasive to its teachers, yet readable externally as meeting university-wide needs.

A second problem, related to determining a unifying structure for these courses, centered on establishing a degree of consistency across sections. There was strong sentiment within the department that adopting a single theme or topic for ENG 112 would not help us to achieve our goal of inducing a broader range of faculty to teach from the standard syllabus, and that prescribing texts that all new graduate-student instructors had to teach would be similarly unpopular. (These sentiments were restated on an instructor survey distributed to all faculty and graduate students in fall 2001, a survey designed to help the ENG 112 subcommittee prepare a standard syllabus for full departmental review in spring 2002.) Thus instead of creating a standard syllabus, we devised a template for each unit of the course. Writing and reading assignments for each unit would be adapted to particular texts chosen by instructors so as to enable the teaching of the rhetorical structures highlighted in each template of the syllabus. Imagining that, once adopted, the syllabus would lend itself to a wide variety of literary and cultural texts, we collated a set of common readings to provide an intellectual core across sections, composed primarily of short theoretical texts on narratology and figurative language.

At the same time, and with an eye to meeting the needs of the ENG 112 first pilot group in the subsequent semester, we also created what we called "an enacted track," a fully articulated syllabus that included particular reading and writing assignments keyed to the specific texts chosen for use in the first pilot. The design team chose Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, a long, complex, but engaging work of fiction that we hoped would captivate the imaginations of first-year students; *Eve*, a volume of poems by our colleague, Annie Finch; and Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, an ambitious play that promised to model intertextuality even as it required careful his-

torical and intellectual contextualization for and by students and instructors alike. The dozen or so faculty and graduate students who piloted the course in the spring of 2000 and the students we surveyed from their sections provided feedback that we used to revise the pilot in the fall of 2000. For the second ENG 112 pilot, we also invited faculty and graduate-student “clusters” to enact tracks of their own, banding together in groups of four or five, each group choosing its own texts and collaborating on implementing the revised pilot. In what follows, we’d like to outline some of the challenges we faced as faculty and graduate students when teaching the enacted track and how we, in turn, revised this pilot after its first outing, as another example of the kind of recursive “composing” work which characterized this re-visioning process.

### THE THICK OF THINGS: TEACHING AND REVISING THE PILOTS

Teaching ENG 112 presents a challenge even without adding the significant variable of a new curriculum. The specter of ENG 111 inevitably intrudes into the second-semester classroom because many first-year students react with bewilderment, frustration, and occasionally resentment when their ENG 112 instructor has a different pedagogical style and set of expectations. Teaching an untested curriculum made this potentially disconcerting experience even more so, especially for new instructors.

**RHODA:** When I volunteered for the first version of the ENG 112 pilot, I was relatively new to teaching, to the role of TA, and to the challenges of a required second-semester composition course. For me, piloting the “new and improved” version of ENG 112 was intimidating and often discouraging. Aware from the beginning that they were in a pilot section, students resisted in various ways. As one student noted, apologizing for the entire class in her final writer’s memo, people felt justified in complaining because of the experimental nature of the curriculum. The fact that I was “learning” the course with the students affected my already shaky confidence, in spite of the invaluable camaraderie and support of the pilot group. Yet I discovered that my “trial by fire,” so to speak, left me with a surprisingly strong commitment to the curriculum. I went on to teach two more pilot versions of ENG 112; new groups of students came and went with only a vague awareness that both the course and my teaching of it were continually evolving. Finally, during the third year of the pilot, I felt, with a certain excitement, that both the students and I were finally “getting it.”

As this and similar testimonies reflect, the new ENG 112 posed considerable intellectual challenges to students and teachers alike.

For example, one of the main goals of the ENG 112 course design was to apply what are typically regarded as “literary” elements—narrative, point of view, figure, and dialogue—to various kinds of texts beyond the discipline of English, as well as to students’ own writing. Pushing those traditional boundaries meant asking students to take on ways of thinking, analyzing, and writing that were unfamiliar to them.

**MOIRA:** This was complicated business for first-year students, and yet students, in my view, seemed up to the challenge. As Ann Berthoff [1981] writes, we should not expect some sort of linear progression from the simple to the complex in terms of learning, but rather we must dive into the deep end with students: real learning happens within complexity and the cognitive dissonance that always accompanies such complexity.

Classes were to spend the first seven weeks of the course reading and analyzing a “long, difficult text.” In the first four weeks, students explored how narrative was constructed and how this construction influenced interpretation. After completing several writing assignments focused on narrative, the class then continued reading the novel, looking now at the various points of view represented within the novel. However, as we taught *Alias Grace*, students seemed to find point of view and narrative so interconnected and interdependent that the formal separation laid out by the curriculum proved impossible to maintain. As students encountered multiple perspectives and genres even within the first fifty pages of the novel, we began to examine and talk about the various points of view immediately as the narrative unfolded. When it came time to revise the course, we removed the point of view sequence altogether, the most drastic of our many revisions, and we collapsed the theory and activities for the two units into one new composite sequence which we titled simply “Narrative.”

Overall, many of us found that the writing tasks described in the test curriculum (frequent short papers intended as warm-ups for the major papers) were opaque, as far as students’ understanding of them was concerned. As a pilot group we vented over the wording of some of the assignments and the choice of some texts, especially *Arcadia*. And other instructors were dissatisfied with the sequence on figure, claiming that they would never teach “five whole weeks on only metaphor again” and citing a variety of problems: the apparent irrelevance of the material to students started the course off on the wrong foot; students were bored with talking about metaphor alone; students could never quite “get” what a metaphor actually was. One instructor in a pilot cluster reported that, even at the end of the sequence, students would either “pull figures out of thin air without provid-

ing any basis in any text at all” or stretch the definition of metaphor out of all discernible shape (“when the author writes ‘at present’ he is speaking of time, not of a present like one you would open on a birthday”). Some students seemed completely unable to discern metaphors, as another instructor reported at the end of January: “My students are really struggling with the concepts of the course so far—they were unable to identify the figures in “Young Goodman Brown,” for example, and . . . they’re still listing ‘adultery’ and ‘lust’ as figures.” The sophistication and level of thought required to get it right seemed prohibitive to many students.

Other instructors persevered in their efforts to make figure matter to the course, especially when using figure to talk about writing and the political or power issues inherent in the act of writing. To think about writing as an act of “meaning making” was to engage in the powerful work of creating (writing) and interpreting (reading) not merely the style and dress of language, but language as it functions to make manifest “figures of thought.” At least one pilot instructor found the most powerful discussions of the semester centered on “figures of thought,” because these discussions necessarily combined the work of close reading with considerations of the power of language to shape reality.

**MOIRA:** At the same time that I completely empathized and even sympathized with the pedagogical struggle others were reporting about the “metaphors” unit, I was more concerned with the problem as just that, a pedagogical challenge, and not, certainly, a question of dropping the unit altogether. In the course of the pilot, I became more and more convinced, in fact, that if “figures of thought” was a, if not the, central concept in language formation and knowledge production, then this powerful idea should be teachable as the basis for second-semester composition.

Her class returned again and again in group discussions to meta-analysis of the work they were doing as students of language-as-thought, language as powerful meaning-making device, and—because reality as “figure” is necessarily constantly under construction and under scrutiny when we write—to writing as itself a learning process, a mode of inquiry.

Such student and instructor perspectives as these, anecdotal and written, proved crucial to revisions of the pilot. As a very specific example of how revision teams responded to student input, we remember that one set of answers really stood out when we read the ENG 112 surveys after the 2000 pilot year. The pilot document had specified that the “rhetorical forms” included by the design team were selected to help students “explore the ways those genres . . . organize writing and thinking across the range of intellectual subjects” and that such “language structures” and reading

practices should be transferable across the disciplines. But when we asked students if the rhetorical forms we had concentrated on that semester were useful in their other courses at Miami, an overwhelming majority claimed that these concepts were not helpful in other classes, and at least one student claimed that they were “not useful in real life.”

We took this student input seriously, though we also had to consider that the negative reaction to the figure/metaphor unit was more a function of our inexperience teaching from this perspective than it was about the actual subject matter or content. Perhaps in anticipation of students’ responses to the issue of “rhetorical forms” and transferability, the design team had included some very specific assignments for the unit that stressed interdisciplinarity and relevance by asking students to explore texts in other disciplines, in the media, within their own social, familial, religious communities, or anywhere else in the “real world.” The sequence also suggested that students research the dominant figures in the field they had chosen as a major field of study. Perhaps in our enthusiasm to move through the course, however, or as a result of our own familiarity with literary texts, some of us sacrificed the assignments dealing with the discovery and analysis of these forms outside of literary studies, inadvertently focusing more on “figure” as an issue of style than on figure as a central and necessary aspect of all meaning-making. While some pilot instructors considered dropping the figure unit, others continued to experiment with ways to teach it more effectively. One instructor restructured the pilot to make the figure sequence the foundation of her course; another mixed poetry with larger doses of popular cultural texts, as well as some examples of disciplinary writing.

Given the students’ response that they were not finding the rhetorical forms useful in their other studies, however, we made two major revisions: we reduced the amount of poetry and included revised assignments in the narrative and dialogue units. In the narrative sequence we added a short paper assignment for which instructors would bring in various accounts of the same event from different sources and perspectives. In the dialogue unit we emphasized a short writing assignment asking students to write about how their readings or discussions in other classes “spoke” to one another.

**MEREDITH:** I attempted to demonstrate the notion of intertextuality by examining sometimes-invisible conversation between disciplines. I did this by bringing in a flyer that I found on campus advertising an “Ex-Gay Speaker” sponsored by a Christian organization on campus. I asked students to look at the flyer and to think about how many different “disciplines” were involved when thinking about this issue, that is, how many different subject areas in the academy could be involved in such a discussion. We talked about how those

in the fields of psychology and biology might approach this issue, and we discussed the spiritual, religious, and political points of view. As we talked I made these connections on the classroom's dry erase board to create a web of ideas, and students seemed to begin to see how ideas from supposedly "separate" fields influence and "talk" to one another.

In addition, some instructors realized that assignments designed for other sequences would also speak either directly or indirectly to issues in "metaphor" or "figure."

### LIVING THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF MEANING MAKING: TEACHING IN CLUSTERS

One important pedagogical advantage grew out of the multiple pilots of ENG 112. Since the design of this course did not emphasize a central theme for all sections, smaller clusters of instructors using a common set of texts were imagined by the design team as a way to introduce some continuity across sections without mandating a common theme, as in ENG 111. The clusters became a place where teacher conversation and shared work seemed to flourish much more effectively than it did in our floundering graduate-student mentoring system.

**MARY JEAN:** Our pilot groups directly influenced the emergence of the concept of "clusters," in which faculty, graduate students, and temporary faculty work together on a version of ENG 112 in four- or five-person modules. In practice, the cluster meets three pressing needs: it enables teachers, whatever their institutional position, to sign on to a common project, while still extending them some autonomy and flexibility in terms of what and how they teach; it requires new teachers to work together on course design in the second semester of their first year, thus providing additional support for relatively new instructors; and it also extends teacher-training beyond the program for new GAs and TAs by teaming faculty with more advanced graduate students in ongoing partnerships.

Not only did the pilot groups demonstrate how a community of "piloteers" could consist of a better mix of graduate students and faculty, but the clusters provided a "natural" site where teachers of varying levels of experience and from various backgrounds and campuses could carry on significant conversations about pedagogy.

For some instructors, teaching the ENG 112 pilot the second time was pivotal. The freedom of each cluster to choose its own set of texts seemed like a natural progression from the across-the-board mandated texts of the previous year, and the more independent nature of the clusters allowed for various adaptations of the basic course concepts.

**MEREDITH:** By 2001, ENG 112 was designed around “templates,” skeletal schedules laying out the theoretical underpinnings of the sequences. In the spring semester, the department suggested that the course be piloted again. This time instructors were invited to take the templates of the course and experiment with different texts. Instructors formed three “teaching clusters,” groups who were teaching the pilot with the same texts. For example, one group chose to use Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* for the narrative unit, Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles* in the dialogue unit, and used only found metaphors and theoretical readings on figure for the metaphor unit. Another group decided to use *Alias Grace* again, *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill (which was also performed at Miami that semester), and short stories and selected poems for the figure unit.

This new flexibility also provided concrete examples that helped us to address recurring questions about the desirability of department-wide consistency, instructor autonomy, and various positions between these two poles. Since some instructors now working in “clusters” had taught the previous version of the course, they had a better idea of what kinds of texts might be most effective, and also had the “enacted track” of the initial pilot to compare with this new, less text-specific one.

Naturally, there were problems with scheduling that forced the “cluster” groups to meet separately sometimes and to rely on email to a great extent, whereas the first year they met more often face-to-face and in a complete group.

**MOIRA:** In the Spring of 2001, when I taught the course, the cluster I joined did begin with the figure sequence, but neither placing figure first nor the content of the sequence itself was roundly embraced by teachers or students. Much of the activity on the listserv we established during the month of January . . . was taken up with the challenges of teaching metaphor as a sequence. We discussed which poetry to use, how to transport the meaning of metaphor from poetry to other texts, resources for work on metaphors in the disciplines, creating handouts to help students understand the language of comparison, and how metaphor might lead to and fit into the

next sequence (dialogue). We worked productively in these discussions: Rhoda found a very helpful Website; Jennie made connections between metaphor and dialogue, as both can be understood as conversation and as “connections among ideas” or interdisciplinarity; Christy Karnes thought picking out figurative language from a popular television series helped her students attach to the ideas; Meredith and I put together a handout of student-created metaphors about writing.

In this way, listservs turned out to provide a valuable and convenient means of communication (and a record for purposes of research at the end of the pilot period), but the nature of that interaction didn’t entirely replace or fulfill the same function of the more relaxed and free-flowing give-and-take of in-person conversations. However, as a source for the teachers’ guide, and a reference for teachers looking back at our own efforts, the listserv archives have been a valuable contribution to our collective teaching memory.

One further disappointment was that contact between the various cluster groups was minimal. While that interaction was perhaps not as crucial to the project in the view of the designers and developers, individual instructors would have undoubtedly benefited from conversations with people in other clusters who were experimenting with different texts, classroom activities, and assignment options. For clusters without listserv archives, much of that experience is likely to be lost. Nevertheless, the instructors who were teaching in conjunction with other teachers, especially those who had taught the pilot under more solitary conditions, reported growing commitment to the pilot itself, and real curiosity about how it was working itself out in its other incarnations.

Some of us believe that the cluster concept is the most important contribution of the ENG 112 pilot sequence. At last the isolation of teaching content no one else is working with could be broken without the total loss of individual choice. The collaborative atmosphere gave individual instructors a space to criticize the emerging design intelligently.

**RHODA:** Teaching in clusters made a potentially intimidating solo venture into a collaborative community experience. The “piloteers,” as we dubbed ourselves, met biweekly in person and much more frequently on our listserv. As we wrote our episode in this narrative of curricular change, we shared frustrations along with resources and sample assignments, moving back and forth from discussing the challenges of an upcoming sequence to assessing the outcomes of the one just completed. Still, to represent ourselves as an ideal community of collaborators would be to idealize an often-episodic history as a seamless narrative. While pooled ideas and resources were

invaluable, not every idea worked for every person who tried it, however promising it had sounded. As a graduate student, I learned that even seasoned writing instructors had trouble translating a pilot syllabus assignment into a workable and effective classroom experience. And I also discovered that my tentatively offered ideas and resources were warmly welcomed, diminishing any uncertainties I had about being a full colleague in the collective.

Even if nothing else had changed from all this activity in our department, we believe the emergence of cluster teaching alone would still be well worth the significant effort and energy we expended.

### **STILL TRAVELING: MULTIPLE PILOTS, MULTIPLE STRATEGIES**

After two rounds of piloting a new ENG 112 syllabus, in response to pressure from upper administration, the department chair charged the new director of composition with putting a finalized version of the new syllabus in place by the end of the academic year. The administration, again, wanted to see more uniformity across sections of the course; primarily, they were tired of complaints from parents about particular texts students were being asked to read and wanted the range of text choices for instructors to be reduced.

In Fall 2001, the ENG 112 subcommittee developed a survey for instructors in order to garner information on the perceptions of what the course is and should be. Responses to the questions “What is your conceptualization of ENG 112 (regardless of whether you have taught it)?” and “What should we be doing in it, and why?” ranged widely. Some viewed it as an introduction to literature course, a misguided perception that was also held by many of that year’s new graduate instructors and therefore caused frustration when they were told otherwise. Others felt it should address equally the acts of reading and writing, pointing out the “constructed” nature of both acts, and should serve as an exposure to the cultural, political, historical and economic factors that affect both writing and reading texts (literature, advertising, film). One respondent reminded the committee of the course description published in the university catalog and pointed out that nobody seemed to be following it: “Study and practice of effective explanatory, expressive, and persuasive writing in the context of an introduction to critical study of literature.”

Since the composition committee at large had suggested that the new ENG 112 syllabus be more overtly connected to the ENG 111 syllabus, the subcommittee asked what could promote more obvious connections between the two courses. Respondents noted that the obvious connection was already in place if the classes were taught as writing courses and not

theory courses, pop culture courses, or political science courses, reminding us that we were supposed to be teaching writing, not our social or cultural values or views. Others, conversely, suggested that cultural issues should be the central thread that tied the literary texts together. A balanced response noted that although the goals are slightly different, they are complementary: ENG 111 teaches writing as a mode of inquiry and public action, while ENG 112 deals more directly with textual interpretation, a vitally important mode of inquiry. Still, we knew that this did not at all amount to a consensus for those of us who were trying to define these two courses more precisely as a two-course sequence in writing. The design of this course, naturally, has also been open to public scrutiny, and although the department has now adopted it, we recognize that this sequence is no more immune to immediate revision than any of the others we've described here.

### **ARE WE THERE YET? COMPASS POINTS ON THE JOURNEY**

If there's anything we've learned from this process, it is that as people teach, we are engaged in constant revision, and about the only thing that remains the same is the recursivity of our design process. That is the nature of culture in general and of the writing culture in our department in particular. We believe that collaborative and communal efforts help to highlight the issues and assumptions of our work and may be a primary source of collective adaptation to the diverse views we represent.

We've learned that collaborative design and buy-in are exceedingly valuable, but not necessarily achieved simply because you gather together representatives of different points of view.

We reinforced our understanding that transferability of writing skills is neither automatic nor easily perceived by students or by our university colleagues. With a skill as complex as writing and contexts as varied as academic disciplines, what may seem transparent to us can seem particularly useless and irrelevant to others. Perhaps the key is openness and frequent discussion—both valuable and sometimes rare commodities.

We feel that the first-year writing sequence of ENG 111 and ENG 112 has become stronger as a result of its most recent revision because the courses' goals have been foregrounded in the syllabi. Just last spring, the composition committee adopted an ENG 111 syllabus centered on a new theme—writing—which focuses on students' positioning themselves as writers and investigating the culture of writing at Miami, in the community, and in the broader social world. ENG 112 now more clearly builds upon and extends the skills learned in ENG 111 and more uniformity has been attained across multiple sections of the courses.

We are pretty sure that teaching in clusters is a great idea, only complicated by the time and effort it requires. Perhaps all good teaching may require this sort of effort, but when it's done in isolation our work has little chance for useful feedback from our peers, and we are all the poorer for missing out on the pooled strategies and ideas such collaborations add to our teaching lore.

We may have learned that our own university's writing culture probably needs larger efforts than a single department's curricular work. Following Andrea Lunsford's advice, we recently collaborated with colleagues in our university honors program on an internal grant proposal that garnered modest funding from campus administrators for a center for writing excellence specifically designed to address faculty development on writing instruction. We're encouraged that the center initiatives currently underway seem to be bringing a greater visibility to writing across the campus. Several of these efforts are department-based, and we believe our own experience confirms this as a good approach.

And finally, those of us who have contributed to this article have found that writing together is almost as demanding as teaching together. We're proud to have tried to do both.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> As this is a genuinely collaborative effort, the contributors are listed here in reverse alphabetical order.

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