

Standardizing a First-year Writing Program: Contested Sites of Influence

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Sitting in one of many first-year writing task-force meetings, I listen to the various perspectives being discussed as my colleagues and I work toward “revising” or “standardizing” our first-year writing program. We all have our program goals in hand, as well as the university’s core curriculum information. These goals are written as specific behaviors that “the student” will be able to “do” upon completion of the created course. In this one-of-many meetings, our main goal is to decide what we want our revised first-year writing program to look like in light of current issues around state assessment outcomes and university climate. The task force has come together in the midst of severe budget cuts, a scramble to justify our share in the redistribution of funds, and the need for greater consistency and accountability for the first-year writing courses. The committee is made up of the associate chair of the English department, the first-year writing program director (me), the associate director, the assistant director, a handful of instructors, and several graduate teaching assistants. All attempts are made to insure proper departmental ranking representation.

With our task before us and our goals in mind, we spend the greater part of a summer deciding on course assignment sequencing, common assignments, and themes for our two-part course sequence. We wrestle with issues such as which writing and reading assignments encourage the specific kinds of critical thinking that are part of our objectives, and we happily discuss the ways the choices that we have made might eliminate some of the “problems” we knew existed in the “ways in which specific unnamed faculty had been treating first-year writing as a literature course or as a platform for exploring some objectionable—almost pornographic!—themes.” These are all arguments that those of us attending the meetings had heard expressed by colleagues within the department and faculty outside the department. What we don’t discuss are the ways in which we, in standardizing the requirements and creating five themes for all 250 sections of our first-year program, are quite possibly diminishing the positive and wide

range of experiences students may have in their first-year writing sequence. We do not discuss the idea that, by limiting what may be perceived as “extremes” in the process of establishing specific standards, we might also be limiting the environments in which students may be encouraged to learn more about themselves and others through writing, through the grappling with less-than-comfortable cultural issues and issues of difference. We also do not discuss the possibility that hearsay about extremes, while possibly an issue in any course in any department, may have been taken completely out of context. Instead, we focus our attention on ways to make sure that we address the outside critiques that initially brought our courses into question—critiques like those from some engineering faculty who have questioned how personal writing could prepare students for the reports or data interpretations that would be expected of them as part of their engineering curriculum. Others in the university have had trouble seeing reasons that students should take a writing course in the English department when other departments offered writing and public speaking in the same course. In response to these demands for convenience and economy of effort coupled with the fear of losing colleagues in the next round of budget cuts looming over us, we work on building an argument for making sure that the writing program in the English department is seen as vital to the goals and needs of the larger university.

By the end of the meetings, while cautious about our own departmental instructor buy-in to the program, our committee remains optimistic that the courses we have created in our “standardizing process” will meet the goals of the core curriculum in such a way as to guarantee our previously assumed dominance in teaching the bulk of the incoming first-year students. I am relieved to have come to some decisions after far too many meetings that have taken up far too much of my summer, but I still feel an odd uneasiness about the standardization process.

While composition theory and pedagogy may be continuing to explore and expand the national meaning of writing and the nature, nationally, of the role of the writing classroom, specific writing programs are more often shaped by current budgetary restraints and a national mandate toward universal competency testing. Many programs court a standardizing process that seems to run counter to what the discipline defines as ideal for writing classrooms. At such a time, it may help to consider whether it is possible to standardize first-year writing programs in ways that are based in the theoretical and pedagogical practices of the field and that are cognizant of students’ needs. Based in our specific program, my narrative and analysis considers the challenges and possibilities of grounding standardization in the research theories and practices of our field. As writing administrators and teachers who have a clear focus on our audience and goals, we may be able to cre-

ate writing program standards that operate at a subversive level by returning authority to the individuals teaching in our writing programs as well as to individual student writers, all the while meeting the agenda and goals of the larger institution.

Sitting in one of a series of meetings with key representatives of each of the colleges in the university, I listen as English department members (and I) present our newly revised writing program curriculum. We know how important it is to target specific aspects of the curriculum verbally to the more “technical” degree programs to ensure that we have addressed their dual concerns: first, student unpreparedness and, second, that what the reading and writing students have been doing in English courses is irrelevant to their skills needs for their major courses. We are careful to point out that we are revising our programs to make sure that all students going through our first-year writing curriculum are completing the same writing assignments so that subsequent teachers can assume at least passing mastery of the analytical writing and critical thinking skills we describe in our course objectives. Attached to the handout we distribute to the representatives at the meeting is a detailed list of program objectives stated into categories that describe specific student-behavioral goals. In this meeting, as in the several that follow, the members of the college are pleased with our move toward standardization and are excited that this more structured foundation provides certain possibilities for the students’ future regarding their work on major writing requirements. By this time we are pleased about the approval from those outside our department—particularly in light of the budgetary implications—but I am still somewhat uneasy about the moves we are making in our process of standardizing our first-year writing program. I am uncomfortable with the need to revise and justify our first-year writing program to seek the “approval”—which later translates to budgetary support—of so many different administrative structures with such a range of varying agendas. I am also deeply concerned about our repeated assurance that we are making the range of experiences in the first-year writing courses “more common.”

My discomfort with this revision process did not come from the lively discussions that went into the creation and redesign of our program. I found those discussions both stimulating and challenging, and it was not the overall appearance of the new standardized program that made me a bit anxious. As a sequence of assignments, this revised curriculum was not measurably different from the structure of many first-year writing sequences that I had taught in the past. My disquiet came with what was not being discussed and with the movement toward what felt like a desperate drive to adjust the first-year writing curriculum structure and goals only out of economic sur-

vival. Left unmentioned was how the decisions we were making fit into the overview of the entire field of composition. Nor were we discussing how the decisions we were making would affect writing teachers and students. I was uneasy with the possibility that in our reactive stance to impending problems with funding—in our desires, that is, to “serve several masters”—we were losing sight of the specific needs of our faculty and students, and even at times, losing sight of what we knew, as writing professionals, to be good writing instruction. Those we had defined as our “masters” were those who had the most budgetary say at the university; they were those departments and colleges with larger discretionary budgets and the administrators who made decisions about how the limited university funds would be distributed. I was also uneasy with the various audiences our curriculum was designed to address. These audiences—of college administrators, core curriculum committees, and college and university-level curriculum committees—at times seemed not to include either the students in the program or the faculty who would be teaching the curriculum. My discomfort heightened later when I watched various deans and other administrators looking so pleased with the program we presented, with the language of acceptance around our “reining in” of some of the curriculum to create an easily assessed, more common experience for students going through the first-year writing sequence. It was not until I began preparing my talk for CCCC—some six months later—that I was able to put into words my fluctuating feelings about “standardizing” our writing program.

What I was unable to articulate at the time of the revision and the subsequent meetings to present the curriculum to the larger university stemmed from a direct encounter with the politics of writing programs within the larger university and our attempt to function successfully within this political sphere. Richard Bullock and John Timbur, in the preface to *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, helped me to clarify my apprehension with their argument that in university writing programs “politics drive curriculum” (xix):

[. . . W]e live within institutions that must continuously account for the political in order to maintain enrollments, budgets, and public good will. [. . . A] genuine force for positive change in the ways and means by which writing is taught is possible only when we take stock of the politics of writing instruction and begin to enter consciously and knowledgeably into the political arena. (xix–xx)

While I knew entering the politics of writing program's roles within the structure and purpose of the larger university's strategic plans was an inevitable part of being part of writing program administration, I was not so certain how "consciously" or "knowledgeably" we were doing so. Yes, we were acutely aware of the need to "win over" the administration at both college and university levels, a strategy that would lead to the funding needed to sustain our program; however, the expertise and contribution of those who would eventually teach and participate in our revised curriculum had not been part of the discussions. At some level, it was assumed at the outset, without question or discussion, that certain changes were inevitable and that the best way to make those changes was to address the concerns of our critics.

The politics of this situation manifested itself to me in a realization that often our efforts to standardize and control the extremes of our program actually work against a student-centered pedagogy of writing instruction that allows for a certain degree of instructional autonomy by those teaching in that program. At our institution the courses where the subject matter seemed most extreme, or even for all practical purposes unconnected from a technical perspective to the reading and writing needed to prepare future engineers and or scientists, were often the very places where critical analysis, individual expression, and engagement with the three issues (tripartite issues) of identity, authority, and voice were all key to students' writing and personal development. It was also often in the creation and teaching of such writing courses that writing instructors expressed the autonomy of their own individual philosophy of teaching, merging their research, political and philosophical perspectives in a way that made writing classrooms come alive for them and for their students. For years our faculty had been allowed and even encouraged to create and revise their own syllabi based solely on what they knew to be good writing instruction and what was or was not effective in their individual writing classrooms. Based on a range of pedagogical perspectives, many faculty encouraged students to explore socially and culturally sensitive issues through writing—choosing the specific writing assignments and texts that they deemed best for doing so. In working through these issues of what is appropriate for a writing classroom and what needed to be more "standardized" or regulated, I was reminded of the question that Mary Louise Pratt posited in her 1991 essay, "Arts of the Contact Zone": "[w]hat is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community? Are teachers supposed to feel that their teaching has been most successful when we have eliminated such things and unified the social world, probably in their own image? Who wins when we do that? Who loses?" (39). Pratt's essay left me with questions

that under close examination led to additional questions: Were we abandoning the possibility of our classrooms being what Pratt calls “contact zones”² in the hopes that a safer, unified curriculum might be more appealing to our colleagues across disciplines and therefore better funded? Were we, in our expediency and need to address audience expectations outside of our discipline, creating a monolithic curriculum that had no place for the individual student—and faculty member, for that matter—to wrestle with his or her role in the university or in other broader institutional contexts? Might we, in our attempt to secure the needed funding for our program, be creating or condoning classroom environments that would see it as “extreme” to bring into question the politics of university structures or examine the values inherit in the funding?

When I realized that the answers to many of these questions were “Yes,” the scope of the anxiety and discomfort with the curriculum began to take on a slightly different shape. As an African American woman studying issues of authority and voice in writing in a climate that is resistant if not dismissive to both, I was grappling with the complexities of meeting both my department’s administrative needs and my own in personal and professional spheres. It was with this new scope of the issue in mind that I realized the importance of reconciling—if only for me—the divergent processes of standardizing our curriculum, meeting the needs of our students and faculty, and retaining a strategic position within an institution.

In stepping back to reevaluate what had happened, I realized that, as faculty and administrators, we were making decisions in our moves toward standardizing our first-year writing program that were much more socially and culturally loaded than they had appeared to us to be. We also realized that they were not so distinctively freighted because of what we had decided on as course objectives and assignments, but because of some of the reasons for those decisions and the audience for whom we had designed our overall revision. A component of our revised curriculum called “oral communication skills” serves as an interesting illustration. Since our department had lost twenty-five to fifty sections of first-year writing in the previous two years to the Communication Studies program,³ we decided to talk to those colleges that had decided to have their students enroll in Communication Studies’ first-year writing sequence, instead of routinely directing them toward our traditional program. We learned that many of the departments had opted for their students enrolling in the Communication Studies course because, along with filling the writing requirement, students could fulfill the public speaking requirements of their majors simultaneously in the sciences and in the College of Business. Facing a 10% departmental budget cut in a department that uses 97% of its budget for salaries, we realized that if this trend

continued, we would indeed lose valued colleagues. Because many of the faculty teaching the writing courses had positions that were contingent on budget—both our own and that given to us by the university and intended for teaching core curriculum courses—a significant reduction in either source of funding often meant that valued colleagues were not re-hired. To guarantee our place as “the teachers of first-year writing,” one of the key points of our departmental promotion of services, offered in meetings with various client-colleges as we marketed our revised curriculum, was our inclusion of a required oral communications proficiency standard that satisfied the National Communication Association’s competency outcomes for college sophomores. While this inclusion may seem a small adjustment, its addition somehow implied to our students and those administrators who were comparing writing courses that the communication that had taken place previously through rich discussions, small group work, and workshops was not equal to or as valued as creating two required, formal presentations. With this one situation, we found we were moving in some small way away from our writing classrooms’ offerings being specifically about writing. Instead of trying to create avenues for better understanding of the communication-rich environments found in writing classrooms, we were taking, instead, what we saw as the more efficient route of adapting our program to a set of standard practices of communication skills that administrators in departments outside our own could better understand and quantify.

In attempting to secure our piece of the economic pie, we were attempting to placate populations of better-funded technical majors (like engineering) and administrators, by adapting our curriculum to meet their needs. I realized that we were making specific decisions about our first-year writing curriculum based on what other programs valued simply in order to retain the long-held support and funding from those programs. And, when a large part of the impetus for these decisions included our recognizing and operating in terms of institutional will, budget cuts, and state assessment, we were making decisions that did not always take into consideration the necessities of creating a writing program that addresses the varied needs of the students who would later be participants in the curriculum.

When the focus of our writing classroom practices became based on what we felt would satisfy or better prepare students for their work later in their majors, the idea of writing courses as having distinct intrinsic value came into question. Although I believe that our first-year writing courses do prepare students for the writing they will later undertake in their majors by equipping them with critical thinking and analytical skills as well as skills in generating, organizing, and clearly and correctly presenting thoughts and ideas, I believe that the course, while implementing those aims, can well

include other/additional outcomes. Previously driven and guided only by our own knowledge of what makes for a good writing class, my colleagues and I taught first-year writing courses that encouraged students to realize that writing is valuable. We helped them to understand that through writing they could better reflect upon and gain insight into themselves and their world. In these courses, students discovered, often for the first time, that through writing they could develop and shape their own identities and learn to effect change in their world. They often discovered that while studying and writing about subjects they found especially challenging, they could expand upon received wisdom and develop their own opinions and authoritative stance. As Juanita Rodgers Comfort explains, when given an appropriate environment in which to do so,

[. .] students have generally sought to use their writing assignments as tools to help themselves mature as thinking individuals and become more powerful as social beings. Through their writerly eyes, I've come to see that successful college writing demands, and ultimately achieves, something more personally enriching than merely "inventing the university," as David Bartholomae would say. The most successful student writers [. .] learn how to move beyond merely imitating the prose styles and interpretive schemes of disciplinary discourse. (542)

Comfort helped me to see that our new curriculum needed to be one in which students, through their encounters with a range of pedagogical perspectives and by writing through them, took on topics that ranged from self discovery and analysis to questioning and challenging attitudes centered around concepts like "institutions," "power structures," and "systematic change." Such a range of pedagogical perspectives might range from expressivism, to cultural studies, to community-based and public discourse writing pedagogies. Students needed the opportunity to encounter writing classrooms in which they were encouraged to write toward a sense of themselves as authors, and individuals, who could assume the power to shape their social and political environments. The conventions, mastery of skills, and the ability to perform measurable accounts of specific behaviors were not the focus of our intent. The focus became the role of writing as means of communication and as a regular practice in their lives. Comfort, Bartholomae, and others helped me to understand that by basing our curricular revisions on the needs of other university entities without considering the insights that we as writing spe-

cialists had gained through research in the field of composition—and the historical experiences of generations of teachers preceding us—we were doing the students a learning disservice and ourselves a professional disservice.

When we decide which behaviors or skills we want to see developed and then prescribe specific writing sequences to develop those skills, we are already privileging certain kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, if we establish critical thinking as an objective, the valuing of the role of this particular skill is clearly implied. When we then go on to do this in light of trying to sustain departmental survival and with the goal of addressing the larger needs of the university, our privileging of knowledge begins to take on the social and cultural hierarchies of the institution we are serving. In some ways and at that point, we undergo a shift in audience that can become profoundly problematic. While we may say that our first-year writing program goals are to assist students in becoming better writers, to teach them to use writing as a means of discovery, and to prepare them for the writing that they may do in subsequent environments, when we shift our emphasis to accommodate our colleagues within the university that are not as familiar with writing studies and who often seek to establish and fund programs based on what they see as concrete measurable components, we may—if we are not careful (and sometimes even when we are careful)—reduce the pedagogical range of our faculty and the significance of our students as well as devalue the gains in our discipline. Although this accommodation may not seem directly connected to issues of difference and exclusion, the standardization of writing program curricula can occur in very tight budgetary times. And, in light of the current economic restructuring being done at our university, and many others like it across the country, this or any university administration may not see the “economic value” in allowing faculty in writing programs to retain enough individual decision-making with regard to choosing which pedagogical practices that we as writing professionals realize are crucial to our discipline. Such outside-of-the-discipline interests, then, can indirectly distort the focus of the curriculum in ways that regress the process of standardization to an historic norm.

So, is it indeed possible to standardize a writing curriculum while remaining knowledgeable and conscious of the needs of students, the faculty and the discipline? I had to find a way to balance all of those needs, or I would have ended up in an odd, schizophrenic administrative-professional existence. While it seemed that administratively we created the problem by looking to outside forces to guide our revision, the solution exceeded what many university colleagues could tackle when they were looking for cost-efficient ways to reduce the writing courses that students would need to take so that they would have more time for in-major courses. Faculty and stu-

dents needed to be involved in any further revisions that took place. While exclusion can, and has been, institutionalized, for us the programmatic institutionalization of inclusion had to be much more democratic. While I was concerned about ways to make sure that we created a program that was student- and faculty-centered enough to give everyone the opportunity to explore and develop a sense of the joys and power of teaching writing and of writing itself, I soon realized that once approved, what we did with the existing curriculum and the ways in which we kept the curriculum dynamic were basically determined by those of us who are part of the composition program—administrators, faculty, and students. For me, the focus then was in the freedom and autonomy we have as individual university teachers working collectively to define and shape the writing program. Although I felt that there were specific programmatic issues that should have been further explored administratively, and while I realized that our curriculum was far from ideal, the next stage of changes that were needed to create a program that worked well for everyone had more to do with the ways in which individual writing instructors approached the balancing of their autonomy in the classroom with the expectations of the program. For us, this balancing was best empowered by faculty development—a point that I will revisit later and that required of us its own budgetary demands.

By definition, the natural outcome of any standardization is the exclusion of “extremes.” The key to a successful process of standardization lies in not allowing the exclusion of extremes to mean an exclusion of difference or a complete reduction in pedagogical range and explorative possibility. We did not want to legitimate inadvertently Sharon Crowley’s argument that “the required introductory course remains in place in order to socialize students into the discourse of the academy, [sic] to the extent that it succeeds in this[,] it supplements or even erases students’ home languages. The universality of the requirement suggests to me that this is, precisely, its point” (230). For us, the distinction between the two seems to lie in who is defining those extremes—specialists in the theory and practice of writing studies, or non-specialists in our field. If writing professionals hear the past voices from the discipline to help us to remember that an inclusive, student-centered curriculum that provides those teaching in it with some pedagogical freedom, we may find that the standards we create can be very different from those of the larger institution—even while appearing on the surface to be somewhat similar.

To accomplish this balancing of university budgetary survival with our desire for disciplinary integrity, I found work such as Frank Sullivan et al.’s “Students’ Needs and Strong Composition: The Dialectics of Writing Program Reform” particularly helpful because it focuses on revising first-

year writing courses by “examin[ing] the dynamics of university, college and departmental committees and task forces in reforming their structure, resources curriculum and evaluation” as they “interrogate the oppositions in play during [their] efforts, oppositions between the universality of the first-year requirements and the libratory goals of [their] program” (Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells and Goldblatt 374). Their practical, “situated leadership” approach enabled them to “engage in coalition-building and disciplinary self-reflection [. . .] rather than merely serving students’ needs as defined by institutional authority” (388). Other perspectives, like the one presented in “Reframing the Great Debate on First-year Writing,” by Marjorie Roemer, et al., suggest that reductive practices may not be warranted because, no matter how much we standardize the overall curriculum, if we ground our revision in the theories and practices that inform our discipline, individual classrooms would never be too “common” or too similar:

In part the richness in first-year writing as a site has been its openness to new possibilities; because its content is not prescribed, many avenues toward critical literacy can be explored. [. . .] Not only is there not just one freshman course, but we could never wish that to be the case. To imagine uniformity is to imagine mechanized teacher-proof programs that substitute the integrity of a set of topics for the integrity of a teacher’s vision of rhetorical consciousness. (386–387)

Using the examples above, our university’s writing program administrators and a broader group of writing faculty were able to revisit our standardization with a more focused sense of the students as the audience and the discipline as the source for practices. What we found was that our revised, standardized curriculum was flexible enough for any English faculty member to create and teach a course that is focused around students’ individual needs and grounded in a range of possible pedagogical approaches to writing instruction. For example, while we had structured the number of essays required for each semester of the two-semester first-year writing series, the categories of analysis, synthesis, and argument are broad enough to provide freedom for the individual instructor to decide on the readings, the structure, and approach to each assignment and to customize the actual essay assignment and requirements to suit his or her individual pedagogical perspective. However, as was the case for me initially, we realized that it may be difficult to articulate, particularly to those outside the discipline, the value of what we do in our writing classrooms. Often, faculty with intense teaching

loads and limited job security are given no opportunity to explore and problematize the questions and issues that I had and that had previously gone undiscussed. Faculty assigned to four sections of first-year writing returned after summer break and were given a new curriculum with a new textbook and, through discussion, a limited understanding about what had happened in our program's shift and why. To further reassure ourselves—as program administrators—that some degree of informed sovereignty would indeed continue, we established strong faculty support seminars⁴ for discussions that were grounded in the practices researched and sanctioned in the field, created thematic working groups to keep discussion and support active at a smaller working level, and began the process of establishing electronic portfolios as a means of programmatic assessment. As Sullivan, et al., describe in their reformation of the Temple University writing program, we too were able to help faculty members feel both supported and informed in what they were doing in their writing classrooms. From this position of informed and supported members of the writing program, our writing instructors were better able to articulate the disciplinary values of their specific writing classroom practices to each other, their students, and other colleagues across the university⁵. As writing program administrators, we sought to increase the value of our writing program by helping various colleagues and administrators across campus understand the value of a writing course—as something more encompassing and often more practical than the traditionally-viewed preparation for writing in the major.

As part of the effort to help faculty and the larger community understand what we were doing with our curriculum revision and to help fund the faculty support workshops we conducted, we worked with a publishing company to create a custom text⁶ that is not only written by the faculty teaching in our program and that highlights student writing by using examples of their work and using discussions of the processes those students used in composing particular assignments. Because students taking our courses are required to buy the text, our department chair was able to negotiate a contract with the publisher that provided our department with shared profits. The revenue generated by the custom text is fed back into the composition program, allowing us to conduct paid workshops and support professional development for faculty teaching in the program. In these paid workshops conducted twice a year and open to all faculty and graduate students teaching first-year writing in our program, we talk about what we do when we say that we are teaching writing, and what theories and experiences have shaped those practices. We also discuss and explore ways to continue to keep both the program and the custom text we have created dynamic, both in theory and in implementation.

As associate director of the program, I began a pilot (which was part of a larger collaboration with Educational Technologies and the Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at Virginia Tech) to investigate the possibilities of using electronic portfolios as a means of programmatic assessment. Working with a core group of five faculty members (each teaching more than one section of first-year writing), we wanted to find out what would be required of the writing faculty if we used electronic portfolios in first-year writing to see how students were responding to the curriculum. We sought to explore the kinds of writing that students were producing as part of the revised curriculum, to see if, indeed, they were meeting the programmatic goals and to see how students were “writing through” issues and moving beyond mere skills acquisition. Since the electronic portfolio program is still new to the university, we are still exploring the possibilities.⁷

Our current revised curriculum now has the backing of all of the colleges and all top administrators. Through faculty development within the department and through creation of a consistently continuing environment of dynamic discussion centered around what we are doing, we are now grounding our curricular changes in a range of pedagogical perspectives from the field of composition studies, and we are doing so by means of using data from the student response we get through surveys and faculty input.⁸

Our new approach to our standardized curriculum encourages a range of pedagogical perspectives. For example, for those faculty who see themselves as expressivists, we can now see how our curriculum uses what Thomas O’Donnell has called “a particular way of seeing or justifying the expressivists’ interest in personal experience and its relationship to language” by making sure we are allowing for the expression and empowering of the individual (430). In O’Donnell’s defense of expressivist rhetorics, he articulates what is essential to our vision of our program, which is that

the concerns with the personal and experimental that expressivists made important will remain central in rhetoric and composition [. . .] not because there is an essence to be ferreted out or an authoritative voice to be discerned but because there are words like “essence” and “authenticity” that we [and our students] may want to bring meaning to—both in what we say and what we do. (438)

Another example of ways we have incorporated yet another pedagogical perspective is reflected in our themes of “writing through cross-cultural contact” and “writing through the environment.” By focusing courses around

these themes, we foreground many of our writing courses so that they incorporate aspects of cultural studies as well as the rhetoric of public discourse. By grounding our courses in the pedagogical practices that help to inform our discipline, we can move students beyond thinking of the first-year writing course solely as one in which they learn the needed writing skills for their later disciplinary writing. We encourage them to see themselves and their writing as relevant to their immediate surroundings and the current discussions on key issues of their time. We are, as Diana George and John Trimbur say in “Cultural Studies and Composition,” helping students to picture themselves not just as “cultural consumers”; we are trying to create “an impetus to imagine writing assignments that take [them] beyond the critical essay of cultural analysis and critique into the rhetoric of public discourse” (87).

Early in the first semester of our new curriculum, sitting in a “writing through cross-cultural contact” thematic workgroup, I listen to my colleagues generate various ideas about what this curriculum means to them and the many ways that students work with and encounter the texts for their courses. One of my colleagues, who is a wonderful writing teacher, says he will focus his course around the cross-cultural contact that takes place when students encounter the writings and culture of the Appalachian region. He says the writing sequence that has been developed will work well toward one of his goals, which is to have students write through their preconceived expectations and assumptions about the Appalachian region to gain a better understanding of how those expectations have been developed and shaped and often transfer from one cultural group to another. We smile, agree, and even take notes as he makes decisions regarding questions of which readings he will be using in class and as he explains how he will use students’ writing as additional texts for the class. Another colleague states that she will be working with the various cross-cultural contacts that students may encounter in their first semester at the university. Her hope is that in exploring the theme from this angle, she will help students think and write through—analytically and eventually critically—the often problematic question of who they are and what their role is in the university and their local communities. I sit quietly but comfortably as I hear various faculty talk about what pedagogical choice they are making for their courses and that they see their pedagogical practices fitting into the discussions in the discipline as well as into the themes of the curriculum.⁹ While these meetings are exciting and informative, I realize that the input that we are receiving will ultimately help keep our program grounded in the field and moving forward, even beyond the lean years of budgetary constraints and programmatic standardization. I no longer feel the uneasiness that I had in former meetings because these discussions feel like a move forward—in the right direction. These meetings and the discussions therein allow me as a com-

position scholar and as an administrator to feel good about the program and the curriculum. While I realize that we are making small but crucial steps in the process of a fairly dynamic programmatic restructuring, they are steps in the right directions.

Our programmatic revision coupled with our move toward standardization plunges us into a dynamic process. While we respond to the pressures of ever-shrinking university-based resources, we do so within the context of a clearer understanding of what it means to have a strong, theoretically informed, inclusive writing program. What we have sought to do is to address various movements in composition while allowing faculty to bring their own interests and expertise to the writing classroom. We have provided a framework for colleagues to investigate some of the larger pedagogical and theoretical movements that have been central to the writing and research in composition for the last two decades. By designing our curriculum so it is positioned within the theory and pedagogy of the field of composition, we have provided a set of courses that allows teachers and students to function within our strategic programmatic parameters without overly narrowing the freedom needed for dynamic writing classrooms.

To meet our own programmatic and budgetary needs, we have created a custom textbook that has been designed specifically to unify our curriculum. This collectively-created custom composition textbook attempts to move far beyond simply dictating what should be taught in this newly revised program. The custom textbook has evolved into a collaborative text that not only serves the program but provides opportunities for those teaching within its scope to have a hand in the program's evolution. While issues arise regarding compensation for participants' work and a fear of commercialism that accompany any sort of textbook collaboration, we consistently renegotiate with the publishers to ensure that all work is compensated and that a high percentage of the revenue generated by the text will be fed back into the program in the form of student scholarships or rewards, faculty development, and conference and research support. To confirm that the faculty and students are truly served by the custom text, we actively seek feedback. Through surveys, student essays, workshops, conferences, meetings, and focus groups, we are better able to understand how our standardization process serves both our students and our own goals. By keeping student needs as well as faculty desires at the forefront, we strive to maintain individual autonomy in teaching while grounding that autonomy in the pedagogical practices of writing studies. We continue to work hard to create a program that is standardized but that is neither exclusive nor unnecessarily restrictive. By approaching and "reapproaching" our standardization process, our hope, as WPAs and as writing faculty, is that we will "reenvision"

“the undergraduate composition classroom as a place where students can learn strategies for expressing themselves meaningfully within the context of academic discourse” (Comfort 549).

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NOTES

1 One faculty member regularly used vampire fiction in his writing courses and asked students to explore through writing various issues emanating from homoerotic references in that body of literature. A graduate student had a set of students explore through writing to what extent technology could possibly go by looking at the concept of the created morphs of women in cartooning. The objections to the course, made by faculty outside the department who were unaware of the course content and focus, were that the students should not be writing about cyber-sex. While students rarely complained about the subject matter taught in these classes, when they spoke to other professors in other disciplines regarding their reading and writing topics, the professorial reactions were that the subject matter was pornographic or otherwise objectionable.

2 Mary Louise Pratt describes a “contact zone” as a space where various cultures “clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relation of power.” (34)

3 Our first-year writing program is part of our English department, and while not always given the same status as the literature curriculum, composition has been generally respected, treated well, and seen as a vital part of the departmental community. Communication Studies resides within the same college, but it is a separate department. Communication Studies has also developed a first-year writing sequence that is required by its majors, but this sequence is also open to other majors. The course that Communication Studies has developed also meets the same writing requirement for the core curriculum as the course taught in the English department.

4 Faculty were interviewed individually by the assistant director of the composition program and were asked to name areas of the revised curriculum that they wanted to support and to implement further. From these interviews, seminars

and workshops were designed and then were conducted throughout the semester. These ranged from presentations by other professionals in composition and those who had previously piloted the assignments to idea-sharing sessions around ways to incorporate smoothly some of the new requirements (like individual and group presentations) into the general flow of the semester course without losing sight of writing as the course focus.

5 The revenue generated by the custom text is used for faculty development such as support for faculty research and invitations to prominent guest speakers from the field of composition, and travel. We also use the revenue for in-house workshops that provide faculty time to discuss and collaborate on assignments, while discussing any questions and/or challenges that they may have around the revised curriculum.

6 The current version of our custom text is *Composition: Writing, Revising, and Speaking*; it is published by Pearson Custom Publishing and sold through our bookstore.

7 The electronic portfolio that we were working with was part of an Open Source Portfolio Initiative that was extremely user-friendly yet limiting in its creativity because of the overall structure and restricted fields in which students could enter information. The ePortfolio system is supported financially by Educational Technologies, as is the training and support for both faculty and students who use it. While the faculty involved in the pilot liked the opportunities that the ePortfolio system provided for reflection about and across assignments, they intensely felt that it might be better to revisit the software (which has been changing and expanding each semester, based on user needs) at a later stage before seriously considering fully implementing it as a first-year writing requirement. While issues of user flexibility are being addressed, I am still working with Educational Technologies to find ways that the Virginia Tech electronic Portfolio (VTeP) system can be used for programmatic assessment purposes.

8 The surveys are administered electronically with students going to a Web site and submitting answers anonymously to questions about the writing done during the course and about the custom text. The surveys are designed so that they are not directly traceable to specific sections of first-year writing. The surveys are completely separate from the course evaluations that are section- and instructor-specific.

9 Our current list of themes includes “writing through the environment,” “writing through cross-cultural contact,” “writing through science and technology,” “writing through arts and aesthetics,” and “writing through the university experience.” Just as the curriculum is revisited, so will be these themes. We also encourage faculty to propose additional themes and to form working groups around those chosen themes.

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