

Service vs. Subject Matter: Merging First-Year Composition and First-Year Experience

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As first-year experience (FYE) programs designed to address increasing attrition rates become more prevalent on college and university campuses throughout the U.S., many writing program administrators are facing increased pressure to align their writing programs with their campuses' first-year experience programs.¹ In some cases, the pressure on WPA's is not only to align these programs, but to merge, or even replace, first-year composition (FYC) with writing intensive, academic content FYE seminars. As Doug Brent points out in "Reinventing WAC (Again): The First-Year Seminar and Academic Literacy," "at a number of institutions, the[] affinities [between writing programs and FYE programs] are already being translated into programmatic convergence" (254). To many provosts, deans, and other upper-institutional administrators, such "programmatic convergence" between these academic content seminars and FYC likely makes such good and obvious sense because of what Sharon Crowley has referred to as composition's "ethic of service" (1) and its subsequent lack of both disciplinary status and the protections of academic freedom that such status affords. For, if, as Crowley suggests, the purpose of composition instruction is perceived to be to "serve the needs of the academic community, as well as those of students and the community at large, by teaching students to write error-free prose" and the purpose of first-year academic content seminars is, as Doug Brent puts it, to "foster intellectual engagement" (256) and "academic discourse" (261) as well as "bodily retention," (256) then why not do what schools like Linfield College have done, "replace first-year composition with a series of seminars 'taught by any teacher on any topic that lends itself to inquiry, provided the course adopts certain pedagogical practices and encourages in students a self-conscious awareness of the intellectual habits of mind associated with those practices'" (Brent 262)?

Given composition's historical concern with its place in the university, it seems fair to assume that despite administrative support for this kind of programmatic merging, many WPA's and other compositionists will be inclined to resist such replacements and/or convergences on territorial, theoretical, and political grounds. Some are likely to argue that those without training in composition are unqualified to teach writing; others are likely to argue that writing instruction will inevitably end up taking a back seat to the content area of the seminar; while still others will be inclined to resist such merging because they do not see composition instruction as a service and do not want to perpetuate the ideologies that undergird this ethic or the exclusionary practices that it supports. While I agree to an extent with all of these arguments, particularly the last one, I would also suggest that it is possible to employ such programmatic convergence to "reframe" (Hesse 345) the work and subject matter of composition studies on our campuses in ways that might begin to disrupt composition's "ethic of service" and its concomitant lack of disciplinary status. More specifically, I would argue that it is possible to implement a merger between FYC and FYE in ways that can work toward a more comprehensive and clearly defined subject matter for composition that might ultimately be granted disciplinary status and the protection of academic freedom that it deserves.

In what follows, then, I provide a brief history of first-year experience programs in general and discuss the specifics of my campus' newly developed first-year experience program—known locally as "Gateway"—and the institutional context out of which it emerged. From there, I explain how the composition faculty at CSUSB has employed the implementation of the Gateway pilot program in ways that have carved out spaces to discuss and reconstruct the subject of composition. I close by considering this programmatic merger in the context of Tom Fox's discussion of de Certeau's tactics, strategies, and its relationship to substantive composition reform.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS

According to Brent, first-year experience programs first emerged in the 1970s as a means of addressing the increasing attrition rates at colleges and universities across the U.S. Although the first-year seminar has always been the "flagship vehicle" (254) for these programs, they consist of a variety of strategies—including learning communities, tutoring and residential programs, specialized academic advising—intended to help students transition successfully from high school to college. For the most part, these strategies have been housed and conducted outside of the academic disciplines. Even the first-year seminar, according to Brent, "originally appeared in the form

of ‘University 101’ or ‘extended orientation’ courses” (254) and “covered topics ranging from library and study skills to adjusting to university life, dealing with sex, drugs and alcohol, personal values, and career advising” (254). As Brent suggests, they were intended to foster the “social” rather than the “intellectual” transition from high school to college.

More recently, however, seminars with more “intellectual” or academic content, taught by faculty across the university, have become more common than they were in the early years of these programs. In contrast to “University 101” courses, academic content seminars are inquiry-based; they are designed around the instructor’s disciplinary research interest, and, as such, they invite students to become, in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger words, “legitimate peripheral participants” (qtd. in Brent 254-255) of their instructors’ discourse community. In so doing, according to Brent, they bring FYE programs “closer to the orbit of composition studies” (257). While Brent may be correct in suggesting that the inquiry-based nature of the first-year seminars bridges FYC programs and FYE programs, that was not the impetus for the union of these programs on our campus; mere practicality was. A bit of background about our institutional context is necessary to explain.

THE BACKDROP FOR THE CURRENT FYE AND FYC AT CSUSB

In the fall of 2004, the provost, in conjunction with the faculty senate, established a task force to research and design an academically-oriented transition program for all incoming students. The creation of this taskforce was publicly represented as part of the faculty’s desire to share responsibility for “student success” with the student affairs units on campus. The CSU chancellor’s office had recently issued an executive order demanding that all CSU campuses develop a plan to decrease the time to graduation and address the issue of unacceptably high attrition rates on campuses. Our campus was already offering a “Freshman Seminar” course akin to the “University 101” courses Brent describes, but retention at CSUSB that year was 42% compared to the national average of 63%. The creation of the task force, now known as the Gateway Taskforce, was the faculty’s way of addressing this issue.

Driving this public interest in sharing responsibility for student success was the wide-spread perception that our campus was in the midst of a bona fide literacy crisis being fed by two separate, but related issues. The first issue feeding this “literacy crisis” was the ever-increasing pressure from the administration to increase FTES. The senate felt that because pressure to increase FTES was so high, the campus was accepting more and more under-prepared students in larger and larger classes. As a result, the quality

of instruction was going down, while attrition rates and time to graduation (not to mention faculty work-load) was going up.

The second issue driving the supposed “literacy crisis” on our campus was another directive from the CSU Chancellor’s Office: to reduce the need for remediation on all CSU campuses to 10% by 2007. (When the executive order was issued in 1996, our remediation rate was 53%; it is now 2008 and our remediation rate hovers around 70%.) Looming in the background of this executive order was the threat of outsourcing basic writing from CSU campuses to the local community colleges—an approach other CSU campuses had already taken—if the target remediation rate was not met. One strategy the composition faculty employed to meet the administration’s demand was to develop a “stretch” program, along the lines of the programs at Arizona State University and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. This program merged the preexisting two quarter basic writing courses into one, unified twenty-week course: the same cohort of twenty students would have the same instructor for all twenty weeks, would complete an elongated version of the first-year composition curriculum, and would, we hoped, ultimately receive college credit for completing this college-level curriculum. At the time I was approached about Gateway, the FYE program that the taskforce had developed, we were in the process of strategizing about how to be able to offer baccalaureate credit for completing the stretch courses.

The suggestion to incorporate sections of our basic writing program into the pilot of the Gateway program came about for two reasons. The first was that the logistics of Gateway would be easier to manage because the program’s design involved cohort-scheduling and students in the stretch program would already be cohorted for the first two quarters of their first year. The second was that the students who tested into the stretch program were assumed to be members of the target population for Gateway, as they were perceived to have the greatest “needs” and would therefore be the most likely to leave school and/or take too long to graduate.² My initial reaction to the suggestion to merge Gateway into our first-year composition program was to say “no,” largely because I was concerned that agreeing to allow the programs to converge in this way would perpetuate composition’s ethic of service, which, as noted above, many composition scholars have identified as problematic in at least two ways. First, as Crowley has pointed out, this service ethic has worked to create and maintain the exclusionary practices of U.S. universities. As Crowley explains:

The instrumental service ethic of the required composition course [is] to make student writing available for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are

deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable for admission to the discourses of the academy. [. . . E]xclusive practices need someone to exclude. The marginalization of the entire freshman class (except, of course, for those few elect—usually English majors—who are exempted) serves to underscore and reinforce the exclusivity of academic discourse, both with regard to the academy’s newest members (students and teachers alike) and with regard to the culture at large. (4)

In other words, perpetuating the notion that the purpose of composition courses is to “fix” students simultaneously perpetuates the hierarchy between academic discourse and anything Other, and leads to the exclusion and/or erasure of difference. The second reason that composition’s ethic of service is problematic concerns the issue of disciplinarity, or composition’s lack of it, and the subsequent lack of the protections of academic freedom. Indeed, drawing on the work of Crowley, as well as that of James Berlin, Robert J. Connors, Wallace Douglass, and Susan Miller, Mary Boland has more recently argued in “The Stakes of Not Staking a Claim,” that composition’s history of service has made it appear to be “wholly nondisciplinarity” (33) and, as a result, the “‘property’ of everyone else” (33). More specifically, she writes:

At the exact moment that disciplined knowledge making was introduced as a primary function of higher education, composition was created as a wholly non-disciplinary course. Born of a test, college composition was always imagined as preparatory to disciplinary work, but not itself amenable to disciplined inquiry. [. . .] This historical construction has left the composition professional largely unprotected by academic freedom. (33-34)

So, allowing the perception of composition as a service to the university compromises the field’s status as a discipline and leaves its practitioners vulnerable to curricular and programmatic takeovers.

At first, it seemed to me that merging our basic writing program, already dogged by the discourse of remediation, with a program whose purpose is to uncritically assimilate students more fully (and efficiently) into the academy would only enable such practices of exclusivity and reinforce the notion that composition has no purpose, no subject matter, other than finding more and better ways to “fix” our woefully broken and under-prepared students. However, as I examined the structure of our specific program and realized that I would have the opportunity to implement the Gateway program myself, I began to see ways that incorporating our basic writing courses

into the pilot of the Gateway program could offer practical benefits. On the most practical level, merging the two programs would provide money for professional development for adjunct composition instructors teaching in our writing program. It also offered the possibility for arguing against the outsourcing of “remedial” writing classes and for considering these courses “remedial” in the first place. After all, if the courses are included in the students’ first-year college experience, then they are, by definition, college courses. However, even more important than pointing out this hypocritical irony (or garnering money for faculty development), I also saw the merger, because of the specific structure of the Gateway Program, as offering opportunities for campus conversations about literacy and writing courses that might work to reconstruct the subject of composition studies. For, as Boland hopefully points out, “we can, by the language we use in even our most local and casual representations of the field, begin to circulate a more comprehensive sense of writing” (45) and, therefore, a more comprehensive and complex understanding of the subject matter of our field.

THE GATEWAY PROGRAM

The Gateway Taskforce Report describes the components of the program as follows:

1. *A two-day Summer Immersion Program*
2. *Gateway-enhanced sections of 1st-year courses (designated in catalog);*
3. *Block-scheduling of student cohorts.* As stated by the National Learning Communities Project, students in learning communities tend to (a) form their own self-supporting groups beyond the classroom; (b) become more actively involved in learning; (c) experience a higher quality of learning because of increased participation; and (4) persist at a substantially higher rate.
4. *Ongoing contact between cohorts and teaching teams throughout the academic year.* Each week, teaching teams comprised of faculty members, study specialists or advisors from Undergraduate Studies (USTD), and student mentors would meet 25-student cohorts for an hour to address common concerns and questions. Each cohort would be assigned a 3- to 4-member team; this part of the Gateway program works to promote community, to create a shared investment in student and program success, and to increase collegiality, and to emphasize an “improvement-oriented” campus culture.

5. *Resources online for the campus community.* These resources should include (at least): templates of “pathways to success” for students; teaching resources for faculty planning Gateway-enhanced courses; graduation rate and retention rate information; information about CSUSB accreditations; information on Gateway program assessment; and contact information.

Most relevant to merging Gateway and our basic writing program are components #2, “Gateway-enhanced sections of 1st-year courses” and #3, “Block-scheduling of student cohorts.” “Gateway-enhanced courses” are enhanced versions of courses already offered in the General Education (GE) curriculum. In other words, students in the Gateway Program take courses as part of their first-year experience that they are already required to take in order to fulfill their GE requirements. Their first-year experience is therefore incorporated into the existing curriculum; it does not involve taking additional seminars. The “enhanced” nature of the Gateway courses implies that each course is explicitly inquiry-based, which means it puts discipline-specific problems at the center of the course, is assignment-centered, and pays explicit attention to literacy practices within disciplinary-specific contexts. Incorporating our basic writing program into this structure would mean students would take their “stretched” basic writing course, as Gateway-enhanced, in fall and winter quarters and then move together as a cohort to a third GE class such as Introduction to Psychology or World Civilizations. The disciplinary integrity would be maintained in all courses: the composition classes would have at their center questions concerning the relationship between language use and its conditions of production and consumption and the history or psychology courses would have at their center questions concerning the subject matter of those disciplines and students will use and discuss discipline-specific literacy practices throughout each quarter in order to examine those questions.

Clearly, then, these Gateway-enhanced courses are more like the academic content first-year seminars Brent describes than the “University 101” courses he mentions. However, they are also different. In the “writing intensive” academic content seminars that Brent discusses, students write intensively about other disciplinary research questions, but composition itself is not represented as having a subject matter about which to write; in Brent’s representation, composition has no discipline-specific questions of its own. We see this, for example, in his discussion of the affinities between academic content seminars and the WAC movement:

Typically, the search for meaningful contexts for research-based reading and writing has found expression in the WAC movement, most notably in the Writing in the Disciplines variant, in which writing-intensive courses provide disciplinary context. In its most strongly argued form, this movement represents a sharp turn away from general-purpose first-year composition courses—dubbed general writing skills instruction or GWSI courses by Joseph Petraglia (“Introduction”) and others—toward courses located firmly in established academic disciplines. (259).

In this conception, composition is constructed as the binary opposite of “established academic disciplines,” characterized as “a general purpose” course focused on “writing skills instruction.” This is precisely the understanding of composition that supports its ethic of service and precisely the kind of construction I hoped would be undermined by merging with Gateway. Indeed, because the structure of our program as a whole requires that students take three consecutive Gateway-enhanced courses, where Gateway-enhanced means that students’ reading, writing, and research is driven by discipline-specific questions, if the first two Gateway-enhanced courses are composition courses, then composition must, by definition, have a subject matter of its own; it must have discipline specific questions that students can investigate in small research/learning communities. Merging with Gateway, and the conversations and professional development that such a move would inevitably enable, I hoped, would make this subject matter of composition visible.

THE SUBJECT OF COMPOSITION

What, then, is the subject of composition? This is a question that those involved with Gateway—faculty in and out of composition, faculty senators, academic deans, and even the provost—have engaged in vigorously and critically, particularly in meetings and workshops geared toward defining and developing the various “Gateway-enhanced” courses. Indeed, the first Gateway faculty meeting—which also included members of the faculty senate not teaching in the program, but who would later be voting on whether or not to pass the English Department’s baccalaureate credit-bearing Stretch Program—was intended to discuss the “inquiry-based” nature of the Gateway-enhanced courses, which meant discussing the boundaries of each of our academic disciplines. More specifically, the faculty members at the meeting were asked to identify the subject matter of their disciplines, some questions concerning what drove their field and which could

be put at the center of their Gateway-enhanced course. As we were sharing our responses, someone in a discipline other than English suggested that one way to create continuity between the courses over the year would be to design the fall/winter composition course as writing about the third course's discipline. I responded that while such a structure might create thematic coherence across the three courses, it would not be consistent with the disciplinary-specific nature of the program. I then asserted that the field of composition has its own questions that students would be exploring and then used the opportunity for the group to discuss our notions of writing and our various perceptions of the purpose of first-year composition.

Not surprisingly, several faculty members in the room, none of whom were trained in composition studies, suggested that the purpose of composition courses was to teach students better writing skills so that they would be able to write well in the rest of their courses. (Composition's ethic of service was raising its ugly head.) Those of us in the room who had been trained in composition responded by trying to articulate a richer, more complex view of writing and the subject of composition studies by emphasizing the social nature and uses of writing and arguing that the subject of composition involves the study of language use, of how text production is context-bound and implicated in relations of power, of how it is tied to the conditions of production and consumption, of what can (and cannot) be said when, where, why, and of what the sociocultural implications of this are.

This was the first of many conversations with the Gateway faculty that provided opportunities for those of us trained in composition to, in Boland's words, "clearly nam[e] our subject for ourselves and others" (44). Articulating the subject of composition in situations like this is important because this works to challenge composition's ethic of service and its problematic implications. Finding such opportunities to articulate and redefine composition's subject in these ways and for such a broad and important audience, however, would have been more difficult were it not for the composition faculty's willingness to include our FYC courses in an FYE program that insists that attention to disciplinary-specific literacy practices be included in all of the courses that make up the FYE. In other words, because the structure of the Gateway Program includes composition courses and insists on disciplinarity, it creates a space for composition to exist *as a discipline*. As a result, as we have moved forward and the Gateway faculty have talked about individual course curricula and how to create continuity and coherence for the Gateway cohorts as they move through their Gateway-enhanced courses, a rhetorical approach to genre has become one of the primary means by which we create continuity and coherence for the

Gateway cohorts. For example, all Gateway-enhanced courses, regardless of discipline, talk about genres and the relationship between form, content, and context. Instructors in each Gateway-enhanced course talk about the different genres common in the discipline, their organizational structures, the various organizations such genres can take, each genre's purpose and intended audience, the identity the various structures create for the writer, the values each genre embeds, and the connections between these issues. So, rather than composition courses functioning as a generalized "how to write course" or a more specific course on how to write in another discipline, the composition courses in the Gateway Program function as one of three WID courses that make up the FYE at CSUSB in which students explore through reading, writing, and researching, the subject of composition.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The increasing prevalence of first-year experience programs coupled with composition's "ethic of service" means that WPA's will probably continue to be asked to align FYC with FYE in one way or another. Such convergences can no doubt be problematic in many ways. When we, as a composition faculty, were faced with this decision, it raised the question for us of whether it is possible to blend these kinds of programs without bolstering the perception of composition as a non-disciplinary service. We have found that it may, in fact, be possible, as long as the combined program is structured in a way that allows composition to be treated as a discipline and allows its subject matter to remain visible and intact. I realize that everyone on campus will not buy into our revised conception of the discipline, but as Boland notes, "the shaping power of discourse suggests that as others overtake our richer ways of talking about writing and language use, they will be overtaking richer ways of knowing what writing and language use [i.e. the field of composition studies] mean[s] and entail[s]" (32).

I realize that, at best, allowing our programs to merge in this way has been a mere tactic in the effort to gain disciplinary and professional status for composition, that as Tom Fox has argued of the Temple composition faculty, we have "disguise[d] [our] own liberatory agenda as the work of the institution" (258). And, as Fox, drawing on de Certeau, asserts, tactical practice is:

Ultimately the work of stalling and forestalling. The success of radical teaching depends ultimately not on tactics, but on strategies, which de Certeau defines as long-term actions that work from one's own place. If the composition program can-

not represent its goals in reasonable complexity, and if it cannot persuade those outside of our discipline to adopt them, then substantive change is not going to happen.” (259)

I believe, however, that in using the particular structure and implementation process of our first-year experience program to “circulate a more comprehensive sense of writing” (Boland 22) and, therefore, the work of the field of composition, such tactical maneuvering has laid the groundwork for the kind of strategic practice and substantive reform that Fox calls for and that many compositionists seek.

NOTES

¹ For resources and trends in First-Year Experience Programs, see the “National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition” (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/index.html>).

² Important to note here is that although the pilot of the Gateway Program would rely exclusively on basic writing courses that are in number, if not in content, pre-baccalaureate course, the Gateway Program, once piloted and proven effective, is intended to be a campus-wide program. In other words, the plan for Gateway is that eventually, all incoming first-year students will start their FYE in the fall FYC course sequence that they place in to (all of which will soon be baccalaureate credit-bearing) and then they will move on to their other Gateway-enhanced courses as a cohort in each subsequent quarter. So, although the initial merger on our campus between FYE and FYC involved only “basic writing” courses, this was never the long-term goal. The composition faculty realized the irony/hypocrisy of situating a first-year college experience in courses that are not considered by the university to be “college material,” but hoped to use this irony as part of their arguments for a baccalaureate credit-bearing stretch program.

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