

The Preceptor Problem: The Effect of “Undisciplined Writing” on Disciplined Instructors

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Harris has experienced the “multidisciplinarity” of Duke’s freestanding writing program as liberating. My article explores how this freedom from disciplinarity is experienced not by a WPA but by an instructor in such a program. This is an autobiographical account that describes how my work at Harvard’s Expository Writing Program (“Expos”) shaped me. In the course of this account, I describe Expos’ evolution into a program that would base its pedagogy on what academic writing shares across the disciplines. The designers of the revamped Expos were thinking about the effect the new program would have on students, but it would also have a profound effect on its instructors—or at least it did in my case. Initially, I, too, found my work at Expos both empowering and liberating, but the reasons for that reaction also caused problems for me in my post-Expos academic career. This article uncovers a problem in freestanding writing program like Duke’s, not in terms of how I was exploited as a contingent laborer (which I do not believe I was) but in the way that such a program shaped me intellectually, making it difficult for me to adjust to a post-Expos life of disciplinarity.

This is a personal narrative about the time I spent working in a freestanding writing program, that is, one not connected to an English department, and the effect the experience had on me after I left for other academic jobs. This narrative describes why I found the experience of working in the Harvard Expository Writing Program (more familiarly called “Expos”) as an instructor both liberating and empowering, just the way that many writing program administrators (WPAs) of such programs experience it themselves. Yet those aspects of the job that made me experience it this way also made it difficult for me to adjust to life outside such a program. Unlike the WPAs

of such programs, I could not continue in the program indefinitely, and, ironically, some of the aspects of the job that made me love it so much made it difficult for me to adjust to life back in the traditional disciplinary world, in my case, of an English department. This narrative complicates accounts of freestanding programs by WPAs like Joseph Harris and Nancy Sommers, narratives that tout the freedom such freestanding programs allow, a freedom that they view as unproblematic. Toward the beginning of the article, I trace the way Expos achieved just such a freedom from disciplinarity. It was hard work to achieve such freedom, and one can understand why Harvard's director and co-director were proud of their accomplishment. Yet I hope to illuminate the ramifications of this lack of disciplinarity (what actually might be more accurately called "transdisciplinarity") on me and, I imagine, other instructors, who eventually return to the departments that Expos' and Duke's programs partly define themselves against. I do not think I possessed a false consciousness in finding my work at Expos liberating and empowering at the time, and I still look back on that period with great affection. Yet the kind of work I did led to problems once I left, intellectual problems different from the more frequently considered problems of exploitative working conditions.¹ This article is addressed both to WPAs and instructors in such a program, the former because I hope they might find ways to address the kind of problems that I experienced (on the assumption my experiences were not unique) and the latter, so they might become aware of the potentially disabling view of disciplinarity that working in such a program can foster.

The occasion for this narrative comes from recent interest in such freestanding departments. These programs represent one model for delivering college composition—to borrow from the title of Kathleen Blake Yancey's *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*, which details many others—but it's a compelling one. For Harris, Duke's writing program offers a respite not just from the discipline of English but from the pressures of disciplinarity in general. "Multidisciplinarity is thus not a theoretical ideal but a lived reality in the Duke UWP" ("Thinking" 360).² Duke's writing program is multidisciplinary³ in a number of ways: it teaches a multitude of first-year students, who are destined for different disciplines; it offers courses whose content and methods derive from a wide variety of disciplines, and it is staffed by a revolving group of post-docs who get their Ph.D.'s from, to quote Harris, "African American studies, architecture, biology, communications, cultural anthropology," etc. ("Undisciplined" 157)—and that's just up to the c's. Harris' program follows a model of composition that "disdains the status and order of the traditional academic disciplines" (155), and as such, it offers a refuge from the border-patrolling questions that plagued

him at his earlier job teaching writing within an English department, such as who gets to direct dissertations? Should articles on teaching count as research? (160). Harris experiences his job directing Duke's Writing Program as a liberation.

But how is such a program experienced not by the WPA but by an instructor who worked in it? Before I answer that question, let me give some background both on my own situation and on Expos itself. I worked at Expos from 2000-2004, and it shared all of the qualities Harris describes, from its separation from the English Department to its hiring of instructors from different disciplines, most of whom were not drawn from Harvard's own pool of graduate students. That is, they did not draw from the captive audience of English PhDs at Harvard or people with PhDs in Rhetoric and Composition. As with Duke, Expos hires people with degrees from a variety of disciplines. Though many received degrees in literature or related fields, this is not a policy but a result of the fact that this is a population to whom such a job seems plausible and even familiar. But there are also many people at Expos from philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology—even one person, when I was there, with a degree in Environmental Science. I myself was still a graduate student in English at Brown when I was hired (most instructors have their degrees when they start at Expos, but some do not). A number of things drew me to the job. I had been frustrated at Brown by the lack of practical pedagogical training I had received: our pedagogy class pressed upon us the need to decenter authority from the teacher (this was not something I needed to learn at that point in my young, female life) but did not teach us how to put together a syllabus, lesson plan, or assignment prompt. I had also become intrigued by the question of how one could teach students to be better writers: what I knew how to do as an academic writer, I knew how to do only intuitively and haphazardly. I did not know how to articulate principles of good academic writing. And Expos is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a wonderful place to live, especially since it enabled me to live with my husband, a philosophy PhD who had also gotten a job at Expos. What I did not expect was just how empowering I would find it there: they taught me a lot about how to teach generally and even more about how to teach academic writing specifically.

One thing you have to understand about Expos is how its history is tied to its pedagogy and hiring practices. Let me depart for a moment from narrating my own history to narrating Expos' in order to explain how Expos evolved into a program that discounted disciplinarity at the same time as it connected what it did to what students would need to know once they entered particular disciplines. Expos was always separate from other departments, but before the early 1990s, classes were divided into different,

relatively pedestrian “sorts” or categories like “Writing about Literature,” “Writing about Social and Ethical Issues,” and “The Essay.” Unlike now, the program was separated not just physically from other departments but pedagogically. The essays taught in Expos at this time were self-contained units, having little relevance to the kind of essays the students would write in their other classes. This apparent irrelevance—the distance between the writing done in the old Expos program and the writing done in students’ other courses—was a problem.

Both Nancy Sommers, the Director of the program (she has since left), and Gordon Harvey, the Associate Director (he has also since left), became interested, after they arrived in 1987 and 1986 respectively, in recasting the program. Harvey was bothered by the way the “sorts,” the different categories of courses taught at Expos, were not parallel and resulted in flat course descriptions, which did not allow the individual instructor to engage his or her particular expertise. Sommers spoke of how she felt that until Expos tied itself to the rest of the curriculum, it was in a vulnerable position with the deans.⁴ So in the early 90s, they embarked on two projects that eventually resulted in the current configuration of the program: Sommers interviewed thirty faculty and twenty-five graduate teaching fellows and surveyed 123 juniors to learn more about the culture of writing beyond the freshman year. Harvey expanded what had started as a casual collection of student assignment prompts by soliciting assignment prompts from professors across the university. Sommers found that students felt their Expos experience was isolated, that they were not learning the things that would equip them to write the academic essays they were expected to write in their other classes. They also did not feel as if they were getting adequate writing instruction from the professors of these other classes, who spent very little time talking explicitly about what a good academic essay looked like, let alone how to write one. Harvey found not just that the assignments he had collected stressed argument (something he had suspected from the beginning) but that the assignments fell into certain basic types, which corresponded to how they asked the student to handle sources.⁵ In the meantime, he developed a list of terms to describe the elements of the academic essay, terms that instructors in Expos could use to guide their teaching, terms that would give their students a language to discuss the academic essay: e.g., “motive” (how you answer the “so what” question readers always bring with them), “sources,” and “keyterms.” Sommers and Harvey now had evidence to show the deans that the program was needed to address the absence of writing instruction in the students’ other classes. They also had a better idea of how to make that writing instruction directly relevant for the students, who would not henceforth be writing personal

essays or book reviews but argumentative essays that fell into certain distinct types they would meet again and again.⁶ Soon after Sommers and Harvey arrived, they made sure classes in Expos were no longer organized by “sorts”; they were instead organized around a great range of topics, each chosen and developed by the particular instructor (with lots of help from the head instructors and director) and shaped by the instructor’s disciplinary training and area of expertise.

One can see how disciplinarity played a complex role in this evolution: what was wrong with Expos in its earlier incarnation was its isolation from the kind of writing students were doing in particular disciplines, but rather than develop a Writing In the Disciplines program, Expos developed a method of teaching writing that would be relevant for each discipline but specific to none. How is that possible? They developed what we might call a “transdisciplinary” method: a method that attends to what writing in different disciplines shares rather than what distinguishes it. I am also evoking the sense of “trans” that connotes “beyond”: such a pedagogy derives from a sense of getting beyond the disciplinary foothills that obscure the panoramic view available when one views academic writing as the countryside we in the university all inhabit. Transdisciplinarity is an inspiring way to see academic writing and to the extent that Expos prepares students to write in whatever discipline they eventually choose—and many of them have reported being helped—it seems a very useful one. The approach Expos developed is also a fairly idiosyncratic one: the “elements” do not form the cornerstone of most other writing departments, except ones headed by ex-Expos instructors, nor are they the lingua franca of Rhetoric and Composition. In fact, one characteristic of Expos when I was there was its remoteness from the discipline. Although not discouraged from reading in that discipline, instructors were not given an introduction to it as part of their own training. Only in retrospect, did I realize that many of the principles—if not the “elements” that structured our courses in Expos—were derived from findings in that field: e.g., our assigning of multiple drafts indebted to the idea of “writing as a process” and “writing as a form of thinking,” and our prioritizing of ideas over grammar in our commenting on student essays indebted to Sommers’ own research.⁷

In developing the program, Sommers and Harvey thought about how the new incarnation of Expos would affect students, but this new design also had a profound effect on the way that instructors learned to teach. I found that the “transdisciplinary” pedagogy required a lot of meta-teaching, by which I mean a lot of explicit talk to the students about how what I was teaching related to their university education as a whole.⁸ I developed a course on “Satire and Irony,” a course that took advantage of my disci-

plinary training in English in its subject matter (it was structured around literary texts and criticism on satire and irony). But it was not like the literature courses I had taught at Brown: for example, instead of a discussion of the final chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being an end in itself, I used such a discussion to bring out the idea that controversies are what shape academic discussion in general. In subsequent classes, I framed the pieces of literary criticism on the ending of *Huck Finn* that we were reading as entries into a “critical conversation,” a “critical conversation” that the students entered themselves in their final essay, with their own original contribution to the conversation. Further, I told students that even if they did not go on to major in English, no matter what discipline they entered would be structured by these critical conversations; learning a discipline requires not just the mastery of a bunch of terms but a mastery of which critical conversations animate the area of the discipline you end up studying. As you can see, teaching was never just a matter of discussing the thing itself, in my case, a literary text or a piece of literary criticism: these became occasions to limn the genre of academic writing in general, to help the students situate what they were doing and how it would relate to what they were going to do in other classes. Harvey’s “elements” provided the foundation for this method since it taxonomized all academic writing. One nicely fiendish extra credit exercise I assigned challenged students to find an academic paper without a “motive” (the motive could be implicit as it often is with very controversial theses): no one ever managed to get that extra credit.

Expos gave me just what I needed: a place in a community of people who were likewise committed to learning how to be good teachers and a set of terms that allowed me to articulate what good academic writing involved. What also made the experience of working there empowering was the sense of expertise it gave me, although it was an odd sort. Academic expertise usually involves learning a discipline, but that is precisely not what I learned at Expos: I learned how to move beyond my discipline. The way I taught took advantage of what I already knew about the discipline of English; however, it also taught me about academic writing in general and made me feel like I could teach students outside the English department.

Harvey allowed instructors both to use and transcend their particular discipline when he helped establish the program in its new incarnation. As Harvey wrote in an internal document outlining the new program:

The best introduction to academic writing isn’t a seminar on that concept but rather one on a particular academic subject. . . . This kind of focus—on “The Ethics of the Environment,” “The World of George Orwell,” “Imagining the Civil War,” “Law and Psychology”—allows students to engage a subject in a sustained enough way

to have something to argue and explain in their papers. . . . It also brings into play more immediately the academic energies and passions of the preceptor, who is after all the most immediate example of an academic thinker and writer. (“Premises of the Program”)⁹

Instructors’ teaching took advantage of their disciplinary expertise, and the instructors themselves modeled scholarship for their students; however, disciplinary expertise was the means and not the end of the course. In fact, it did not matter what the instructor’s particular academic expertise was so long as she had one. So rather than cultivate disciplinary expertise in Expos, I developed an expertise in how to use my expertise in English in order to transcend it. I found that experience liberating. I did not learn how to teach literature and criticism to English majors; I learned how to teach writing, using literature and literary criticism, to beginning university students. The work allowed me to think of myself as more than just a would-be English professor, and I took on the habit of seeing what English professors do as a subset of what all professors did. Harris’ habit of seeing English professors’ insistence on the uniqueness of their discipline as a form of border-patrolling became my view as well.

DOUBLE EDGED SWORDS IN EXPOS

When I worked at Expos, instructors held five-year terms, although they could be extended a few more years in special cases (the program has since tightened up that rule). The WPAs at Expos assumed that instructors, with their strong commitments to their own discipline, would eventually return to their home departments. The assumption offered intellectual justification for keeping the positions temporary (there were already institutional reasons for doing so). Yet this justification also puts pressure on making this job a stepping stone for such a position, for if it is assumed that instructors will go on to get jobs outside of the program in traditional disciplines, then the program should offer the tools and credentials to do that, and this is where Expos, by serving me so well in some regards, did not serve me well in this one, in my transition back to my home discipline.

There are reasons why an instructorship might not help an instructor return to her home discipline. Some of these are no fault of Expos—and outside their control. Instructors at Expos are not, in fact, referred to as “instructors”; our official title is “preceptor.” I found that “preceptor” as job title was either baffling or misleading to most hiring committees (what did we do, patrol dorms for illicit drinking and comma splices?), and the position itself is hard for English departments to respect. For one thing, it is a teaching position, and this emphasis on teaching does nothing to impress

research universities (though it might help at smaller, teaching-oriented colleges). Second, the teaching of *writing* does not convince those English departments that stress literary studies to the exclusion of Rhetoric and Composition that one is capable of being a professor of English.

In my view, this bias on the part of some English departments is unfounded in most respects. Teaching at Expos taught me a way of making literary texts vivid to students (it particularly comes in handy when teaching older texts, whose intended audience is distant from a contemporary one): I learned to offer competing interpretations of an older text and invite the students to take up a position within the “critical conversation.” For example, the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American woman to publish a book, can be brought alive by teaching how controversial she has been and continues to be. Scholars now debate the extent of her capitulation to racist ideologies, a debate to which students find they, too, have something to contribute. Teaching at Expos also made it easier for me to publish because I myself began to think seriously about “motive,” and this attention paid to why my own work mattered helped convince others it mattered, too.

Yet this anti-Expos bias on the part of English departments is understandable in one respect: Expos drew me away from disciplinary thinking. I do not mean this in the sense that I stopped investigating the questions and controversies that animate the corner of American literature my research was exploring and my teaching took advantage of, but it did make me think disciplinarity itself was a distraction and impediment to what really mattered: teaching students how to write academic essays regardless of their discipline.

Harris and the directors of Expos tried to create a utopian space where the normal disciplinary rules did not apply. Extrapolating from my experience of Expos, they succeeded to a large extent. At this point, though, we might do well to heed Joe Marshall Hardin’s warning that there is no ideal space in composition. WPAs often pit themselves against the “corporate university,” or, more locally, the English Department, putting a *cordon sanitaire* around themselves, although, in Expos’ case at least, the program remained very attentive to what kinds of writing went on in other departments. But Expos’ borders are permeable in ways the directors might not have fully acknowledged as long as their preceptors have limited-term appointments and are expected to continue in their original disciplinary home. The problem was not just that I became comfortable in this seeming utopian space of transdisciplinarity, but that I did not realize how distinctive a space Expos had created. I became good at tweaking my c.v. to downplay the fact that these were writing classes I had been teaching (while

finding subtle ways to highlight the fact I had been teaching at Harvard), but something else had happened to me that could not be finessed: Expos had made me, a trained English scholar who had begun working in the program as a *traditional* scholar, much less orthodox.

Some of the ways Expos changed me have not made it hard for me to go back to an English department. Yes, I have come to believe that writing is simply fundamental to learning. In fact, stating it like that feels ridiculous to me now, like saying breathing is important to living. My habit of putting writing first, more specifically, of teaching to the papers I want my students to write, has affected the way I put together my syllabi and lesson plans. I cannot foresee designing a course by thinking up what texts are needed to illuminate the genre, author, period, or the cultural logic that defines the period—the traditional ways English professors design courses. I think now in terms of questions and controversies that certain texts activate, things that students can write about. Similarly, it is still uncomfortable for me to think of teaching a literary course without including secondary criticism since it is much harder for students to write meaningfully on a topic without the conversation, even though many introductory literary courses leave it out.¹⁰ It is also hard for me to envision teaching a literature course without devoting a lot of class time to talking about how to consider counterarguments or pulling out examples of different theses from student essays for us to discuss. These tendencies, although they grow out of a commitment to teaching academic writing in a transdisciplinary way, have not presented much of a problem in my subsequent jobs, especially since they shaped only the way that I taught my own classes. The problems arose when I tried to promote my own transdisciplinary view of writing to colleagues. Ironically, this view got me into trouble even before I went back to teaching in an English department, when I was hired specifically to teach other professors how to teach writing.

POST EXPOS

In 2004, when my term at Expos was almost up, I went on the job market. My search resulted, tellingly enough, in two campus interviews, both at small colleges, one where I would teach American literature and a couple of writing classes every year and one where I would run their writing center, take part in running their writing program, and teach two writing classes per semester. I was eventually offered the latter job, which I accepted. This job, though potentially permanent, was not tenure-track; it had a renewable three-year contract, generous benefits and salary, and a chance to be director of the writing program someday. But it also offered absolutely no

chance of being part of the English department: there was a well-policed border separating us (I was not able even to teach a class whose topic overlapped with something they wanted to teach). This border in fact grew out of the same soil that eventually produced an independent writing program. Until the mid-90s, first-year writing courses at this small college had been offered out of the English Department. But the English professors found the teaching of these writing classes onerous, making it difficult to staff their literature classes (many English professors also felt keenly the conventional hierarchy between professing literature and teaching writing), and so the independent writing program was born. To their credit, the college tried to establish it according to the Wyoming Resolution: the directorship of the program was a tenure-track position, with a renewable Associate Directorship to help run the program (the job I took). In fact, they hired a Rhet/Comp PhD to become the first director, one of whose charges was to begin offering advanced undergraduate courses on rhetoric and writing, not just first-year composition classes.

The creation of a writing program separate from the English department also gave the administration a chance to re-think who should teach these writing classes, and they decided, just as administrators at Expos did, on scholars from a range of disciplines. But in this school's case, as is the case with most liberal arts colleges with first-year writing classes (or writing-intensive classes), the classes were to be staffed not by outsiders but by existing faculty at the college. In so doing, they seemed to bypass the problem that places like Expos introduce: because their writing classes are taught by existing faculty, they do not have to worry about exploiting temporary laborers.

But a new problem arose. It quickly became apparent that there would not be enough faculty to teach all the sections of the first-year writing courses, so at least during the two years I was there, we had to hire adjuncts to fill in the gaps, a necessity that conflicted with the administration's aim to rely less on contingent labor than they had been. Why weren't there more faculty willing to teach these classes?¹¹ There was the publicly stated reason, which was that departments were having trouble staffing their own courses, and given the choice between using their already stretched-thin faculty to teach a departmental class or a first-year writing class, they quite reasonably opted for the former. In addition, there was the private reason, frequently related to me when I was trying to recruit a particular professor to teach in the first-year writing program—"But I don't know how to teach writing! My class would be terrible." And when I told the person that I had materials—lots and lots of materials and workshops, many workshops, and an orientation that could span several days!—to help, they nodded weakly and

said they would think about it. I got quite angry at this kind of resistance, silently accused the person of gross dereliction of duty, both to the college and to the Goddess *Rhetorica*.

But I theorize this reaction differently now, and my new perspective has led me to be more sympathetic. At the time, I was not thinking in terms of disciplinarity, of how professors in order to become professors in a particular discipline are trained in the particular methods and topics of their own field and, furthermore, trained to know that other disciplines have quite different ones. In fact, even had this fact occurred to me, I would have discounted it. On the face of it, the lack of importance I attributed to disciplinarity in teaching academic writing should have conflicted with the director's immersion in the world of Rhet/Comp, which has struggled to assert its own disciplinary distinctiveness and importance. Instead, we were oddly aligned, and this led to the problem. In splitting off the program from English, in creating a tenure-track position in the new independent writing program, in paving the way for Rhet/Comp to be seen as a discipline like other disciplines, the college was unwittingly setting up a tension between institutional structures and pedagogical requirements: we in the writing program thought we knew what it meant to teach a writing course, and that claim was a big part of the director's disciplinary expertise; despite my own distance from Rhet/Comp, I, too, had come to teach writing in a way that other disciplines generally do not train its own scholars to do (my strange transdisciplinary expertise), to the extent they train their own scholars to do so at all.

In fact, it was, in large part, the transdisciplinary way I looked at and taught writing that distinguished my way of teaching writing. Yet here we were needing our courses to be taught, and the available labor was from professors in *other* disciplines. The more the writing program seemed like its own disciplinary endeavor—what the director thought we had to reinforce in order for us to gain professional respect at this college—and the more I thought that professors had to unlearn their disciplinary biases and learn this new thing, then the more the professors from other disciplines resisted being trained to teach a writing class, which they justifiably believed they did not have the background to teach (or the time to master). But this analysis is only enabled by hindsight. At the time, I uncharitably attributed the resistance I met from many professors to laziness; instead, it might very well have been motivated by their desire to teach writing well or at least the way they sensed we wanted it taught. I should have been more worried by the professors who easily agreed to teach a first-year writing course with only the minimal training we ended up providing, for their ready agreement often signaled not a commitment to a new approach but a commit-

ment to offering courses that looked identical to the courses they usually taught, with one or two extra papers assigned. But in order to think about a solution to this problem, I had first to be able to understand its origins, and my training at Expos did not equip me to think in terms of disciplinarity since it seemed to me that the teaching of writing was not anchored to any particular one. Working from a perspective that assumed that of course anyone (with a lot of training) could teach a writing class, I could not see how the institutional particulars of this writing program were contributing to the opposite impression.

Ironically, the college had set up the program in such a way that faculty would need to think about writing pedagogy as a transdisciplinary endeavor since it would be taught to first-year students who had not been sorted according to what discipline they would end up in (something it would be extremely hard to do at a liberal arts college whose students were encouraged to explore many disciplines before settling on a major). However, in order to gain credibility the way Rhetoric and Composition recommends, the writing program had been set up in a way to broadcast to others that what we did belonged to our own discipline. The faculty I spoke to were reading the institutional signs better than I was. Because I could not read the situation correctly, I had little hope of bettering it. Instead, I got mad at individuals when in fact the problem lay elsewhere. It lay in the contradictions the college had engendered by establishing the writing program the way it did: as a place of disciplinary expertise that nevertheless depended on a faculty whose disciplinary expertise lay elsewhere. But it also lay with me, because my assumptions about the transdisciplinarity of writing instruction determined that although I thought writing could (and should) be taught to a mixed-disciplinary audience, only instructors who gave up the idea of disciplinary specificity in teaching writing were appropriate. This problem arose out of my extremely effective training at Expos, which became, in this different context, more shackling than liberating.

I left this small college after two years for a tenure-track job in the English Department at a large university in Canada. I had finally returned to my original disciplinary home only to realize it felt like the home of a stranger. At an interview with a dean, I mentioned my interest in teaching writing, and the dean informed me that “Unlike American students, Canadian students already know how to write.” When I arrived, the University of Calgary had no first-year writing course anymore; in the early 90s, the English Department offered a first-year comp class to all entering students, but it ended a few years later with the professors in the department vowing never to teach composition again. They felt, much like the faculty in the

English department at the small college, that it had become too onerous, and that their first responsibility lay with their own majors.

Despite the dean's assurance, a couple of years after I arrived, a colleague and I decided that the Canadian students we were encountering did in fact need writing instruction, so we proposed a mandatory first-year writing course for English majors as part of a curricular overhaul the English department was engaged in. What enabled my colleague and I to successfully promote this writing course was to insist on its traditional (literary) disciplinarity: this was not a class for all first years; rather, to the contrary, it would benefit English majors exclusively. (This was enabled by the fact that first-year students come into this university having chosen their major.) The course focuses on teaching practices that English majors specifically need to adopt, the "close reading" of a literary text, for instance. Other aims of the course could be made to seem relevant only for English majors, although they actually fit quite nicely into a transdisciplinary approach: the student learns how to engage with other (literary) critics and how to formulate a debatable thesis (about a literary text). But the real trick in getting this new course passed by the department was to avoid two words in our proposal: "composition" and "writing." English 203: Introduction to Literary Analysis was born three springs ago, and the department has managed to secure the course enrollment at twenty-five students, despite the pressure to teach bigger and bigger classes.

In hindsight, I realize how important the issue of disciplinarity was to its passage. In fitting this class to the intelligible skills needed to be an English major, we made it seem palatable to my department. Writing pedagogy as a "transdisciplinary" endeavor had to be downplayed. We offered a (writing) course that only we in English could teach and that only our students could take. Yet this "solution," which fully acknowledges the disciplinary specialization of those who will be teaching it, has come at a high cost. In making the teaching of it fit more easily within the English faculty's comfort zone (although there is still a good number of the department faculty who prefer not to teach it), these classes assign more writing than usual, but many faculty do not yet seem to teach writing self-consciously at all. Faculty members teaching the course use "coverage" as the organizing principle of their syllabus development. We have no common set of terms to name what reading and writing skills English majors rely on beyond that nebulous term "close-reading," and many faculty who teach in the program talk of grammatical correctness as being the be-all and end-all of explicit writing instruction.

Although teaching writing may not require a wholesale rejection of a professor's disciplinarity, the truth is that it does require at least a partial

transformation of how one teaches. And this is something the English department has not accepted nor facilitated, even if it were to accept this idea—but not for lack of my trying. However, I have no authority in the department as a writing person (I was hired as an Americanist) or power to make or enforce any policy, and my attempts to teach my colleagues how it might be done comes off as annoying know-it-all-ness if not American imperialism. Despite this problem, I do see more clearly than I had before, how disciplinarity cannot be transcended in the very real, un-Utopian space of this department.

Expos was hard to leave, not just because I loved working there, but because in having moved beyond disciplinarity in certain ways, Expos did not consider how disciplinarity would affect its preceptors, who at some point would need to leave Expos. The strategy Expos pursued to justify their program had unintended consequences for me, when I had to navigate quite different institutional spaces after I left. I needed to know more about the role disciplinarity would play for me after I left the program, so I might see it neither as simply a non-factor nor a hindrance. According to Stanley Fish, for a discipline to survive, it needs to be seen as distinctive, as doing something other disciplines do not. That is not to say that people in a viable discipline do only one thing in only one way, but that “the kind of thing they do around here is not positively defined in a list, or even in a very precise single statement; it is defined by their being able to have a share of a franchise to which no one else can lay a plausible claim” (Fish 162). Fish’s observations might explain the border-patrolling Joseph Harris ran into when he was teaching writing as part of an English department and why faculty from other disciplines might be resistant to adopting a “transdisciplinary” pedagogy. Fish’s observations might even suggest something else: that in most cases, disciplinarity is not something to be gotten around or ignored. Could programs like Expos and Duke’s help its preceptors understand how disciplinarity does not stymie the teaching of writing but can enable it?

Perhaps one of the hardest things for a program to do is to acknowledge its own partiality. I mean “partiality” in two senses: programs are partial to their own methods, and their methods constitute only one approach, an approach that intersects inevitably with the work of others. WPAs should not allow their partiality in the first sense to obscure what they would surely acknowledge to be the truth of the second. Joseph Harris thinks—and I completely agree—that Duke’s approach is terrific. Yet however much he is grateful to have left the questions of disciplinarity behind for himself, he needs to acknowledge that for his instructors, those questions might just be beginning. We need to make sure that the safe harbor from disciplinarity

these programs offer any one WPA does not inadvertently hamper the professional advancement of their departing instructors.

NOTES

1. There is a rich body literature describing the exploitation of contingent labor in writing program and possible solutions. See, for example, Jeanne Gunner's "The Fate of the Wyoming Resolution," Richard E. Miller's "Let's Do the Numbers," Michael Murphy's "New Faculty for a New University," and Harris' "Meet the New Boss." Actually, Expos paid a living wage, around \$44,000/year when I was working there, and with only two courses to teach per term, the workload was manageable.

2. See Harris' "Déjà Vu All Over Again" for a more detailed argument for teaching of writing "as a multidisciplinary project" (536).

3. I will explain later in the article why I think "transdisciplinarity" might better describe Expos.

4. The details of this evolution are taken from private correspondence with Gordon Harvey as well as a talk given by Nancy Sommers at the 2004 CCCC conference and since turned into an article, the former entitled "The Case for Research," the latter called "The Call of Research."

5. For example, Harvey found there are essays based on "giving a close reading," essays based on "comparing," essays based on "testing one or more particular claims or arguments," and essays based on "testing a general theory, principle, or definition" ("Common Assignment Tasks at Harvard").

6. This work of assuring the continuity between Expos and the rest of the student's undergraduate career continues. The current director of Expos, Tom Jehn, has noted how difficult it is for beginning students to transfer knowledge about writing from one course to another (perhaps because students think in terms of what a particular professor wants); Expos courses now explicitly help students with such a knowledge transfer, e.g., decoding assignments students might run into and talking a lot about what is unique to this Expos course and what they will run into again but under different names.

7. See Sommers' "Revision Strategies."

8. One result of this focus in Expos' pedagogy is that students often became quite articulate themselves about what academic writing involved; in their early years at Harvard, as the Harvard Writing Study, a longitudinal study that followed the writing development of a group of Harvard students over the course of their four years, found, students could often talk better about what they were doing than actually do it. See Sommers and Saltz' "The Novice as Expert" for more details.

9. It was not until I left Expos and got more of a sense of how other institutions teach writing that I realized this is a controversial premise. I realized that many other programs teach academic writing by making writing itself the topic of the class. Or they work by dividing the syllabus into units like “Explaining Concepts,” “Taking a Position,” and “Evaluation” and having students read essays—not necessarily all academic—that demonstrate each of these moves (this latter approach is, in fact, a description of a popular textbook, Axelrod et al.’s *Reading Critically, Writing Well*). Yet I think Harvey’s method, which is also widespread, has many advantages: it models very closely what students will actually be doing in their other classes and can offer more compelling subject matter to students who are not particularly interested in exploring writing as a topic.

10. Gerald Graff has described the benefits of including literary criticism and teaching controversies at all levels in both *Professing Literature* and his more recent *Clueless in Academe*.

11. For an account of others’ experience of—and advice on—involving existing faculty in teaching in a writing program, see Susan H. McLeod and Margot Soven’s *Writing Across the Curriculum*, especially Karen Wiley Sandler’s “Starting a WAC Program,” which describes the successful methods by which she got faculty from different disciplines involved in aWAC program. For another account of what faculty stand to gain by such participation, see Barbara E. Walvoord et al.

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