"Freeing Students to Do Their Best": Examining Writing in First-Year Seminars

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Abstract: First-Year Seminars (FYS) are among the high-impact practices described by AAC&U. We studied the long-standing First-Year Seminar Program at our public research university for the ways in which writing assignments—individualized for each seminar—help faculty and students achieve program objectives in critical and analytical thinking, the building of classroom community, and application of course themes to wider contexts. Data for our study came from existing survey results concerning student and faculty satisfaction and recommendations, analysis of all course proposals and assignments for the Spring 2015 term, and interviews with FYS faculty from eleven departments across the humanities, social sciences, life sciences, and health professions. Significant findings included (1) the power of group writing-and-presentation projects in the seminar environment to build community and to shift the focus of writing (and speaking) from individual development to group and larger community goals; and (2) the "freeing" of students in the language-rich seminars from traditional academic pressures so that students were motivated to achieve for the community. The study findings led us to merge the typical WAC theory binary of "learning to write" and "writing to learn" into an interwoven objective of "learning to write to learn for the benefit of the many."

Introduction

Carlos Jackson teaches a course intriguingly called "An Image Is Missing" to fifteen students, most of them first-year, at the University of California, Davis. With his students, Jackson, associate professor and chair of Chicana/o Studies, grapples with the issue of under-representation of Chicanos/Latinos in literature for children. They discover and read articles on the topic, and each week students explore the significance of their readings by writing *précis* to fuel their class discussions. Also each week, a small team of the students takes notes on the discussion, then drafts a 1500-2000-word analytical reflection that, after receiving feedback from Jackson, they post to a blog on Facebook. "I want us all to be accountable to the public and to each other for what we say and write, " says Jackson, who has taught seminars such as this one since 2007 as part of Davis's First-Year Seminar Program. "I learn from the students' openness and creativity that come through in their conversation and writing."

The First-Year Seminars (FYS) have been offered at UC Davis since 1988, and each year attract more than 3000 students to close to 200 offerings, with titles such as "What Makes Airplanes Fly?", "From

the Big Bang to Life," "How to Look at Modern Art," "Veterinary Emergency/Critical Care," and "Bebop Jazz: From Charlie Parker to John Coltrane." The approximately 3000 students who enroll per year include over 25% of Davis's entering class (5300 total in 2014-15), plus many first-year transfer students. About a quarter of these FYS students enjoy the experience so much that they enroll in more than one seminar in a year. The students who enroll in FYS are representative of Davis's ethnic and linguistic diversity.[1]

Unlike some other FYS programs, Davis's is purely elective, not required,[2] and first-year students take these 1- and 2-credit courses because of their provocative subjects and their reputation for providing a relaxed but intellectually lively climate. Graded either by letter or Pass/No Pass—the instructors choose at the time they propose the course—seminars provide first-year students the opportunity to learn from Davis faculty in a true seminar environment, distinct from the large classes that typify much of the first-year course load.

For first-year students in many majors, the required introductory, or "gateway," courses, such as in chemistry and biological sciences, enroll hundreds of students in large lecture sections and often have failure rates above 30%, with assessment occurring through mid-term and final multiple-choice exams. Also, some of the lower-division courses typically used by students to fulfill general education area requirements in arts and humanities, social sciences, and science and engineering (http://ge.ucdavis.edu) also have enrollments over 100, 200, or even 500 students. Therefore, the first-year students who take FYS often do so as their only small course, perhaps with another small class in English composition, amid a schedule that admits of no other opportunities for the kinds of teacher-student or student-student give-and-take and intense engagement that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) sees as the hallmarks of a "high impact practice" (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips; see also Kuh, 2008).

According to AAC&U, first-year seminars place a "strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research." As described on the Davis FYS website (http://fys.ucdavis.edu), seminars are intended to meet course criteria that reflect the characteristics of high-impact practices:

> Emphasis on interactive and engaged class discussions; student projects, reports, and in-class presentations; student group work; a safe place for all students to share ideas.

> More than many other courses, Seminars emphasize class discussions as an essential form of teaching and learning. A key goal of the First-Year Seminar Program is to create opportunities for first-year students and faculty members to meet face-to-face in examining a topic of mutual interest. Unlike most courses on campus, First-Year Seminars are not designed to help students master a sub-section of disciplinary knowledge at a clearly defined level of understanding.

> AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIMENT: Many First-Year Seminars require students to complete assignments that are difficult to evaluate by traditional academic criteria alone. Instructors cannot require students to complete a final exam, and group presentations or individual projects appear frequently as alternatives (or complements) to term papers.

When UC Davis FYS students and faculty were surveyed by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in 2008 (FYS Faculty Toolkit, 2016), the two most oft-stated reasons for student enrollment were (1) small class size and (2) the regular opportunity for in-class debate and open discussion

(http://fys.ucdavis.edu/docs/FYSFacultyToolkit.pdf). When students were asked to suggest improvements in the seminars, the most oft-cited suggestions related to the students' desire for discussion and debate of ideas. They wanted fewer Power-Point-driven lectures (a staple of their large-enrollment classes) and even more opportunity "to get to know their teachers" through participation in discussion. Closely tied to opportunities for participation were suggestions for "fostering a friendly class climate": "those who gave the class high marks on class participation often wrote they enjoyed the professor's personality, humor, and efforts to share personal opinions and thoughts with students." These student responses from 2008 anticipated the findings from the 2014 Gallup-Purdue poll of U.S. college graduates (Gallup, Inc.,2015). The poll found that, regardless of institution type or prestige, students regarded several quality-of-academic-life factors as most responsible both for engagement in college and workplace satisfaction. The most oft-cited factors were the student's having had "at least one professor who made me excited about learning" and "a professor who cared about me as a person." Both of these factors are implied by UC Davis students' reasons for valuing the FYS experience.

Similarly, the teachers of FYS, who include full-time faculty and faculty emeriti, plus several staff and administrators who have affiliate status in academic departments, are drawn to the seminars for much the same reasons the students are. According to the 2008 survey quoted above, faculty cited as first incentive the opportunity to try out new courses and to teach in areas different from their usual courses. As their second incentive, they cited the chance to work with undergraduates, especially first-year students, one reason being "to 'catch them' while they were still interested in broad issues" (http://fys.ucdavis.edu/docs/FYSFacultyToolkit.pdf). A third incentive cited was word of mouth from other faculty who enjoyed the experience. Indeed, such are the good feelings engendered by the FYS experience that 86% of the faculty respondents said they would teach again, a statistic corroborated by faculty practice up to the present.

Gerhard Bauer, a faculty member in Internal Medicine and an authority on tissue repair and HIV gene therapy, says that his oft-taught seminar on—perhaps surprisingly—"The History of Motion Pictures" gives him an opportunity outside his regular duties to express other interests; in his case, his life-long love of acting and his 36 years' growth of knowledge as a collector and restorer of classic film. Instructors receive $2500 to $3000 for a 1- or 2-credit seminar, but the stipend, which may be used to reimburse research expenses, is not the major incentive. Says Carlos Jackson, "I don't do the seminars for the stipend, but for the chance to build a course around a question important to me." Wendy Terry, a lecturer who frequently teaches 60-, 100-, or 120-student classes in the Religious Studies department, loves teaching her "Druids: Religion, Wisdom, and Violence" FYS because otherwise she doesn't get to teach such small groups: "To get to sit down in a circle with a small group of students is a luxury. In that small a group, there's nowhere to hide, and because of that, I can actually interact with them."

In fact, the small size of a First-year Seminar helps cultivate a close-knit environment where not only do the instructors interact closely with their students but also where the students can engage with each other in a more intimate way.

Roles of Writing in First-year Seminars

In the above description on the FYS website at Davis, writing is not explicitly mentioned as a required or even recommended form of learning or assessment. "Reports," "projects," and "student group work" are mentioned as recommended practices, but how this work would be carried out is not described, and indeed there are some seminars, a minority, that specify oral presentations, but not written products. Thus, when we undertook this study of writing in FYS at Davis, we did not assume

that every course would require student writing. We also assumed that, when we asked faculty about their uses of writing in the courses, we would not get the response, "Well, it is required, you know."

Conversely, we did assume that when we asked teachers to talk about why and how they used writing in their courses, we would get thoughtful answers that spoke to their goals and hopes for their courses. Indeed, this is what we found and what we report, below, in our results and analysis. We might speculate, therefore, that the seminars represent a research space where we can find evidence of a "WAC environment," as Condon and Rutz describe in their taxonomy of WAC/WID programs (2012), in contrast to situations where a college or university requirement for writing-intensive (WI) courses may imply an institutional goal but not necessarily a fulfilled practice (Thaiss & Porter, 2010; Townsend, 2008; Walvoord et al., 1997).

In that light, we'll describe briefly where the FYS fit within the larger picture of writing across disciplines at UC Davis. All undergraduates must meet two types of writing requirements (http://ge.ucdavis.edu): (1) a two-course English composition requirement and (2) a two- or three-course "writing experience" (WE) requirement (Davis's version of WI), which students may meet within their major or elsewhere in the curriculum. (80 majors list courses in the major that fulfill this requirement.) Students take a minimum of two such courses if they also take a course from an approved list of oral communication courses. Students who don't take an oral communication course must take a third WE course. In addition to these requirements, admissions testing in writing places 30% of first-year students in at least one preparatory writing course before they are eligible to take the lower-division course that meets the first half of the English composition requirement. About 10% of students, most of them among Davis's growing population of international students, may take as many as three preparatory quarter courses in a sequence for English language learners (http://esl.ucdavis.edu).

Toward understanding the place of FYS in the overall scheme of writing at UC Davis, it is particularly significant that more than 1500 courses (roughly one third of all undergraduate offerings) are approved to meet the "writing experience" requirement across majors. (FYS do not meet the WE requirement, because, as we noted above, faculty are not *required* to assign writing in FYS.) Also, the second half of the English composition requirement is met in upper-division courses that focus on writing rhetorical genres in courses with titles such as Writing in the Health Professions, Business Writing, Technical Writing, Writing in Science, Writing in Human Development, Writing in Engineering, Journalism, Writing in Ethnic Studies. Writing in Fine Arts, etc. These two factors contribute to an overall awareness that writing occurs in courses across disciplines and areas of professional preparation.

Hence, when we talk with faculty who teach FYS, it is not surprising to hear them mention writing that they assign in other courses that they teach, nor to hear them say that the writing they ask students to do in FYS has as one of their goals to prepare students for other courses they will take. When interviewed about writing in FYS, Robert Newcomb, associate professor in Spanish and Portuguese, says that FYS impacts "not so much the content of class discussion and lectures but the kind of critical writing component" that emerges from the discussions, because "that's a transferable and useful skill." Newcomb applies this philosophy in his own FYS, which is based on his teenage interest in the 1990s underground rock music of Seattle grunge bands such as Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam. More importantly, when our informants talked with us about other courses they teach and how they have tried to adapt practices from FYS to large-class environments, we see both the inspirational value of the FYS as an experimental space and the specialness of those seminars in the overall curricular environment. We also see on occasion their frustration at not being able to recreate the FYS atmosphere in large-enrollment courses.

Roles of Collaboration in First-year Seminars

Embedded in most Davis FY seminars is another AAC&U high impact practice—collaborative assignments and projects—that takes a range of forms to meet diverse purposes. AAC&U defines these as follows: "Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research" (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips).

The combination of writing with collaborative activity has long been part of writing studies theory, most expressly in the literatures on peer review (e.g., Murray, 1968; Elbow, 1973; Spear, 1988) and writing development (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Martin, D'Arcy, Newton, & Parker, 1976). What we see in the FYS model is that writing and collaborative work are mutually reinforcing toward growth in student self-efficacy, as well as working together to build the interactive, learning-focused environment that both the students and faculty cherish about the FYS. According to Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, and Hall (2003), it is important to consider the influence of self-efficacy and goal orientation on academic motivation. Self-efficacy describes one's sense of competence in being able to achieve (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003). While self-esteem is general, self-efficacy is situational and contextual (Linnenbrink & Pintrick, 2003). Perception of self-efficacy influences self-regulation and management (Bandura et al., 2003) and influences "how people behave, think, feel and self-motivate" (Caraway et al., 2003, p. 419). The FYS emphasis on "debate," "discussion," and "small group work" in both the students' reports of incentives (2008 survey) and in the course designs by faculty shows their mutual awareness of the link between collaborative activity and self-efficacy/motivation. Perhaps for this reason, many of our informants have students work in groups to lead class discussions and carry out writing projects. Discussions end up being the most valuable part of the class, and informants say that they know a class is successful when they don't hear their voices as much as the quarter progresses; the students take over talking and sharing what they have learned—and written—with others.

In the excerpts from the interviews we conducted, as reported in our results, we will describe several collaborative projects and how these have worked to meet creative and critical thinking goals, as well as rhetorical aims of the courses. The methods we describe in the next section were intended to help us understand how the First-year Seminars, as instructors design and conduct them at UC Davis, create environments where learning happens in diverse ways and where the projected aims of a "high-impact practice" are achieved. We focus some of our questions on how writing occurs in these courses, with the writing not thought of as an end in itself, but as a means toward building these productive environments.

Methodology

Setting

The University of California, Davis, was founded in 1908, and is currently the third most populous of the ten campuses in the University of California system (35,000 students) and by far the largest in geographical area. A predominantly residential research institution, UC Davis offers more than 100 undergraduate degrees and more than 80 graduate degrees in the sciences and engineering, social sciences, and arts and humanities, as well as in medicine, veterinary medicine, management, and law.

Its agricultural and veterinary science programs were recently ranked (2015) No. 1 in the world by QS World University Rankings (http://www.topuniversities.com/subject-rankings/2015).

Participants

In order to gain insight into faculty members' uses of writing in the context of FYS, we used two methods for this study. (1) We studied the four-part course descriptions written by each instructor on the FYS website (http://fys.ucdavis.edu), with each description subdivided into "description," "goals," "assignments," and "grading." (2) We recruited participants for interviews who (1) were teaching an FYS in the current quarter (Spring 2015), (2) had taught a FYS more than once, and (3) represented a variety of disciplines. In addition, we paid particular attention to the types and variety of writing opportunities the faculty included in their course descriptions. Although the vast majority (85% of 35) of FYS descriptions in Spring 2015 include writing, which, as noted earlier, is not required for teaching these interactive seminars, we chose for our interview sample faculty whose courses, according to their descriptions, provided a varied range of writing activities and opportunities. With approval from our institutional review board (IRB), we selected eleven faculty members[3] who met our recruitment criteria and contacted them via email to invite them to participate in the study. All accepted. All gave informed consent to have us use their names and comments in the article.

Data Collection

Members of the research team conducted semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2006; Brenner, 2006; Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, 2005; Warren, 2004) with the eleven participants (see interview protocol in Appendix). Each 60- minute interview was audio recorded; the interviewers also took detailed notes during the conversations.

Data Analysis

We relied on both inductive and deductive (Thomas, 2006) analytic strategies to make sense of the data. Our analyses were informed by our desire to extend existing scholarship about "high impact educational practices," so we used what Mayring (2000, as cited by Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) refers to as deductive category application. We did not apply *a priori* categories; rather, we identified initial coding categories based on our understanding of the use of writing as a tool for learning (McLeod & Soven, 1992; Thaiss, 2001; Poe, Lerner, & Craig, 2010). Specifically, we expected our participants to tell us that their use of writing had resulted in the development of their students':

- critical thinking skills;
- subject knowledge awareness;
- creativity; and
- rhetorical awareness.

As we discuss in the results section below, our participants' observations of their students' writing provided confirmation for the results we had anticipated. Our more surprising and important finding, however, arose due to our commitment to the tenets of naturalistic inquiry (Russell, 2001). Because we wanted to read beyond the categories, we engaged in general content analysis, which Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define as "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). It was

through this very open reading of the interviews that we discovered the importance of the interplay between risk and engagement, as described below, as well as the importance of writing in community building.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we organize our findings into several themes that emerged from the data and our analysis. These themes we name "Weaving vs. Sewing," "Freeing to Do Their Best," and "Learning to Write to Learn—For Everyone's Benefit."

"Weaving" vs. "Sewing"

The Argentine scholar Paula Carlino (2012) has written that writing in disciplines can be thought of as either "woven" into the fabric of a course, so that it is essential to learning, or merely "sewn" on to the fabric of a course, as inessential decoration. The teacher, for example, who modifies a course to include a mandatory writing assignment to meet a general education requirement, but who could just as easily remove the assignment without affecting student outcomes, is into "sewing." But when our informant Gerhard Bauer in his seminar on the history of motion pictures says that one "can't grasp an idea without writing," that is weaving. Weaving, too, is what Diana Cassady in her seminar "Salt, Sugar, Fat" does when she assigns her students to write letters to state legislators and to the director of the Centers for Disease Control, because crafting those letters and knowing enough about nutrition and policy options to write them is the soul of her course.

As stated earlier, no teacher of a First-year Seminar at Davis is required by the proposal rules to have assigned writing. That over 80% of them do speaks to the environment that the instructors want to create. That many link some type of writing to small-group presentations also speaks to that hoped-for environment. When students present individually or in small-groups, for example, the small space environment helps embolden them to lead class discussions in more thoughtful and productive ways. This kind of environment brings us closer to the one-to-one ratio of teacher-student that informant Bob Kimsey, who teaches a "Forensic Entomology" First-year Seminar, describes as the most effective kind of teaching: "The greater distance that you go away from that 1-1, very intimate thing, the less effective on an individual basis you become." As effective instructors, our informants utilize the special environment that First-year Seminars afford to "weave" writing as a tool for learning.

Freeing to Do Their Best

In our informants' elucidating these unique "weaves" and the worlds the teachers hope to create in their courses, we were somewhat surprised to find how often, indeed ubiquitously, they spoke of their goals for students in emotional-developmental terms: "building confidence," "engaged in the topic," "becoming unafraid," "free to take risks," or, as in the title of this essay, "free to do their best," as spoken by Wendy Terry about her course "Druids: Religion, Wisdom, and Violence." According to Carlos Jackson, this emotional impact on his students, as they become inspired to be agents of social change, is "90% of the course goal" for him. Indeed, "free to do their best" captures a ubiquitous binary in our interviews—that some might think paradoxical—between teachers having high standards for student performance and their wanting to reduce pressure and risk. But we saw this binary expressed time and again. For example, Bauer asserted both that he has high standards for the quality of the students' writing, even awarding prizes to the top three essays, while also "taking away fear" by giving "second chances" to students who perform less well. Similarly, Moshe Rosenberg, the renowned cheese-making authority who teaches "There Is Life after Cheddar," asserts his demand that his students dig into the library for appropriate sources to describe cheese-making

in far-flung parts of the world, but also emphasizes the fun of the course, for example in its many cheese tastings and in the group publishing project that culminates the course.

This linking of high performance with "freeing" from certain kinds of pressure is familiar in writing studies from process theory (e.g., Anson, in Tate et al., 2014) and its emphasis on improvement through revision stages. This "freeing to do their best" also resonates through Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1990a) "flow" theory, which posits a balance between the challenge of a task and the actor's feeling of confidence to perform it. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discovered that literacy activities that correspond to Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics of flow experience tended to increase students' engagement. Specifically, Smith and Wilhelm's participants favored activities in which they experienced "[a] sense of control and competence; [b] challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill; [c] clear goals and feedback; [and a] focus on the immediate experience" (pp. 29-30). Whereas too great a challenge and too little confidence produce paralyzing stress, and too little challenge for a confident person produces boredom, the ideal balance is a kind of intense engagement that we see happening in our informants' descriptions of these seminars and that is reflected in the 2008 student survey results. When students emphasize in their evaluations that "debate," "discussion," and "participation" are what they prize in the seminars, as well as "getting to know" the rest of the class, including their teachers—the same goals highlighted by our informants—we see also a meshing of teacher and student expectations that is the ideal posited by "activity" theory, as adapted by Russell and Yañez (2003) from Engeström (1999, 2001). Because the concept of the first-year seminar, as defined by AAC&U and enacted by our informants, offers many opportunities for mutual "getting to know" and for teacher and students to blend their expectations for success, that intense engagement and "doing everyone's best" becomes a possibility. Where those opportunities are lacking, as in many high-enrollment classes or in other mass test-taking situations, it is no wonder that low performance will be the norm for a significant percentage of students.

While commonplace thinking in education equates grade pressure (or high standardized test scores) with superior achievement, the teachers we interviewed saw grade pressure and high performance in conflict. Schwinger, Lemmer, Wirthwein, and Steinmayr (2014) argue that "in the context of academic learning, students sometimes experience threats to their self-esteem. These threats are often elicited by the fear of failing in upcoming achievement situations such as an important exam" (p. 744). In fact, the student who has positive expectations of success "must not only believe that doing the assigned work can earn a passing grade, she must also believe that she is capable of doing the work necessary to earn a passing grade" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 77). Note the connections with flow theory and self-efficacy described earlier. Christiana Drake, a professor of Statistics who routinely teaches a FYS on "How to Conduct a Survey," discusses this very problem when asked about her FYS. She believes that students appreciate the fact that the first-year seminar is not academically threatening. When students are so grade focused, they forget that they're in school to learn. She says that because the punishment for low grades is so severe, many students "are very reluctant to try anything difficult or challenging." It is for this reason that many informants appreciated the grading option of Pass/No Pass, because it freed the students to think about the intrinsic value, pleasure, and challenge of the course topic and assignments. Without grades as a distraction, students can focus on working with their fellow students, sometimes in friendly competitions for recognition of quality, and on students creating work intended for other audiences. So, for example, food science professor Moshe Rosenberg, who teaches "There Is Life after Cheddar," can demand that his students do varied research about the many cheese-makers in California and around the world, and he knows that he'll get good work because they have the common class goal of creating a multi-site brochure for "agrotourism." Says Rosenberg, "They come to understand the

necessity of good communication with the public in order to keep alive the craft of artisan cheese-making."

Learning to Write to Learn—for Everyone's Benefit

We began this project with the expectation of exploring writing in these first-year seminars via the classic WAC/WID binary of writing to learn and learning to write (McLeod & Soven, 1992; Thaiss, 2001; "Statement," 2014). Our interview questions (Appendix) are founded on the construct that writing contributes to student learning, and we wanted to know from our varied informants what that connection between student learning and the writing experiences they conceived of might mean in those different courses. We also expected that our informants would mention ways in which they wanted the writing itself, as a formal complex of skills, to improve as the quarter went on. Interestingly, many of our informants talked about writing as so interwoven with student learning and growth that it was difficult for us to tease out differences between writing to learn and learning to write. In other words, it might be more accurate to say that the teachers perceived that the most prevalent goal for the assigned writing was to "learn to write to learn." Moreover, and here is where the link with collaborative learning—another High-Impact Practice—comes in, the purpose of much of the writing in the courses was not individual development only, but the success of the group investment in learning. Individual growth is interwoven with communal success. That most of the writing in these courses is either (1) done in small teams and/or (2) presented to the rest of the class demonstrates this goal.

Keep in mind that what makes this study different from some other studies of WID is that our primary focus was not on the writing at all. It was on the First-year Seminar at Davis as a particular kind of learning environment. How did the features of that world, as molded by specific teachers and further elaborated by the students, lead to particular learning, thinking, and emotional results? And how did writing, as one kind of activity tailored to that world, contribute to those results?

Writing for diverse audiences plays a key role in these courses in turning student focus away from pleasing the teacher-as-grade-giver and toward objectives in relation to others. Several of the courses we studied had political objectives, for example. Public Health professor Cassady's "Salt, Sugar, Fat," on causes of childhood obesity, positions students as advocates for political change by having them develop informed arguments to write to politicians and health officials. She deliberately chooses readings that explore the complexity of the debates, and she prizes in her feedback their learning to achieve and defend their own points of view. "When I was their age, I'd have been too modest to stake out my own position," said Cassady. "I don't want them fearing their professors. But they need the tools to argue well." Rhetorician Rachel Simon, a lecturer in the University Writing Program, who teaches "Political Rhetoric and the Daily Show with Jon Stewart," uses critical readings about media, clips from the Daily Show, and weekly informal analyses by her students to build their skill in probing the humor of Jon Stewart (and other TV satirists). Small groups prepare their fellow students for each week's discussion, and as the course goes on, she sees the discussions becoming more incisive and nuanced. "I know I'm succeeding when they talk more and I talk less." Their culminating assignment, for each team to create and script their own Daily Show segment for presentation on the final day of the course, shows how far they have come in understanding the rhetorical complexities—and the serious points behind the humor. "They become competitive with each other, and students know, by the end of the quarter, why one segment is better than another."

Sudipta Sen, a Professor of History who specializes in the history of India and the British Empire, uses other creative assignments to achieve these group results and build an enriched rhetorical awareness. He teaches a seminar designed to introduce students to Gandhi's ideas of civil-

disobedience and non-violence. He finds the First-year Seminar liberating because he can be more creative with his writing prompts. He assigns two projects: the first asks his students to imagine themselves as U.S. journalists visiting South Africa between 1895 and 1914. These would-be journalists happen to witness Gandhi's protest movements championing the cause of Indian immigrants. He asks the students to write a newspaper report or editorial on their visit. The second assignment invites the students to imagine themselves as Gandhi, had he been brought back to life, writing a letter to his assassin, Nathuram Godse. They are to base the content of their letters on readings about Gandhi's testimony and beliefs that they had been reading throughout the class prior to the assignment. In doing so, Sen pushes his students to think beyond the grade and challenges them to think about Gandhi as a real world figure who has changed the world in which they live.

In each of these cases, successful writing is not separable from successful learning, and vice versa. Moreover, in each case, the teacher's design of how the course will work from week to week substitutes rhetorical imperatives that supersede whatever grade pressure might otherwise exist, whether or not the teacher chooses the P/NP option. One kind of rhetorical incentive is created by assignments like those of Cassady, Simon, Sen, Rosenberg, and Jackson, which postulate specific audiences and purposes, as well as demand an authoritative ethos by the writer.

This kind of approach to teaching helps the instructors think about the teaching of writing in creative ways. Robert Newcomb, through his seminar on "Grunge and the Seattle Sound of the 1990s," takes principles that he normally teaches in Spanish and Portuguese literature courses, like how to write critically, or how to make an argument that draws in equal measure on textual citations and paragraph phrasing and analysis, and applies them to different genres of creative expression in music. He has found that the same principles in terms of writing remain constant regardless of whether one teaches a literature course or a course on pop culture. The point is that students learn that they can write intelligently and critically about ideas that go beyond the conventional "academic" or "literary" sense. In doing so, they engage with the world more intelligently and critically: they are able to take what they're doing in the classroom and apply it to gain real-world skills.

Because of the less conventional approach to learning that the First-year Seminar affords, instructors like Sylvia Sensiper, the Director of the Guardian Professions Program (GPP) in the Office of Graduate Studies, is able to assign work that gets students out of the classroom to feel the influence of ideas on others. One of the assignments from her "Contemporary American Buddhism: How Meditation Became a Part of the Mainstream" asks her students to visit a meditation center and journal/free-write about their experiences. She doesn't grade these journal entries, but the writing itself becomes a way for them to appreciate the potentially deep experience they encounter through the visit itself.

Similarly, entomologist Bob Kimsey attempts to give his students a real CSI experience through writing. He states: "The process of actually learning a thing, of learning to become observant, and of understanding what you've seen is very rather elegantly crystalized by the process of translating what it is into words you write into paper." So after visiting a forensics lab, he asks the students to write their direct experiences in a comprehensible and legible way so that others can benefit from their observations. Not only do students mimic the CSI officers who must write reports of what they see, they also are learning how to convert their observations into words with meaning for others.

A more pervasive rhetorical, performative incentive in the seminars is the week-by-week demand that each student prepare to perform well for the other students. For almost all we interviewed, their students, usually in small teams, were assigned to prepare the weekly discussions by creating questions for discussion (based on assigned readings or research) and/or by preparing some form of introduction. As the interviews show, the instructors were observing these prepared questions and remarks, and their grading criteria demonstrated the importance of these small-group tasks. But

at least equally important as an incentive was the comparative framework of the seminar community, as students observed and responded to the preparations of each small group. As we observed again and again, a key role of writing in the seminars is to facilitate whole-group discussion/interaction. Moreover, the small-group structure for the writing that led to presentations was yet another way by which each student's rhetorical sense of audience is directed toward their colleagues.

Hence, we should add to the typical binary of WAC/WID—"writing to learn" and "learning to write"—a third core element, which we might call "writing to build community" or "writing to stimulate group learning." In this way, the high-impact practice of the FYS is joined with the high-impact practice of collaboration. This role of writing has been featured in active-learning literature (e.g., Walvoord, 2014; Dannels, 2014; Timpson & Doe, 2010), as well as in "writing in communities" scholarship (e.g., Gere, 1987; Bräeur & Girgensohn, 2012), but our analysis of how writing functions in these FYS environments suggests a more prominent place for this function of writing in WAC/WID theory.

Conclusion

As we have shown, our current study supports AAC&U's advocacy of FYS as a high-impact practice due to its varied benefit to student growth; but rather than simply lead to positive outcomes for students, we have found that FYS is also a valuable experience for the instructors. Not only do FYS foster an environment where faculty can express other interests besides their current field of study, they also allow space for using writing in creative and productive ways that deepen learning and build rhetorical skill. Time and again, informants discussed enjoying teaching more in their FYS: they find that they teach for the joy of teaching rather than for content delivery; and their students respond well to such environments. For this reason, their FYS experience has impacted their teaching of other classes, where they attempt to bring some part of the FYS experience to larger, less-intimate environments. Whether by assigning small group projects or having more one-to-one student interactions outside of the classroom, the informants are finding more resourceful ways of reaching students beyond the teacher-as-a-grade-giver, all of which are promoting maximal student learning.

This study has deepened our knowledge of the processes of design and teaching that lead to the success that students have noted in their evaluations over the years of the FYS at Davis. As we at Davis go forward in our efforts to assess student—and instructor—learning not only in the FYS, but also in other programs, we can use our interview structure and protocol as one means to delve into the mechanisms of other courses and answer other ongoing questions:

- How can FYS influence other class- and program- development at UC Davis?
- How do we use this information to set a research agenda for Undergraduate Education?
- What are other optimal models for reducing pressure and risk and increasing engagement that UC Davis and other institutions may use for their benefit?

Because the findings of this study revealed that lower risk/higher engagement brings about positive outcomes in student learning, it is advisable for UC Davis and other institutions to consider designing more programs that foster learning that values alternatives to traditional academic design. Institutions should strive to provide students the opportunity to learn without conventional "pressures" in a more relaxed but intellectually lively—and demanding—climate. Not only does this kind of design help student performance, it also improves the teaching that faculty can provide to their students, and in this way, there is a mutual blend of expectations for success.

Finally, this study and its results also suggest two key ways that our theory of writing in WAC/WID contexts might be broadened. The well-known binary, almost a mantra, of "writing to learn/learning to write" fails to capture environments like our FYS, where the terms of the binary are so deeply *interwoven* that they can't be teased apart. Further, to the degree that the binary (like most of educational theory) focuses primarily on *individual* development, it misses the productivity of writing as a *technology of communal development*. Where, as in the FYS courses we studied, writing mutually facilitates group talk, as well as opening students' horizons for meeting the needs of others, *writing for the benefits of the many* becomes another core element of WAC/WID theory.

Appendix - Template of Interview Questions

(We asked all of these questions. In addition, we asked follow-up questions prompted by informant responses.)

1. What prompted you to design your course and its assignments in the way that you did for this seminar?
2. What did you hope that your students would achieve through the writing assignments you selected?
3. On what outcomes are you assessing the students in this course?
4. How do you evaluate student work in your course?
5. How do you evaluate writing in your course?
6. How do you know if your students are meeting course goals?
7. How and why has your approach to using writing changed since you last taught this or another FYS?
8. How do you feel that students are learning through writing in this course?
9. How is students' critical thinking improving?
10. In what ways do you feel that your assignments help students improve as writers?

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Notes

[1] Our thanks to Matt Steinwachs of the UC Davis Educational Effectiveness Hub (http://eehub.ucdavis.edu) for the FYS enrollment figures. Proportional diversity at UC Davis is as follows: Asian/Pacific Islander 39%; White 29%; Hispanic 19%; African American/Black 3%; American Indian/Alaskan Native 1%. (Source: UC Davis Profile, http://ucdavis.edu/about/facts/uc_davis_profile.pdf)

[2] Nor do FYS at Davis fulfill all or part of the university's first-year writing requirement, which is met through other courses. The writing requirements at Davis are described later in the essay.

[3] Our informants represent the following disciplines: anthropology, chicana/chicano studies, entomology, food science, history, medicine, public health, religious studies, rhetoric and writing, Spanish and Portuguese, and statistics.

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