It's Not *Just the Facts, Ma'am*: Writing for Success in Career Education

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Abstract: Writing across the secondary curriculum has been viewed primarily through the lens of traditional academic courses taught in comprehensive high schools. In this paper the author draws on her past experience as a criminal justice teacher at a career and technical high school to describe writing that facilitates and demonstrates learning of subject matter, but also facilitates and demonstrates learning to do and to be. Because CTE students are immersed in a field of their own choosing, the writing they do is more than an add-on; it is accepted as an integral part of what they want to do and the professional they strive to become.

It is often difficult to see across the road at 7:50 A.M. The snow blows around; the sky is its usual gray. And then a bright yellow bus pulls into the lot in front of the two-story brick building that rises from the cornfield miles from the closest town. It is the first of more than a dozen that will drop off high school seniors from the fourteen participating school districts, some as far away as 40 miles. The scene will be repeated shortly after noon; this time, however, the buses will bring the juniors. For more than two hours a day, five days a week, over the course of two years more than 500 students will brave the elements and the discomfort of a school bus to attend one of the twenty technical and career programs offered. They will learn the skills necessary for success in their chosen career field. Because of that, though it is an unlikely place to find writers, you will find many there. Welcome to Upstate Tech.[1]

In addition to enduring an often uncomfortable and long commute, students who attend Upstate Tech do so with the knowledge that it is not an escape from the academic demands of courses at their home districts. All must meet the New York State Regents requirements of four years of English and social studies, three years of math and science, one year of a second language, two years of physical education, and a half year of health. Their decision to attend, therefore, translates to a very long day and a demanding schedule in which study hall is no longer an option. The reward is the opportunity for hands-on learning and the prospect of receiving a technical endorsement on their diploma. (Students who pass an approved technical assessment and complete a work-based learning experience are eligible for this endorsement.)

I confess to a degree of romanticism as I set the scene. Let's be honest. Attendance at a vocational high school is not often seen as a badge of honor. The perception is that the students are deficient, unable to grasp the complexities of chemistry or the challenges of calculus. Rose (2004) expressed concern that "many vocationally oriented students have mediocre educations" (p. 191). Guidance

counselors often discourage the "good" students from attending, and encourage the troublemakers in order to be rid of them for half the day. After all, although more than 40% of Upstate Tech's graduates historically go on to postsecondary institutions, most are not considered college material. Even the words of vocational education's most vocal advocate suggest that those who "do" and "make" are somehow different.

> While training for the profession of learning is regarded as the type of culture, as a liberal education, that of a mechanic, a musician, a lawyer, a doctor, a farmer, a merchant, or a railroad manager is regarded as purely technical and professional. The result is that which we see about us everywhere – the division into 'cultured' people and 'workers,' the separation of theory and practice...If we were to conceive our educational end and aim in a less exclusive way, if we were to introduce into educational processes the activities which appeal to those whose dominant interest is to do and to make, we should find the hold of the school upon its members to be more vital, more prolonged, containing more of culture (Dewey, 1964, p. 309).

Yet, Dewey certainly recognized the need to expand the curriculum to include vocational instruction so as to be more inclusive – to keep more students involved. Schooling had to be purposeful, more than an isolated recitation of disconnected facts. It must "furnish the environment which stimulates responses" (p. 186). Upstate Tech does that.

Let us also acknowledge that a vocational high school is not often the site for studying writing. Writing is not what we expect to find there; the casual observer might even question whether it is a school. Students are working on cars, grooming dogs, sitting in a circle playing games with toddlers, operating a backhoe, dusting for fingerprints. It does not quite fit the picture we have of school since few students are sitting quietly in their seats. Some might even wonder if a teacher is in the room until they spot an adult looking under the hood of a car, or sitting on the floor brushing a dog's fur, or standing at the hairstylist's workstation. Everyone appears to be having too much fun.

Because of vocational education's non-academic image, writing to learn content across the secondary curriculum, the goal of which is, "better thinking and learning" (Gere, 1985, p. 5) has been viewed primarily through the lens of comprehensive high schools and the academic subjects they offer. Writing to learn German (Peterson, 1985), social studies (Beaman, 1985), and science (Bruce & Mansfield, 1994) are just a few examples of inquiries into writing at the secondary level. When the effects of writing-to-learn activities in a vocational agricultural program in North Carolina were studied, however, the researchers (Reaves, Flowers & Jewell, 1993) noted that it was the first of its kind. (If my internet search was as thorough as it felt, it was also one of the last.) Writing as a member of an academic discourse community, what McLeod (1992) described as the rhetorical approach to writing across the curriculum (WAC), has been studied primarily at the postsecondary level.

Also studied at the postsecondary level (and in the workplace) is a third avenue that writing across the curriculum can take, and the one that is most visible at Upstate Tech. It was suggested by Russell (1997) in his celebration of WAC's 27th birthday and it involves exploration of the workplaces students will enter, and knowledge of the writing they will need to be successful. "WAC is not only about writing to learn, it is also about writing to learn *to do*" (p. 4). What is commonly referred to as professional writing instruction, however, has not been without its share of controversy. There is no debate that writing in school is not the same as writing in the workplace. The difference was acknowledged over 100 years ago when Horace Greeley lamented, "Of all horned cattle, deliver me from a college graduate" (as cited in Adams, 1993, p. 100). Since the early 1900s members of the business community have been complaining about the failure of schools to adequately prepare

students for writing in the workplace. In response, colleges and universities began adding specialized writing courses to their curricula. More recently, however, the transferrable value of those courses has been called into question. Writing in school is for the purpose of evaluating and ranking (Beaufort, 1999; Dias, Freedman, Medway & Paré, 1999). Instruction is centered around students (Dias, et al., 1999; Freedman & Adam, 1996), and so teachers teach before they evaluate, and give students the tools they will need to be successful. In the workplace, writing is not to let someone know that the writer knows something; it is to get something done. It requires "an understanding of underlying values and goals" (Beaufort, 1999, p. 39). Writing in the workplace requires knowledge of the subject matter and the writing process, but it also requires knowledge of the genre and the context. Since the textual features of a genre are secondary to the social/rhetorical action, Freedman (1994) was opposed to explicit instruction in school, and said it could even be harmful. Workplace genres were observed as being so unlike school genres that "any academic attempt to replicate them, no matter how sophisticated or elaborate the simulation, case study, or role play [is ultimately futile because] the lived experience of texts is impossible outside of their enactment" (Dias, et al., 1999, p. 134). Spinuzzi (2004) called it pseudotransactional writing. His assertion was that when college classrooms try to replicate the workplace with simulations and hands-on learning activities, the results are artificial.

What about career-oriented high school classrooms? Are the results merely artificial? Are the hands-on learning activities and simulations little more than playing *make believe* or *grownup*, and not really learning at all? A look inside Upstate State can provide answers.

A High School at Work

A hush comes over the crowd as the twelve jurors and two alternates enter. The prosecutors look up from their table where they have been reviewing their notes, aware that the burden is on them to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The defense team and the defendant, similarly occupied with last minute preparations, scan the faces of those who were selected during the *voir dire*. The court stenographer has noted the time as the court attendant announces, "All rise. The Honorable Amy Armstrong presiding." Judge Armstrong takes her seat, turns to the prosecutor and asks if he is ready to make his opening statement.

The trial of Bill Connor, charged with one count of first degree manslaughter and one count of second degree burglary, begins.

Welcome to the criminal justice classroom at Upstate Tech. It is large for a classroom, roughly 36' by 48'. The back quarter of the room is partitioned off and, thanks to the carpentry class, has a raised floor with two tiers of seating. It is where weeks of preparation will either pay off or come crashing down in disappointment. It is where the paperwork completed by the investigators during last year's crime scenario will be scrutinized; the opening and closing arguments written by the lawyers will be heard; the testimony memorized from the script the students wrote will be challenged by the other side. It is where writing has a purpose.

Since the late 1990s there has been a shift in what is now referred to as career and technical education (CTE). In response to the need to better prepare students for a changing workforce, there has been an increased emphasis on preparing students who attend vocational programs for future employment as well as postsecondary education (Lynch, 2000). Although the integration of academic and vocational curriculum has been regarded as "more the exception than the rule" (Hoachlander, 1999, p.1), it is also true that "the once-common assumption that CTE does not prepare students for higher education is no longer valid" (Dare, 2006, p. 74). Despite limited long-term follow-up of CTE graduates, the National Assessment of Vocation Education (NAVE) reports their pursuit of

postsecondary education parallels that of the general student population. A 2006 study by The National Center for Education Statistics found that 82% of all 2004 public high school graduates who had enrolled in a postsecondary institution had completed or were still pursuing a degree. The rate for CTE graduates was 79.7%. Although completion of a vocational program is associated with a higher probability of earning an associate's degree rather than a bachelor's degree, the research suggests that graduation rates and grade point averages are very similar (Griffith & Wade, 2001; Offenstein, Moore & Shulock, 2009).

One road that has been taken to better prepare CTE students for the demands of postsecondary education is an initiative of the Southern Regional Education Board, *High Schools That Work* (HSTW). Since 1987 HSTW has been gaining momentum in both a quantitative and qualitative sense with over 1,200 participating schools in 30 states and the District of Columbia (HSTW, 2011). Its emphasis on rigorous academic coursework, which includes intensive integration of writing into vocational classes, has succeeded in providing CTE students with intellectual challenges formerly reserved for the academic elite. It has also succeeded in garnering praise (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2003; Dare, 2006) as a best practice for preparing students for life after high school, and has provided reliable evidence that its strategies are successful in raising the academic achievement of career-bound students (Lynch, 2000).

HSTW is not a formal WAC program, but its literacy goals do closely mirror those of WAC. Writing in a variety of genres on a regular basis, writing and revising papers, reading and writing to encourage critical thinking, reading and writing to enhance learning are all recommended practices of a literacy curriculum in which students are actively engaged. These are objectives shared by advocates and practitioners of writing across the curriculum.

> Ask most of the founding mothers and fathers of WAC programs just what ideas sparked the program at their institution and they are likely to give you two answers: (1) students' writing skills will diminish if not reinforced and practiced between freshman composition and graduation and (2) students' writing improves most markedly if they write while they are engaged by their major subject.
> (Farris & Smith, 1992, pp. 71-72)

The connection between critical thinking, active engagement and writing made by Bean (1996) asserted "that the most intensive and demanding tool for eliciting sustained critical thought is a well-designed writing assignment on a subject matter problem" (p. xiii). Classroom debates, simulations, small group discussions are just a few of the many strategies he recommended. A wide variety of writing assignments ranging from ungraded personal writing to thesis-driven academic papers, less routine assignments like interviews and dialogues all contribute to creating an environment in which at-risk students and others from diverse backgrounds are challenged and engaged.

In the late 1990s Upstate Tech received a grant to participate in HSTW. Academic teachers had been hired to assist vocational instructors, and HSTW provided a framework, support and training for the entire faculty. Writing was fully integrated into 13 programs.

Although many career-bound students were found to be writing very little in their home schools (Bottoms & Bearman, 2000), at Upstate Tech students are writing to learn to do the jobs they hope to do either immediately after high school or upon completion of a postsecondary course of study. In the early childhood education, for example, students prepare lesson plans for the pre-schoolers who attend their program three mornings each week. The cosmetology students team up with the drafting class on a salon design project, and complete an extensive business plan. The culinary students who prepare a daily lunch for the faculty put together the menus, and create recipe books complete with

all instructions. Students in the human services program visit local nursing homes, correspond with residents regularly in writing, and write case histories of the people with whom they formed a bond. A "Portfolio Day" is set aside at the end of the school year, and hundreds of students share their best work with their peers, faculty, administrators and the public.

It's More Than *Just the Facts, Ma'am*

It is another overcast day. Although the calendar says May (the school year doesn't end in New York until late June), the chill in the air feels more like early March. But watching the action out in the parking lot it is clear that the temperature is not a concern. Gabe is face down near the telephone pole lying motionless, his body covered with a rancid mixture of ketchup and tomato sauce. Melissa and John are standing near his body taking careful measurements and jotting down notes. Stephanie is interviewing Michael about 20 feet away and Dan is talking to Nicole; both interviewers are writing furiously as their respective respondents reply to their questions. Others can be seen examining tread marks in the driveway, dusting a car for fingerprints, lifting with latex-gloved hands what appears to be evidence. Everyone is documenting something.

I doubt that many of my students were acquainted with Sgt. Joe Friday of *Dragnet* fame, or with the line he made popular. They were more familiar with *CSI*, and many told me they enrolled in the criminal justice program (officially called *Public and Private Security*) because they thought it would be fun to solve crimes. During my 10 years there it was consistently one of the larger classes, enrolling between 50 and 70 high school juniors and seniors annually. While the occasional future valedictorian and salutatorian attended, the majority of my students were what we would describe as average; a substantial number struggled with subjects at their home schools, particularly English. They all expressed a desire to continue their educations after graduation, and roughly 70% did enroll in a postsecondary institution.[2] Many also articulated an intense dislike of reading, writing, and all things associated with English class.

Like all the teachers at Upstate Tech, I had professional experience in the field I was teaching. Having been a probation officer, I knew my students would need to know how to write well if they were going to achieve their dream of working in law enforcement, the courts, corrections or private security. Guest speakers would echo my mantra that writing was a necessary skill. Local, state and federal law enforcement officers, district attorneys and defense attorneys, probation officers and parole officers, even the security guard from the local mall emphasized the writing demands of their positions. In addition to classroom contact with professionals, students spent time in the field. As a class they visited local jails and state prisons, probation departments and private security firms. They observed arraignments and sat in on trials. These group experiences culminated in a 5-week individual shadowing experience during senior year.

The 900-hour course was designed to provide students with as rich and real an experience as possible. Although most of the students' interest was in the field of law enforcement, it was important to provide them with knowledge of the workings of and connections between all three components of the criminal justice system: law enforcement, courts and corrections. Eleven units of study were designed:

First Year		Second Year
Foundations of Criminal	Justice	Criminal Procedures & Mock Trial
The	Police	Criminal Behavior
Criminal	Law	Corrections

| Forensics | Private Security |
| Police Functions & Investigations | Family Court & the Juvenile System |

Writing was an integral part of each unit but served different purposes depending on the content. Students wrote to learn, to demonstrate learning, to learn how to do, but also to learn how to be. If the program was to succeed in developing critical thinking and writing skills, and giving students a deeper understanding of the role writing plays in their expressed career choices then writing had to be integrated in such a way that it became part of "being" a cop, "being" a lawyer – not an add-on. Instead of using exit cards or reading logs, for example, students turned in daily ungraded "activity logs" that documented their actions and understandings. Case histories and scenarios were written by the students, not provided by the teacher. Learning was demonstrated primarily via project-based activities that replicated, as much as possible, real world situations. These situations (establishing probable cause to obtain an arrest warrant, preparing a case folder, conducting a *voir dire*, determining probation or parole eligibility) all involve writing.

Creating a quasi-workplace environment also afforded me the opportunity to respond as a supervisor would – not always evaluating a piece of writing with a grade affixed, but rather returning documents until they were right. Many of my students entered the program with little regard for or limited ability with basic language conventions (spelling, punctuation, usage). Students began to appreciate the value of writing clearly and correctly, of revising and proofreading their reports so as not to have their work questioned by the defense attorneys during trials. Writing became real and personal to them; they strived to rise to the challenge. Other writing activities included:

- Foundations of Criminal Justice Unit
  - Students wrote letters to professionals in law enforcement, the courts, corrections, and private security to request they speak to the class. Following the presentations students wrote thank-you letters.
- Criminal Law Unit
  - Each student was provided with a copy of the current New York State Penal Law. As they learned the statutes they wrote scenarios that described the elements of the crime (harm, mind, act, causation, etc.). Without naming the offense, partners had to determine which statute(s) applied.
- Policing Units
  - Students conducted research into the historical development, composition, duties and qualifications of a particular law enforcement agency (local, state, federal or private). They obtained employment applications from the agency, wrote cover letters for the completed application and prepared resumés.
  - Students learned how to complete official police paperwork: incident reports, domestic violence incident reports, accusatory instruments, traffic tickets, investigation reports, depositions, search warrant applications, and arrest reports.
- Investigations Unit
  - In groups, students created a crime scenario for another group to investigate. They wrote out a description of the offense, the roles and materials needed.
  - The investigating group responded to the initial complaint, investigated the scene, took measurements, conducted interviews, and kept complete documentation.
  - Each investigating group submitted a case folder which included all investigative notes, secured evidence, and the paperwork they had learned how to complete during the policing unit.
- Mock Trials

- - Based on the crime scenarios and subsequent investigations conducted the previous year, defendants had their day in court. The attorneys wrote and delivered opening and closing arguments; the judge prepared instructions for the jury; witnesses wrote and practiced their testimony. The case folders that had been completed by the investigators were scrutinized; much of the paperwork was submitted into evidence.

Additionally, students wrote reflections about their visit to a maximum security prison and the inmates they met. They wrote case histories and presentence reports based on their readings of "Frankenstein," "In Cold Blood," "Newjack," "Helter Skelter," and media accounts of crimes and punishments.

Did the students balk? Sometimes. Did they complain that it was like taking an extra English class? Occasionally. Was it messy? Frequently. Did they focus and do the work and revise their work until they got it right? For the most part. They did it because it had a purpose for them. If we agree with Vygotsky (1978) that "teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something...something the child needs" (p. 117), and that immersion in a subject develops writing abilities (Hirsch, 2003), then it is clear that career and technical education programs can and do provide an excellent writing environment. Students are there by choice; they have made the decision to enroll and so what they learn and do in their technical program has a purpose. Blau (1987) pointed out that "it is only through an ongoing long-term engagement with the spoken and written discourse that constitutes a field of study that a student can learn the ways of seeing and talking that will render him competent for discourse in a field" (p. 5). Upstate Tech's students spend 900 hours absorbed in learning the theory and practice of their chosen craft.

It is true that many of the students who attend do so in order to escape their home schools. Also true is "the fundamental paradox of vocational education...its diminishment of the intellectual dimension of common work and of the people who do it" (Rose, 2004, p. 170). When writing is distinguished from coloring someone's hair without it falling out or knowing which wire connects with which so as to prevent a fire on the basis of it being academically rigorous, it only exacerbates the problem. Many CTE students are doing things that remain a mystery to doctoral candidates.

To conclude that Upstate Tech's students are producing pseudotransactional writing suggests that there is a false or deceptive element to it. But, Upstate Tech's students are not writing in high school English classrooms or the writing classes Spinuzzi (2004) described. Clearly, no one really died in the parking lot; Bill Connor was not charged with two felonies, and his attorneys have yet to attend law school. What, then, distinguishes the simulated crime scene and subsequent trial from the trials of Lady Macbeth or George Milton that take place in many English classes? Purpose. Fictional characters are "tried" in order to encourage and demonstrate deeper understanding of the content. Bill Connor went to trial because the investigating police officers successfully processed and documented the crime scene, deposed witnesses, and produced legally correct arrest reports, investigation reports and accusatory instruments so that the prosecutor could obtain an indictment. The simulations, therefore, provide the content for understanding and practicing the kinds of writing that they will actually do in workplace. Given the students' exposure to authentic documents, the professionals who wrote them, and the activity systems within which these texts function, they have an understanding of the different genres' objectives and their relationships to one another. While it may not be real world writing, it is not false writing. It is *almost*transactional, quasi rather than pseudo.

As noted earlier, students who complete a field experience and pass an approved technical assessment graduate with a technical endorsement on their diploma. For my students the assessment was/is the NOCTI (National Occupational Competency Testing Institute) Criminal Justice

Examination. Expertise is required in subjects ranging from criminal law and procedure to corrections, courtroom practices to crime scene handling. Like other standardized assessments much of the test is comprised of multiple-choice questions that are scored by a computer. Unlike others, there is a "must pass" practice section that requires students to process a simulated crime scene and write up the accompanying documents. This section is evaluated by a current professional in the field. My students passed.

There is no way to determine whether the 70% of criminal justice students who went on to postsecondary education would have done the same had they remained at their home schools all day. Neither can I assert that the writing they did made them more successful writers in college. I can say that Amy graduated second in her class of several hundred from the NYPD Academy; Mike is in charge of teaching new recruits how to write reports at his police department; Dan earned a B.S. in Sociology and is a probation officer who writes presentence investigation reports. I can also say that CTE classrooms should be included in future discussions of writing at the secondary level.

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Notes

[1] Upstate Tech is a pseudonym.

[2] Graduates of Upstate Tech are contacted one year after graduation. The percentage was obtained via that contact. The vast majority were enrolled in criminal justice programs at community colleges. No further formal follow-up was conducted.

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