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Writing Across the Curriculum and/in the Freshman English Program

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Creating a writing across the curriculum course for—or WAC component of—the English department seems like a contradiction in terms. The writing across the curriculum movement has had as one of its major goals the dispersal of writing throughout undergraduate education. That goal has been formulated for diverse reasons, some practical (e.g., that the English department cannot assume sole responsibility for teaching writing or that writing skills learned in freshman English need reinforcement), others theoretical (e.g., that writing is a mode of learning or that undergraduate education ought to introduce students to conventions of thinking and writing in various disciplines). Whatever the reasons, writing across the curriculum programs have advocated a movement beyond—indeed, away from—the English department.

Nonetheless, the freshman English course can provide a major component of a comprehensive writing program and, if well conceived, can become the basis for subsequent writing across the curriculum efforts (see Hilgers and Marsella, ch. 7). The practical reality, at many institutions, is that freshman English is the one required course in writing, one that all students hold in common. What freshman English requires often defines for students what "writing" is. If freshman English is a course that asks students to

read literary texts and write about them, then it represents "writing" as training in literary criticism. If freshman English instead asks students to read and write contemporary prose forms (the autobiographical essay, the character sketch, the cultural critique, and so on), then it provides an introduction to nonfictional writing. If, however, freshman English asks students to read and write in various academic genres, then it may provide a foundation for writing in the disciplines. This preparation is important for all undergraduates who plan advanced work in their majors and, later, in their professions; it is even more important for less well prepared students who need a general introduction to the features of academic discourse (see Bartholomae).

Obviously, a director of writing across the curriculum cannot mandate that the English department offer this third sort of course. As Barbara Walvoord suggests in Chapter 2, writing directors and administrative officers should never force a program or curriculum onto any faculty. Departments believe, quite rightly, that the courses they offer must fit into a coherent set of offerings. And if the freshman course is to be taught primarily by members of the English department, then it makes sense for the approach to be compatible with the department's sense of its methodology as well as with the writing across the curriculum program's sense of its mission. In English departments that take a broad view of English studies—a view that includes linguistic, rhetorical, and textual studies—a freshman course focusing on forms of academic prose may be possible, even desirable as part of its undergraduate sequence.

THINKING THEORETICALLY, CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROGRAM

The model outlined in the following pages aims for both conceptual compatibility and administrative practicability. It is, according to Susan McLeod's distinction in Chapter 1, a *rhetorical*, or *learning-to-write*, model. It begins by drawing on an essential technique of English studies: rhetorical analysis of the ways that conventions operate in forms of written discourse. This model does not assume that English faculty can or must master the complex subject matters and methodologies of disciplines other

than their own. It does assume, however, that English faculty teach rhetorical analysis as fundamental to their discipline: that they regularly show students how conventions operate in literary texts, how those conventions both enable and limit the writer, how they make reading possible and pleasurable for the reader. As Jonathan Culler puts it in *Structuralist Poetics*, we cannot read a literary text, certainly not "interpret" it, without competence in the conventions of its genre: Readers bring to the work "an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells [them] what to look for" (113-14).

Similarly, readers and writers of "nonliterary" texts—whether a quantitative report by an anthropologist or a descriptive analysis by an art historian—need to understand the conventions. The concept of *convention*—literally a "coming together," a shared understanding about matters of structure, style, evidence, and theme—is as important in a writing class as it is in a literature seminar. Student writers, whom thinkers like Elaine Maimon have characterized as apprentices in a field, need to understand the conventions of thinking and writing in that field. The concept of convention, if not the term itself, is crucial to the student's success in undergraduate courses.

Consider, for example, the knowledge required of a biology student assigned a laboratory report in its standard form. The student needs to know the conventional structure: title, abstract, introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, and references. She needs to understand conventional distinctions among the sections: that, for example, the "results" section presents the facts discovered in the past tense and in both statistical and verbal forms, whereas the "discussion" section interprets the facts in the present tense, explaining their significance and relation to other work in the field. And she needs to understand the conventions of scientific style, what might be called an *effaced style*, if one refers to a deemphasis of the experimenter, or a *highlighted style*, if one refers to an emphasis on key objects and facts.

Such conventions of the lab report may, at first glance, seem a far cry from the conventions of an English sonnet or a classical epic. Yet the English teacher's means of understanding these forms, like his or her way of teaching "close reading," derive from techniques of rhetorical analysis. A freshman course within a writing across the curriculum program might focus on learning

such techniques and applying them to a broad range of academic discourse. Traditionally, English teachers have taught students to recognize conventions and to explore the use to which writers have put them in the creation of literary texts. In a writing across the curriculum program, English teachers might transfer this knowledge of convention and its enabling power to forms of writing that are not strictly literary: to historical essays, psychological case studies, reviews of anthropological literature, and scientific lab reports.

This transference can represent the English department's contribution to the writing across the curriculum program (or part of it). The goal of freshman English, at the most basic level, would be to teach students how to recognize and use central conventions of writing in the disciplines by applying techniques of rhetorical analysis. This goal would link the students' desire to take a *practical* course with the English faculty's desire to show how rhetorical analysis, a central aspect of its discipline, complements other parts of a university education. Beyond this basic goal, the course might engage students in the process by which conventions are created and established. It might show students how conventions are shaped by an agreement between writers and readers in a shared field of discourse, and it might demonstrate, via faculty dialogue, how these agreements are constantly being renegotiated as fields expand and change.

The rationale for adopting this model might be articulated as follows: Professionals within a discipline share a knowledge of the conventions of written discourse used by that discipline. Such knowledge needs to be shared with students, too. English faculty can, with the help of others, encourage this sharing by introducing students to the written work of professionals in various disciplines, by showing them how to read that work for conventions as well as content, and then by asking students to try their hands at apprentice versions of such writing.

TURNING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

The writing director who wishes to design a freshman course that focuses on forms of academic writing needs to begin by consulting faculty in several different departments. To repeat

Barbara Walvoord's advice, "Start with faculty dialogue" (this volume). When members of our freshman English staff decided to try this approach, we contacted colleagues in five fields: art history, history, biology, anthropology, and philosophy. The exact fields are not crucial, but a representation from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences provides an important mix of discourse styles. So, too, cooperative colleagues from those departments are important—not because they must team teach the writing course, but because they must provide substantial advice and assistance.

We asked for the following advice: (1) What are some examples of good writing in your field? (2) What are typical assignments that a freshman or sophomore might encounter in your department? (3) What tips would you give students for writing successfully in your field?[1]

With such information, a freshman staff can design a course with four to six units, each introducing students to writing in an area of academic study. In a typical unit, students would read examples of exemplary writing in the discipline; would try, with the help of the writing instructor, to identify central conventions of this writing; would do a typical assignment, ideally an apprentice version of the professional form; and would have an opportunity to ask questions of (or hear advice from) a faculty member in the discipline. Other sound pedagogical techniques from *cognitive models* of writing across the curriculum—such as using heuristics, keeping journals, writing drafts, and eliciting peer commentary—would be incorporated into each unit. We regularly used peer workshops, for example, to help our students generate ideas and revise drafts during the course of each unit.

In planning the course, the writing staff might consider the following principles and procedures.

1. Working with colleagues to choose examples of good writing may be more productive than searching through professional journals or relying on collections of essays. On their own, English faculty may choose writing they perceive as exemplary, but it is not necessarily writing admired by professionals in the field. Colleagues in other departments can suggest well-written, representative, even humorous articles that the English teacher would never find independently. They can also recommend a wide range of texts that demonstrate the various strategies used by scholars in their discipline.

Given the increasing number of textbooks on writing across the curriculum, it is possible, of course, to shorten this process of collecting exemplary writing. Textbook authors and editors, some of whom are contributors to this volume, have already done the hard work of assembling and then testing materials for classroom use. But even if a staff decides to adopt a writing across the curriculum textbook, it would be unwise, I think, to sidestep entirely the process of soliciting examples of good writing from one's colleagues. Faculty benefit immensely from the conversations that develop as they discuss good writing with each other. Students benefit from discussing writing that a professor at their home institution has chosen, perhaps even written. There is no pedagogical substitute for talking with a professor about how she or he wrote an article, what procedures she or he used, and how much trouble she or he had.

2. Asking colleagues for advice in formulating assignments can strengthen the link between the freshman writing course and the broader college curriculum. In my experience, colleagues will readily share paper topics from their introductory courses or help writing faculty invent topics modeled on actual assignments from introductory courses. The assignments the students do in freshman English will directly relate, therefore, to the writing they do throughout the university.

Sometimes colleagues even suggest examples of professional writing that provide instant paper topics. An anthropologist from Union College, for example, contributed two versions of an essay he had co-authored: one for a professional journal, *Current Anthropology*, the other for a popular magazine, *Psychology Today* (see Gmelch and Felson; Felson and Gmelch). Not only did these essays demonstrate how writers adapt materials for different audiences but the professional version actually included a survey that students could repeat to generate data for their own writing assignment. The survey—on forms of "magic" used by modern college students—had only to be reproduced and distributed to a new population. Thus the professional reading naturally produced the students' research and writing: Students became apprentice anthropologists as they added new data to, and tested the theoretical statements in, the work of a professional anthropologist.

3. Inviting colleagues to join in a class discussion, to respond in person to questions about academic writing and its conventions,

can aid the writing program's efforts to show the differences and similarities among the disciplines. Such discussions give students a chance to ask questions that they normally cannot—or will not—ask in large introductory courses. (Not coincidentally, they remind professors of issues that should be raised regularly, even in "content" courses.) When I teach such a course, students use these informal discussions with professors to ask questions that, although central to a discipline, are rarely if ever raised in other contexts: "What is an historical fact?" "What does it mean that writing in the sciences is 'objective'?" "Why do literature teachers tell us not to refer to the 'author' or his 'message'?" These questions can aid the goals of the general education or core curriculum programs at many liberal arts institutions.

English faculty could, of course, teach an introductory writing across the curriculum course without asking colleagues to lead a discussion or respond to students' questions. But a colleague's presence lends authority to the approach. It shows how professionals within a field use conventions as part of their working vocabulary and as means for generating ideas. Discussions also demonstrate how collegial relationships work. We—English faculty as well as students—felt free to raise issues about academic writing that we knew we could answer only partially but that we expected to be able to resolve with the help of an additional perspective.

4. Using class time for collaborative work keeps the focus on the students' writing and on the kinship between professional writers and apprentices in the field (see Bruffee "Structure of Knowledge"). It is tempting to devote class time primarily to analyzing professional texts and questioning guest professors about strategies for success in their disciplines. As in all writing courses, however, the focus should stay on the students' own work. To make this possible, writing teachers should encourage collaboration among peers. Collaborative workshops give students a chance to practice methods of invention or strategies of revision and to define for themselves the modes of argumentation and presentation that delineate the conventions of a discipline.

Certain writing assignments can encourage this collaborative methodology further. For instance, a biologist now teaching at the University of Virginia, Nancy Knowlton, suggested that students conduct pseudoexperiments that would allow them to focus on

the form of the scientific report, rather than on an actual research problem. (They did Coke versus Pepsi tests, experiments with homemade versus "refrigerator" cookies, taste tests of various foreign foods.) Knowlton also suggested that students work in teams, just as they might in a research lab. As the students gathered data and later as they wrote up their findings, they worked collaboratively, dividing up the research and writing tasks. Such division reflects the actual procedures of professional scientists, who seldom write every section of a research report on their own but instead rely on teamwork to produce research and writing.

ANTICIPATING THE DIFFICULTIES, AVOIDING THE PITFALLS

Introducing writing in the disciplines, by using these principles and procedures, helps to address a pedagogical problem that often surfaces in freshman English. When students write within an academic setting, they often try to compose what they think the teacher wants. Often, too, they approach successful writing as the arbitrary result of the luck—or bad luck—they had when they got assigned to an individual composition teacher. Teaching convention helps us redefine these (false) premises by shifting focus away from the individual teacher and toward the academic discipline: They as student writers are expected to recognize and apply a core of conventions agreed on by an academic community (see Bruffee "Structure of Knowledge"). What we as writing teachers do is redefined as helping students learn to discover and master such conventions.

Although a freshman course in academic writing may resolve this pedagogical problem, it may not help writing programs (or program directors) avoid more fundamental conceptual and administrative problems. Two problems tend to originate within the English department, three others outside of English.

English departments that define themselves narrowly (or perhaps, in fairness, I should say specifically) as departments of literature may be unsympathetic to a freshman course that focuses on "nonliterary" reading and writing. Especially if English departments have been pressured into service, into teaching every incoming student in a required writing seminar, they may not wish

to add to their burden by teaching materials unfamiliar to them. The freshman course I have described works best in an English department that defines itself broadly as a department of language and literature, that places rhetorical issues at the center of English studies, that takes an interest in nonfictional prose forms, that sees itself as interdisciplinary, and that assumes a wide definition of what is "literary" or even rejects the distinction between the literary and nonliterary. This sort of English department will find teaching writing in the disciplines challenging and intrinsically interesting.

If a writing director does not have a sympathetic English department with which to work, it may be better to accept a different model for the freshman course. A more traditional course that uses various prose forms—some literary, some academic, some popular genres of nonfiction—can still provide an appropriate introduction to composition, so long as it incorporates sound pedagogical practices from "cognitive" models of writing across the curriculum. An introductory course in literary criticism may be an appropriate contribution for the English department to make to the writing across the curriculum program—if it is (re)conceived as a course that teaches not just literary texts, but the conventions of reading and writing about literary texts. (This approach has been adopted, for example, at SUNY Albany.)

A second problem may also originate with the English department, although it may have little to do with antagonism or incompatibility. This problem surfaces when the primary instructors for freshman English are graduate students in English, but the primary instruction they receive as graduate students is in literary history and criticism. To teach an introductory course in academic writing, an instructor must have some familiarity with nonfictional prose forms, some understanding of the rhetorical techniques and issues at stake. Many students beginning graduate study have no experience with nonfictional prose—let alone with rhetorical strategies for analyzing forms of academic prose. Many have never taken freshmen English themselves; some have avoided, as undergraduates, exposure to disciplines other than English. As a result, they may find teaching a writing across the curriculum course more difficult than freshmen, with a broad range of interests and backgrounds, find taking it.

To avoid this pitfall, the graduate program should include course work not only in composition theory and pedagogy but also in forms of nonfictional prose. It is possible to compensate for a lack of such courses by devising a strong teaching practicum—one that addresses issues in academic writing, perhaps one that invites faculty from across the university to discuss professional writing with graduate teaching assistants (TAs). But assistance at the graduate level cannot be ignored—without disastrous effects on the freshman course. Whether formally through course work or informally through workshops, novice instructors will need help teaching a writing across the curriculum course. (This point holds true at colleges where regular faculty comprise the writing staff, but because faculty have more experience as teachers, the difficulties can be solved quite readily with a strong faculty development program.)

Not all difficulties involve the English department. Some derive from the practices that this model of teaching writing across the curriculum assumes. For instance, when colleagues suggest examples of good writing, they may in fact select writing that is inappropriate for use with freshman students: it may be too difficult, it may pursue an intellectual problem too abstruse, it may contain passages of "bad writing" (even by the standards of the professor who has chosen it). These less-than-ideal choices can cause difficulties in the classroom. They need not cause disasters, however. In conversation with writing instructors, faculty will often admit that a piece of writing is difficult for freshmen, but that they assign it anyway to illustrate essential techniques of academic writing. Or, in discussions with students, faculty will acknowledge that an exemplary article contains passages of dull or poor writing, but that overall it represents powerful strategies of argumentation.

Admissions like these can lead to crucial discussions about standards for academic writing. Students can come to understand how a piece of writing may be both "good" and "bad," how and why writing may be "powerful" at certain moments but "dull" at others, how writing may be "acceptable" in its use of conventions but "poor" writing nonetheless. And, because students have the opportunity to study multiple forms of academic writing, they can begin to formulate differences in disciplinary standards. In a discussion with a biologist, for example, one student asked why

the scientific report had so few transitions—a feature that history and literature professors emphasized as essential. The biologist was able to explain that sections of the scientific report must stand on their own, without verbal transitions; further, she explained that the logic of paragraphs within sections must be clear without a reliance on transitional devices.

In other words, difficulties with suggested readings can become occasions for significant learning in the classroom. As the writing program develops and English faculty gain experience, some writing suggested by colleagues may be "disappeared" or replaced by other selections. Some freshman staffs may decide, too, that they will concentrate only on writing about a discipline or writing done by professionals for a lay audience. These choices may be necessary, but in my experience, the ideal version of the freshman writing across the curriculum course uses real academic writing, in combination with these other forms of prose. In most instances the difficulties that academic essays introduce can be turned into pedagogical assets.

This is less true for difficulties with suggested writing assignments. Colleagues in other fields sometimes propose assignments that cannot be completed without a course in the department or at least some understanding of the subject matter. A history paper we initially assigned asked for a comparison of different positions taken during the Civil War on the meaning of the Preamble to the Constitution ("We the people of the United States..."). The rhetorical techniques needed for analyzing the documents and writing the paper were relatively simple (the compare/contrast paper is, after all, one of the most common assignments in postsecondary education). But the historical background needed to complete the paper proved a stumbling block to foreign students. American students enter college with basic information about the American Civil War, whereas foreign students do not. The assignment put the latter at a disadvantage.

By quickly adding background reading and by encouraging collaboration, we were able to compensate for our initial blindness to the difficulties of the assignment—and we avoided the problem the next time around. Yet every assignment in a writing across the curriculum course has the potential, in some way, to put some student(s) at a disadvantage. The biology major will find writing a scientific report easier than a prelaw student will; the humanities major will probably prefer writing about a literary text or an art

object to writing up a psychological case study. Although this reflects the reality of a liberal arts education, writing instructors can avoid the pitfall of unnecessarily privileging or disadvantaging certain students by thinking through the skills needed to complete an assignment and then by evaluating assignments at the end of the course.

And this point raises the last—and most knotty—problem: that, even with careful planning and evaluation, this model for writing across the curriculum may be too difficult for some freshmen at some institutions. Both David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell have written about incoming college students for whom the general practices of academic discourse are unfamiliar and intimidating. For these students, a more general introduction to academic thinking and writing may be preferable—with this more discipline-specific model saved for a second-semester or junior-level course. Only the individual writing program director, familiar with students at his or her home institution, can decide the case. But I might point out that variations on this freshman English course have been tried successfully at institutions as diverse as Carleton and Beaver Colleges, UCLA and Utah State, and the University of Pennsylvania and Yale.

Despite potential difficulties, a freshman-level introduction to academic writing can provide a sound basis for a writing across the curriculum program. The course can challenge English faculty to apply their expertise as scholars and critics to written texts not traditionally included in the literary canon. It can help TAs in English see the broad application of the rhetorical strategies and generic conventions they are studying at the graduate level. And, most important, it can help incoming undergraduates comprehend the modes of thinking and writing that underlie the courses they are—and will be—taking.

NOTE

1. For a detailed description of how an individual unit in such a course might work, see Moore and Peterson. I wish to thank Leslie Moore for her years of collegial friendship and for her permission to rework ideas developed together in teaching freshman English.

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