

Afterword. What's Next? Advocating for the Value of FYC

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Taken together, the ten chapters included in this collection present a portrait of first-year composition as it exists in a variety of institutions and demonstrate first-year composition courses that function as spaces in which first-year writers construct writerly identities while simultaneously developing agency as writers. It is telling that while the pedagogies shared in each chapter differ, they are all grounded in current understandings of composition that have resulted from decades of careful and thoughtful research and scholarship by individuals who asked important questions about writing and teaching because they cared about their work and about the student writers whom they served.

Early teacher-researchers devised ways to uncover and demystify what writers do when they write, ushering in a paradigm shift in composition research—from a focus on product to a focus on process. Later, having recognized the shortcomings of early research studies using experimental design, researchers honed methodologies and turned to naturalistic research techniques to accommodate what had begun to become clear—that writing is both a cognitive and social endeavor—and one that is richly complex and not easily described or understood. They also tapped into other fields, including cultural anthropology, linguistics, and psychology, to augment their work. Ultimately, among other things, this scholarship encouraged a re-visioning of FYC, its function as a “service” course, and its role in the academy.

In retrospect, we can see these early composition theorists and researchers as advocates for the importance and value of writing—in its many forms and genres. Today, as we note in the introduction to this volume, it is more imperative than ever to advocate for FYC. With that in mind, we invite you (graduate students, teachers, teacher-scholars) to consider and identify ways to promote FYC and the work being done for and in service of students in this course.

To assist you with this task, we include here content that clearly makes the case for advocacy in light of the challenges to FYC that exist in the current climate. We follow this content with a list of prompts designed to promote thinking that can lead to advocacy. Finally, we include a brief list of specific suggestions for applying any relevant thoughts and ideas generated through engagement with the prompts.

The Need for Advocacy

Given the still-prominent public perception that FYC exists to inoculate students against writing errors (Downs 54) and the multiple opportunities available to students to skip FYC altogether (see Anson; Carter), it is not enough for FYC teachers to be FYC teachers alone. Rather, every stakeholder in FYC needs to play a part in pushing back against this public perception—in telling the story of why FYC is valuable in students’ development as writers and their gaining agency in writing and of helping to advocate for the presence and resourcing of FYC courses and programs. In *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers*, Linda Adler-Kassner describes ways that writing program faculty and administrators can reframe composition’s public perceptions by targeting communication at specific audiences. She writes,

There will always be much that we want to change, of course, because there will always be people (and organizations) who decry students’ preparations, or what’s happening in classrooms, or other aspects of education that are important for us. But we can have some influence on how these discussions take place and how they are framed if we work strategically. We can think about where we have the most influence and the loudest voices—at our local levels. We can think about who we can reach out to, learn from, and enlist as allies. And with them, we can develop a communication plan that helps all of us shape and communicate messages about writers and writing to audiences who might just attend to those messages—and change the stories that they tell. (163)

We invite you to pause on Adler-Kassner’s word “influence” and to recognize that each of us, no matter whether we are new to the profession or have long been stakeholders within it, can have influence on the state of writing education broadly and on FYC in particular.

Taking Action

We encourage you to choose one (or more) of the following prompts to use as a catalyst for reflection and to generate some thoughts and ideas that can be used to help you choose how to advocate for FYC.

1. Identify one core belief that is essential to your FYC pedagogy. Why do you hold this belief? How might you make this core belief explicit for your students so that they better understand your course’s workings and what they are asked to do as student-writers?

2. How might you encourage your FYC students to be advocates for FYC? As students, how can they help you clarify the role that FYC has in the academy and its value to FY students?
3. What is one question about FYC that you have found yourself thinking about? How might you go about attempting to answer this question? How might you share what you discover as a way to advocate for FYC?
4. Choose one chapter from this collection that is especially valuable to you as a composition teacher. Why is this chapter valuable to you? How does it (or can it) inform your pedagogy? Your advocacy?
5. In the introduction to this collection, we allude to Maxine Greene's idea of "wide-awakeness" and note that teachers committed to dialogic pedagogy must also practice this habit of mind to successfully resolve the conflict between what they are expected to teach in FYC and what they believe they should teach. Being wide-awake in the context of FYC means thinking about conditions and questioning forces that make it difficult to teach what ought to be taught. Think about the conditions of your FYC classes and identify any forces that work against your pedagogy. What are some ways to combat these forces and, in doing so, advocate for FYC best practice?

We recognize that readers may be tempted to see activist communication as the domain, or the responsibility, of administrators alone. Yet we encourage readers to consider the effects we can have in even small communicative acts in shaping how the public and our own institutions perceive FYC.

Here are some suggestions for doing so:

- At your institution: Talk with administrators about what you teach and how your FYC courses position students to be agents of their own learning and to be successful as college writers.
- In your local area: Talk with friends, neighbors, and parents of future college students about your and your institution's commitment to developing strong writers through FYC.
- In your state: Join faculty at other institutions in professional development work and broadcast this work to state legislators to emphasize the value of the education happening within FYC programs.

By considering your own orientations toward FYC and the possibilities you see for enacting change, we hope you will begin to see openings for advocating for FYC's continuation. In addition to considering the questions above, we hope you will return to the material that accompanies each chapter in this collection—Reflect Before Reading prompts, questions for discussion, and writing prompts—as well as to this collection's multimedia components, all of which may also inform and encourage your advocacy for FYC.

Works Cited

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- Greene, Maxine. "'Wide-Awakeness' and the Moral Life." *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education*, edited by Alan R. Sadovnik et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 218-24.