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REFOCUS THROUGH INVOLVEMENT: (RE)WRITING THE CURRICULAR DOCUMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA-GENERAL COLLEGE BASIC WRITING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT: This essay recounts the process of writing guiding curricular documents for the University of Minnesota - General College's basic writing program. The first part of the essay describes how this was a community-building process that involved a wide group of instructors and others connected to the program. The second part includes the opening statement, as well as the goals and principles of the program, from the document.

In her *College English* article, "More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work," Laura R. Micciche writes about the emotion of "disappointment" and the considerable role it plays, or can play, in the jobs of Writing Program Administrators. Her piece ends with recommendations for developing a deeper knowledge of and engagement with the processes of work in order to make WPA disappointment an occasion for change and better working conditions (453).

Although our story of writing, or really re-writing, the curricular documents of the University of Minnesota General College writing program did not begin in great disappointment, we, the instructors, embraced Micciche's ideas about how to go forward in a writing program. In short, the process of writing the documents helped our program, located in a developmental education college within the university, learn a great deal about itself as it re-evaluated and embraced common guiding ideas and practices. Our goal was not only to produce an

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updated document, but just as important, to involve instructors and others associated with the program in that process. We were, in a sense, trying to use this process of wide involvement in order to forestall the kind of disappointment that results, as Micciche points out, in loneliness and isolation.

Initiation of the process of writing our curricular documents began with the hiring of three new program co-directors. As they got to know each other and had long talks about where they would like the program to go, they knew that they needed to learn where the program had been. One of the co-directors had some of that historical knowledge in a first-hand way, having worked in the program as a graduate student. But much of what was already in place had a deeper history that extended beyond what could be supplied through memories of those still present in the program. Luckily, our Head of Academic Affairs, Terry Collins, remembered that documents explaining and detailing the curriculum existed…somewhere. These documents were located in an old file cabinet and became a way to focus discussion.

As useful as these documents were, the directors also knew that bringing about change institutionally was a complicated matter. For starters, we work in a program made up of somewhere between fifteen and twenty teachers with varying levels of teaching experience and education. Bringing about change would need to involve and recognize the different work realities of these teachers. More than simply a matter of changing the wording in the old documents, we recognized that changes would affect the material lives of all the teachers in the program and, potentially, each teacher differently. A programmatic change that held implications for professors' work lives, for example, may well have seriously different implications for the jobs of the teaching specialists with double the course load or for graduate students just learning to teach for the first time. Apart from immediate programmatic concerns, we also needed to know what institutional brakes would be applied for any changes we wanted to implement.

All this was made more complicated by the fact that the balance of teachers had shifted so that numbers were now weighted more heavily toward full-time teaching specialists, most of whom had been hired in the past two or three years. They were well-experienced teachers, now on multiple year contracts, with a lot to add to any discussion of basic writing instruction. As the directors began to see the process of discussing the curriculum of the writing program as an opportunity to actively shape, or re-shape, the program, they sought to involve more constituent groups in a formal process of re-writing the existing documents. Given that we would all be teaching the same students under the developmental education mission of our college, inclusion of regular teachers of all ranks also seemed the right thing to do. We agreed

that we should not be acting as independent agents when we could learn so much from each other in helping our students succeed.

Over the course of a year, a series of weekly meetings were held with the head of academic affairs, two teaching specialists, two tenured members of the writing faculty, the head of our ESL program, the Writing Center Director, and the program co-directors. Documents that were drafted initially by the program directors were read, discussed, and revised in committee. Additional revisions and sections written by other committee members became part of the merged document as the year progressed. The strengths of attempting a re-examination of the program and our classes with such a wide group quickly became apparent as we began to discuss best approaches to teaching our students.

One strength of working in committee was that we began to see our teaching as taking place within a wider College and University structure. Our job was, we saw more clearly, to prepare students as writers who would work in a number of different locations, including residence halls, writing centers, and variously equipped computer classrooms, and with an increasingly diverse set of audiences within the University. Working as a group also forced us to interpret and work within our College's primary mission of preparing "…students for transfer to schools and colleges of the University and other higher education institutions." The College's mission also states that the College "provides an environment for a diverse population of students, faculty, and staff and seeks to encourage multicultural perspectives in its activities" (General College Mission). How would our approaches in the writing program, both as teachers and as teachers working in a group, contribute to this effort? What kinds of principles would encourage us to be innovative teachers with our various perspectives informing our work but also bring us together as a "program" with a coherent approach? These kinds of considerations led us to proceed cautiously and with a great deal of listening to one another.

Even more important than the strengthening of the document's scope and purpose, however, were the strengths programmatically that came about as the result of acting as co-writers. At some points, this was a matter of making basic decisions about the structure and purpose of the document. Would it be primarily for teachers? Yes, we decided, but we also wanted it to be accessible to students and others who might view it on the web. Readability became a common concern, and at times, a source of humor, in our meetings. Sections would have to be intelligible to a fairly wide audience, but we still wanted it to reflect ideas that were not easily translated out of professional jargon. Terms such as "process pedagogy," for example, were spun out and explained in later drafts. As we worked together, we also came to know each other as readers/writers and as professionals with varying

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concerns and commitments. At times, we learned that approaches or concepts that we thought we had understood before were actually understood differently by different instructors. Some issues were re-solved with inventive wording; others remain under discussion for the next round of revisions. Overall, we agreed much more than we disagreed, but we needed to talk about these issues in order to bring to light some of the buried assumptions in the program. And we were reminded, as writers who teach, of how difficult the process of col-laboration can be – a valuable lesson for us to share as we planned for the program.

For non-tenure track teachers whose past jobs demanded that teaching follow either unstated or already set curricula and teaching philosophy, involvement in the process of constructing institutional policy has resulted in approaching tasks such as orientation for new instructors, syllabus/assignment writing, and job evaluation with a richer knowledge and commitment. For newer teachers, in particular, policies that used to be discussed and guessed at in hallways and of-fices can now be studied and used when planning the scope and se-quence of assignments. Involving newer teachers in this process of redefining the program's curriculum and goals has helped to smooth development of individual teaching philosophies and in carrying out the more particular tasks of forming course objectives and student/teacher expectations. Teacher development happens within particu-lar programs with whatever help those programs can provide, includ-ing such documents as our curricular goals and guidelines. Ours is also a living document, we agreed, one to which new ideas and fresh revisions will be made as teachers construct their own understandings and teaching practices based on it and hold new conversations around it.

From the point of view of the program co-directors, the benefits of writing together as a committee strengthened our program in the kinds of ties it created among our teachers. As we teach our students, literacy is about the use of words to form relationships with other people. Writing *does* matter, we hope to show them. For us, the teach-ers, this act of writing together enacted what we hope to teach stu-dents: we discussed, argued, agreed, disagreed, and in so doing, formed working relationships that were more respectful of each other in the end. Part of the "literacy work" on which we place a great deal of value in the document also extends, we hope, to our own work efforts.

Of course this was not a perfect process. We recognized that some held more power in the group than others to effect change. Some had more time than others to do the drafting, with reward structures in place for carrying out that work. Negotiations that involved real acknowledgement of the possibilities and limitations of each of our positions in the process were ongoing. The process itself, we had to

remember, was initiated more from above than below, even if it was intended to be inclusive. And of course, there were disappointments. Individual visions did not always make it into the final document. As we go forward, however, with our disagreements, we do so as participants on the level of policy, confident that our arguments will continue to be heard.

What follows are the two opening sections of our document — an introductory statement of our program philosophy, "Toward a Deepened Notion of Access," and "Guidelines and Goals for GC Writing Courses." The entire document can be viewed online at <http://www.gen.umn.edu/programs/writing/htm>

Toward a Deepened Notion of Access: The Writing Program at the University of Minnesota General College

The writing courses at the General College grow directly out of the mission of the College — to enable promising students excluded by the mainstream admission criteria of the University of Minnesota to gain access to the University and to contribute to its community of intellectual excellence. As is suggested by the College's explicit commitment to research and teaching within a multicultural paradigm, today's GC teachers continue the college's legacy of defining higher education around broadening and deepening access to knowledge and power. As teachers, we understand that assumptions about good writing are culturally grounded and deeply involved in legitimating certain interests and values. As we describe below, rather than avoiding talk about how valued forms of writing give definition to access, our curriculum embraces the challenge of enabling access while deepening the meanings of access through the guiding philosophy of our courses as "apprenticeships in multicultural literacy work."

The idea that our courses are apprenticeships in literacy work brings together the insights of process theories of learning writing with social theories of knowledge and power and teachers' experiences of what works. From process theory we learn that for purposes of teaching, "writing" is not so much a correct version of words on a page, but all of the overlapping practices of working alone and with others to get words and ideas down on paper and then reflect on them, perhaps share them, rethink them, revise them, try them out on audiences, assess the communication and so forth. Writing, then, is not something that one has, it is something that people do. As persons with extensive experience in the process of engaging and communicating ideas through writing, our teachers help students practice and reflect on the conventions of academic prose.

These insights of the process approach to writing instruction are

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inflected within the writing curriculum by the contemporary critical theories that link knowledge and practice to power. Historically, the concept that "knowledge is power" was widely understood as a one way street—any individual can get knowledge and automatically exercise the power of the better argument. Today, critical social theory has complicated the way we understand this relationship so that dominant knowledge is seen as a way that currently dominant worldviews exercise power over individuals and groups. The practices, like literacy, through which dominant knowledge is approximated, invested in, resisted, or negotiated are then sites of conflict. Applying this critical insight to the writing classroom, "literacy work" substantively extends process theories of writing by concentrating attention on the work writing does for people—the social functions the processes of writing serve. As we understand it, literacy work locates power in the specific ways that people take up conventions, in our ability to think critically about the contexts (institutional, social, material, rhetorical) we inhabit, and how those contexts both enable and inhibit textual possibilities. As fellow apprentices in critically navigating the possibilities of work, teachers continuously learn to reflect on our contexts and the work we do within them, conforming, reforming and deforming them, through our reading and writing. In other words, literacy work challenges either/or approaches that see writing as either totally dominating or completely liberating.

In the largest sense, our courses continue the historic striving for the democratic promise that has always been central to literacy education—to make available to all (or, to help all participate in creating) the communicative resources for enacting individual and social group equality. This means that we conceive of our classes as important sites for questioning current inequalities brought about, in part, by literacy practices, even as we study and demystify the commonly accepted forms that are used by those in power. As experienced apprentices in literacy work, we know that reading and writing are processes through which the most fundamental and powerful experiences and insights can be sharpened and shared in ways that change the world and keep it changing. We place this intensification of feeling, thought, and experience at the core of our classroom activities, always striving to create opportunities for ourselves and students to participate in literacy work that awakens and inspires us all.

Taken together, these insights from process theory and critical theory provide a framework for our teaching. Over the two semester sequence of writing course work, General College students write formal papers and a variety of other genres, going through the writing process from invention to completion many times in response to many different prompts and contexts. Through this practice students develop into more experienced writers, deepening their knowledge and sophis-

tication about intellectual inquiry as it is conducted within the university setting. We recognize student work as serious and valuable, and as such, part of the social relations of power that extend through the university. Thus, student reading and writing are respected and studied as the complex texts that they are.

The writing sequence of the General College implements theoretical, technological, and pedagogical insights from basic writing to support the preparation of GC students to be successful and active participants in the degree granting colleges of the University. Outlined below are some of the goals for the writing courses at GC and specific objectives for students' learning:

Guidelines and Goals for GC Writing Courses

Through the two course writing sequence, General College students fulfill the freshman writing requirement. The primary goal of the sequence is to help students develop reading and writing practices that will serve their needs as they progress through the university. For us, rather than forcing conformity to a standardized norm, this goal requires inviting students to use the diverse skills, backgrounds, and experiences they bring to their writing courses as resources for interpreting and participating in academic literacies. Many students have been taught to see school writing as a rote exercise in a "correctness" foreign to anything they care about (other than a grade). Our goal of having students consciously create for themselves academic literacy strategies and practices that matter to them is, accordingly, a challenge. We respond to this challenge by seeking to nurture apprentice-type relationships among people (students and teachers, students and students) involved in the common project of knowledge creation and self-expression through various kinds of academic literacy work. We begin with six desired outcomes of the writing sequence.

1. Students will practice strategies for invention, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading and will gain experience working in multiple scenarios of writing.

2. Students will develop confidence in the production of elaborated texts in response to a variety of prompts. They will produce focused, extended pieces of writing, consider various audiences, and effectively incorporate evidence or examples from outside sources and from experience.

3. Students will study the way texts work and the work texts

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do. In other words, students will pay attention not only to content, but to rhetorical context (to whom is it written? With what goal in mind?). This entails identifying the writer's rhetorical strategies or choices (how does the writer attempt to reach that audience in particular? Establish authority? What kind of language does writer choose to enhance effective communication?), and assessing the text's effectiveness (does the writing communicate successfully within the identified rhetorical context?). By reading texts (their own and others') as writers, students will grapple in their own writing with the ways that texts negotiate self-expression and social relations.

4. Students will develop a strong sense of their own process, including knowing where and how to seek feedback and assistance with their writing. For this reason, the course emphasizes the collaborative aspects of reading and writing, asking students to work with their peers and their teacher in conceiving, composing, revising and editing.

5. Students will gain experience in how writing, like learning itself, is an ongoing and shared endeavor, involving experience, reflection, discipline, discovery and participation. In other words, the course will emphasize not merely the practical, but the emotional/affective, ethical and cultural/traditional aspects of writing and learning.

6. Students will study and practice effective use of outside materials in writing, including the evaluation and assessment of sources for credibility, bias, and timeliness. Courses will also focus on rhetorical concerns, such as exploring the use of different kinds of sources in a range of writing situations, to enhance credibility, highlight particular views, affiliate individual writers with larger groups, and to explore and substantiate claims. Effective use of research includes, of course, exposure to formal systems of citation and proficiency in one.

7. Students will gain experience with using various technologies to enhance their writing and research processes.

These goals for our students underscore both our first and second semester required writing courses. It is worth noting that, although variety from section to section is expected and desirable as each teacher works to her or his strengths and responds to specific classroom dynamics, there are particular shared perspectives that inform our work as a Writing Program. Just

as we have expectations for our students in these courses, we have expectations of one another as teachers of these courses. These expectations are informed by the following principles, drawn from research in Composition Studies.

Principles:

1. Student performance is directly related to teachers' expectations. Developmental studies show that, when teachers assume their students to be primarily characterized by a lack or a deficit (as writers or as students), they lower their expectations and don't foster a learning environment where students can develop to their utmost potential.

2. Focused, extensive practice is key to a writer's development.

3. Deep understanding of and competence in various literacies, including academic writing, depends on engagement with literacy as a social practice.

Expectations of Writing Instruction in General College

1. Teachers understand and affirm each student's basic linguistic competence, see all students as capable of progress and achievement, and encourage students to set and meet high expectations for their learning.

2. Teachers make student writing the central feature of each course. The courses help students to develop and extend their abilities to write, and enrich their thinking about writing and the kinds of work it does.

3. Teachers present writing, reading, teaching, and learning as processes that are never neutral. Rather, reading and writing are practices through which teachers and learners make choices about whether to reinforce, resist, revise, or record a particular cultural or academic conversation and the attendant relations of power.

Works Cited

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