Karen S. Uehling

CREATING A STATEMENT OF GUIDELINES AND GOALS FOR BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY'S BASIC WRITING COURSE: CONTENT AND DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT: This essay describes a statement of guidelines and goals developed for Boise State University's (BSU) basic writing course. The essay includes an account of local conditions at BSU, a copy of the statement itself with commentary on its seven competencies, a description of how the document was developed through a collaborative process, and the effects of that development.

My institution, Boise State University, created a statement of guidelines and goals for our basic writing course in 2000-2001.[1] To develop our statement, we wrestled with the relationship between basic writing and our two required first year composition courses. Ultimately, we envisioned a course that prepares students for English 101 in several ways. We hope students will be prepared "because they have begun to develop confidence in their reading and writing abilities, learn the conventions and expectations of university classrooms, [and] develop an awareness of the activities in writing classrooms and the terms used to talk about writing" (Boise State University). Like other documents of this kind, our curricular statement was developed in response to local conditions.

Boise State University (BSU) in Boise, Idaho, is a six-year urban, commuter institution of 17,000 part- and full-time students with an average age of about twenty-seven. BSU also fulfills a community college function through a vocational technical program that offers two-year degrees and certificate programs. The Idaho State Board of Education, in its mission statement for the institution, describes Boise State University as "a comprehensive, urban university serving a diverse

Karen S. Uehling is an Associate Professor of English at Boise State University where she has taught basic writing and other writing courses since 1981. She is the author/editor of two basic writing textbooks: Starting Out or Starting Over (1993) and Vision and Revision (1994). She served as the second Chair of the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW). Recently she published a history of CBW in a monograph edited by Dana Britt Lundell and Jeanne L. Higbee (University of Minnesota: 2002) and helped create an online archive on the CBW website.

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population. . . ." Further, the mission statement calls for the university to "maintain basic strengths in the liberal arts and sciences, which provide the core curriculum or general education portion of the curriculum." Our basic writing course is within the English Department and thus within the College of Arts and Sciences; the college mission statement reads, in part: "In teaching, the College of Arts and Sciences offers a core curriculum that prepares undergraduate students for future lives and careers by developing their communication, numerical, and analytical skills, enhancing their creative abilities, fostering in them a greater awareness of human values and needs, and encouraging in them a lifelong appreciation of learning for its own sake." It was within these contexts that we worked to produce our statement of guidelines and goals for basic writing.

Numbered English 90, our basic writing class is a one-semester, non-credit course, the equivalent of three credits.[2] Passing the course permits students to enroll in English 101. Our institution places students in basic writing based on test scores. Beginning fall term 2000, the Idaho State Board of Education raised the scores necessary for admission to first year composition, and consequently doubled the number of students in basic writing. In addition to those students who are required to take basic writing, some, primarily older, returning students, choose to take the course as a review.

Since the test scores were raised, the quality of writing has improved in the class, and the students now fall in two groups—those typical of students who enrolled previous to the change in test scores who have clear surface level writing problems and those who can write relatively correct prose, but whose texts seems vacant, vague, and disorganized. The current group of students in our basic writing course might be characterized as upper-level basic/lower-level freshman composition students.

Our Statement of Guidelines and Goals for Basic Writing

Our statement of guidelines and goals for basic writing (see Appendix A) contains several headings: an introduction, and sections called "Transforming Attitudes," "Making the Transition to the University" (which includes "Relationship to English 101"), "Demonstrations, Examples, and Models," "Consistent Goals and Methods," "Language Study," "Minimum Requirements," "Specifics," "Competencies," and "Suggestions for Teachers."

The framework for this document derived from curricular documents already developed by Boise State faculty for the two required first year writing courses at our institution, English 101 and 102. New features that the basic writing faculty added were "Relationship to

English 101" and "Suggestions for Teachers."

The heart of this document is the seven competencies for basic writing because the competencies are tied to portfolio assessment and thus significantly influence what goes on in class. I will explain our thinking about and approaches to each competency in turn.

The Competencies

1. They have confidence in themselves as writers and readers within a college environment.

Students need confidence to access the skills they have. Many do not trust their own instincts about language. Students also need confidence to develop new skills, try out new processes and approaches, allow themselves to make mistakes, and learn. Some have had bad experiences with English in high school; for older students, negative feelings may have festered for years, and often students don't give themselves credit for having any language skills. Some students are "generation 1.5" learners who have used two languages or dialects since birth, and they may distrust standard English. Some students dropped out of high school and obtained GEDs and believe there is a vast world of education they missed in high school. Most hold a university in awe — they do not see themselves as peers of other students or capable learners.

2. They can engage in a multi-faceted process of writing, that includes invention, development, organization, feedback, revision, and editing/proofreading.

In our course we introduce and practice various methods of invention — free writing, brainstorming, clustering, listing, and other processes. We develop papers step-by-step over time. Students may draft five papers and later revise three in the last third of the course. We teach editing/proofreading as a separate step generally at the end of writing. Revised and edited papers become part of a portfolio due at the end of the course. The English 90 portfolio is fifteen pages, in line with twenty pages for English 101 and twenty-five for English 102: thus each course steps up five pages in portfolio length.

3. They are willing to use multiple strategies to view, revise, and edit their evolving written texts over time, moving from writer- to reader-based prose.

Students observe pieces of writing evolving and changing over time. Often the instructor demonstrates this process with her own

drafts, by handing out raw invention materials, then a rough draft; next, after soliciting student feedback, a revised draft. Student assistants also model the invention and response processes with drafts of papers on later projects. And students see their own and their peers' papers shifting and developing as they focus and revise. Eventually students come to view the same text differently as they get reader response and reread a paper later in the term that had earlier seemed "finished." We want them to experiment with changing a text that they thought was completed; this is a key transition to English 101 and critical for English 102.

4. They can produce writing that has a beginning, middle, and end developed with relevant details and examples.

For this competency, we draw attention to how writers open and close pieces, such as the use of anecdote or dialogue as an opening strategy or returning to the beginning idea as a closing strategy. We point out how titles are not random or merely topic announcements but have some integral connection to the text. We review some essential organizational strategies, like chronology, categorization, and final emphasis. We push students to find these structures in readings and imitate them. Of course, we stress concrete details and specific examples and ask for figures, names, species, colors, ages, dates, and dollars and cents.

5. They can produce writing in a format appropriate to its purpose.

By "format," we mean these kinds of features: typed, double spaced, 1" margins; standard, 12-point font; left justified; paragraphs indented .5"; all important words of title capitalized, and title not all capitals, bold, underlined, in quotes, in italics, or in a larger typeface. "Format" in this competence also includes basic academic conventions like referring to the author by his or her last name, not first name; checking that the name is accurate and not in a similar or rough form; capitalizing the name; and spelling it right.

We also work on identifying and labeling work, and the basics of responding to a question: answering the question asked with adequate length and carrying out the number and kinds of tasks for which the question asks. We emphasize the need to answer questions using complete sentences and to make responses self-contained, so that the reader who does not have the question handy can still understand the response. We examine when and how to insert a quotation and the word choice needed to talk about quotations.

6. They can read actively and critically and engage in a dialogue with a text.

Students read essays that connect directly to the kinds of essays they are writing; they also read the textbook, their own and others' drafts, and in many sections, a complete challenging nonfiction book. The textbook used most recently was *Reading Critically, Writing Well*, edited by Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper, which is especially effective at connecting reading and writing assignments. Typical full-length books that we might assign are *Lives on the Boundary*, by Mike Rose, or *Bootstraps*, by Victor Villanueva, both literacy narratives that focus on the transition to college. Students write reading log responses to such works, answering specific questions. We ask for a variety of responses, beginning with if they liked the reading or not and why and proceeding through such investigative processes as speculation about the title, use of sensory description and specific development, imitation of powerful lines, the meaning of the text, and connection with other texts. Some of us ask students to write midterm and final exam essays based on questions from the nonfiction book.

7. They can edit their work for mechanical errors to the extent that, while perhaps not "perfect," surface features of the language do not interfere with communication.

English 90 is the primary class we offer that includes some direct language work, as a review. We teach a minimal grammar; I favor Rei Noguchi's "writer's grammar." I show a video of a colleague coaching a student as she edits her paper for fragments and run-ons using this writer's grammar. We talk about proofreading as a different kind of reading from reading for meaning. We ask students to engage in self-study of problem areas and thus make them responsible for their errors; and we offer tips and hints for editing. And, all of this, we hope, is in an atmosphere of language play. Reading a challenging nonfiction book is also critical because a text that forces a reader to stop, look, and think about language helps develop awareness of language and the kind of seeing required for effective editing.

So that is the heart of our document. The final section of our statement is called "Suggestions for Teaching." Each competency connects with and is supported by the teaching suggestions. I will consider one example, our first competency: 1. They have confidence in themselves as writers and readers within a college environment.

The teaching suggestion *Making the Transition to the University* supports confidence in that we introduce students to campus resources for academic services and support through guest speakers from groups

like the Writing Center and student success and support programs; and we offer information on where and how to learn to type or learn basic word processing skills. We also build student confidence by reviewing and re-enforcing basic study skills. At one time Boise State University had a learning community program that linked basic writing students through grouped courses, including basic writing, study skills, and core courses, and we still try to support study skills in the basic writing class.

Consistent Goals and Methods is a teaching suggestion that also supports confidence; we offer an overview of the course at the beginning, and we make course goals and methods clear throughout. We repeat reading, writing, discussion, and feedback activities in a predictable format. And we present extended assignments in a step-by-step sequence.

Developing the Statement of Guidelines and Goals

The key to the development of the statement of guidelines and goals was a collaborative process, what Bruce Ballenger, our Director of Writing, characterizes as a "focus group." The group was initially created to increase the number of trained faculty prepared to teach basic writing. The group consisted of six adjunct faculty, chosen for their talent and experience teaching freshman composition, and me; I was asked to mentor these instructors during the first term they taught basic writing, fall 2000. An important feature of this training was administrative support. The adjunct faculty received an honorarium for participating in the training and collaborative work, and I received a course release for undertaking the mentor's role.[3] As part of the training and mentoring, I wanted to engage the group in a substantive contribution to the basic writing endeavor on our campus, and producing the statement of guidelines and goals seemed timely and important[4]; and, for once we had the time to engage in serious reflection on our work as basic writing teachers.

We spent several of our weekly mentoring meetings working on the statement. We began by listing everything we did in basic writing, especially what we thought was critical or unique to the course. Next I categorized this list and gave it back to the group for discussion. At the same time, I had posted a request on the Conference on Basic Writing Listserv (CBW-L) asking for sample guidelines, goals, and mission statements, and I gave these samples to the group as well. Although our group did not directly consider the formal mission statements of the university and college when we initially drafted our statement, clearly it would be preferable to do so; however, the course we describe does support those mission statements. After all, we are directly engaged each day with the students the mission statement describes, an "urban

university serving a diverse population," and we work to develop students' core communication skills in reading and writing.

Based on the group's feedback to my list of basic writing activities, I drafted the first full statement for group review and consensus. When we had a draft we could agree on, I sought response from two tenured colleagues who also teach the course. The revised document was then presented to the chair and Writing Committee.

The next term, spring 2001, the adjunct faculty and I met with the Writing Committee a few times and together we revised the document further. In the summer, the Writing Program carried out a preliminary assessment of basic writing portfolios based on the proposed competencies. Our students did well in this pilot assessment, revealing that the statement of guidelines and goals appeared appropriate. Further, there was informal evidence that students who took English 90 often did better in English 101 than those who did not take it. In October of 2001, the Writing Committee brought the statement of guidelines and goals to an English Department meeting where it was ratified and then the document was posted on the Writing Program website.

The collaborative nature of this process produced several benefits. Obviously, the faculty group, using a collective brainstorming method, generated more good ideas than could have been articulated by any one person. The initial focus group process also gave the instructors ownership of the document because they helped created it. The instructors thus "bought" into the process and the resulting course. The follow-up with other tenured instructors and the Writing Committee, which included the Director of Writing, strengthened the document, especially by aligning it more closely with our existing statements. When the statement was brought to the department, this development process gave it legitimacy; there was little discussion before approval because it had already been tested and revised. The creation of the statement of guidelines and goals brought visibility to our basic writing course; I feel the department better understands basic writing now and takes it more seriously as a course.

The development of the English 90 *Statement of Mission and Minimum Requirements* has also affected other first-year writing courses. The Writing Committee and Writing Program administrators liked the features the basic writing faculty added to the template of the document, which were "Relationship to English 101" and "Suggestions for Teachers," and there are plans to add similar sections, developed collaboratively, to the English 101 and 102 documents. Also the writing program plans eventually to develop statements of guidelines and goals for our other first year courses, honors composition and our English as a Second Language (ESL) sequence.

One of the most interesting aspects of creating our statement of guidelines and goals was trying to articulate how basic writing differs

from English 101 and how it is the same. Ultimately, we framed our thinking in these terms: previewing, practicing, working on language, explaining writing courses, and developing confidence. We *preview* some of the academic work of English 101 and of the university as a whole. We *practice* reading and writing. We are the primary class that includes *some language instruction*. We *explain* what goes on in a college writing course and why. This information is especially important for students who have been out of school for a while. Adult learning theory suggests that learners need to know why they are being asked to do something and how it fits into the big picture of the course or the field of study (Knowles 174). This means we have to justify our goals and methods of instruction, for instance, why we ask for early free writing or peer response in feedback groups or editing as primarily the last step. We hope that we *develop confidence* through all of these activities.

Our English 101 course is now taught largely by teaching assistants who use a modified expressivist and reading process approach with free writing, conferencing, and group work. We hope our basic writing students will be ready to thrive in an atmosphere of this kind, especially where TAs may not be adept at articulating exactly why these teaching strategies are effective. Our students will be able to trust this process.

Notes

1. Although titled a *Statement of Mission and Minimum Requirements*, our document is not a traditionally conceived mission statement, that is, a concise statement of a group's mission and identity. Rather, our basic writing statement is a document of several pages that details course rationale and describes and explains curriculum; thus I refer to this statement as a statement of "guidelines and goals."

2. I think the course should carry elective credits, and, as a step in that direction, in fall 2002 I piloted a dual enrollment combined basic writing/freshman composition course, which met for six hours per week and offered the noncredit equivalent of three credits for English 90 and three regular credits for English 101; the course was successful enough that it will be offered again in fall 2003.

3. Recently, all tenured faculty in writing, including the Director and Assistant Director of Writing, participated in some of the basic writing training so that they will eventually be prepared to teach basic writing. This clear administrative support for basic writing strengthens the sense of commitment and community of those who teach basic writing and increases the visibility of the course to other faculty and cam-

pus administrators.

4. The group of faculty who helped draft the initial statement included Julie Ewing, Jill Heney, Joy Kidwell, Siskanna Naynaha, Kate Pritchard, Marian Thomas, and Karen Uehling.

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APPENDIX A

English 90
Boise State University

Statement of Mission and Minimum Requirements
Fall 2001

Introduction

One of the strengths and challenges of Boise State University is the rich diversity of its students, and ENGL 90 students are often some of the most diverse students on campus. They may be adults, returning to college after many years; they may work full or part-time as they attend school; they may be speakers of more than one language or dialect. ENGL 90, an introduction to college writing, is required if a placement test or writing sample demonstrates need, and it also provides review for those who wish further preparation before taking ENGL 101. ENGL 90 offers students extra time to work on their writing with attention to fluency, development, organization, revision, and editing/proofreading. ENGL 90 counts as the equivalent of 3 credits, though the credits do not count toward graduation.

Transforming Attitudes

Students in ENGL 90 are usually just entering the university and can often be distinguished by their lack of confidence. Yet to thrive in college, students must become confident as readers and writers and as members of the academic community. ENGL 90 is a course that builds both confidence and skill. We believe that students' experiences with language and language use in the course should be positive, and that this will provide the basis for the development of writing skills. As a consequence, ENGL 90 focuses, like ENGL 101, in part on the affective dimension of writing and thinking processes; that is, the course hopes to encourage students to believe that reading and writing are meaning-making activities that are relevant to their lives, within school and without.

Making the Transition to the University

ENGL 90 serves as a bridge between the community and the university. Instructors should assist students with this transition into the world of studenthood. Essential topics include active, critical reading; an introduction to the culture of the academy and to basic terms of academic analysis; review of study skills; and an introduction to campus resources for academic support.

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ENGL 090 students will be prepared to enter ENGL 101 because they have begun to

- develop confidence in their reading and writing abilities
- learn the conventions and expectations of university classrooms
- develop an awareness of the activities in writing classrooms and the terms used to talk about writing

Demonstrations, Examples, and Models

Students may have not seen writing develop over time and may be unfamiliar with the processes writers engage in to produce writing. Thus, students will observe how writing is produced.

Consistent Goals and Methods

We believe ENGL 90 students thrive in an atmosphere that is predictable. Clear goals, repeated routines, and "scaffolded" assignments are likely to create an atmosphere that builds student confidence and provides the basis for the development of writing skills.

Language Study

ENGL 90 is one of the few courses in which editing and proofreading skills are taught; however, such skills are only one part of ENGL 90, which is clearly a writing course. Language skills should be taught largely within the context of the student's own writing.

Minimum Requirements

Specifics

Students in writing classes should continuously produce written work. This includes evaluated work, such as formal assignments and subsequent revisions, as well as informal and non-evaluated work, such as journal entries, in-class writing exercises, rough drafts, and peer responses. ENGL 90 students will produce, on average, the equivalent of 3 to 3.5 double-spaced and typed pages — about 1000 words — a week. The equivalent of 15 pages of double-spaced and typed writing will be the basis for assessing students' final grades in the course.

Students will write several informal responses to reading materials using a variety of strategies for active, critical reading.

Students will begin to learn the terms, processes, and conventions of academic writing necessary for success in ENGL 101 and other university classrooms.

Students will meet all the attendance and class participation requirements and submit required assignments on deadline.

Competencies

Students will demonstrate that:

1. they have confidence in themselves as writers and readers within a college environment.

2. they can engage in a multi-faceted process of writing, that includes invention, development, organization, feedback, revision, and editing/proofreading.

3. they are willing to use multiple strategies to view, revise, and edit their evolving written texts over time, moving from writer- to reader-based prose.

4. they can produce writing that has a beginning, middle, and end developed with relevant details and examples.

5. they can produce writing in a format appropriate to its purpose.

6. they can read actively and critically and engage in a dialogue with a text.

7. they can edit their work for mechanical errors to the extent that, while perhaps not "perfect," surface features of the language do not interfere with communication.

Suggestions for Teachers

Making the Transition to the University. Demonstrate how to view a text not as a "flat landscape" but as a rich, living piece of discourse; have students practice engaging in a dialogue with the author. Preview some of the terms, processes, and conventions of academic writing. Review and re-enforce basic study skills. Introduce students to campus resources for academic services and support.

Demonstrations, Examples, and Models. Conduct demonstrations of writing in progress, both step-by-step examples of major assignments and examples of informal assignments. Several examples will provide a range for students rather than a single model to follow. Student interns can provide additional supporting demonstrations.

Consistent Goals and Methods. Present an overview of the course at the beginning of the term, carefully explaining course goals and methods

of instruction. Repeat and practice reading, writing, discussion, and feedback procedures in a predictable format. Present extended assignments in a step-by-step, staged, and sequenced manner.

Language Study. Foster a playful, inquisitive attitude toward language and its richness, encouraging students to take an investigative approach to language phenomena. Practice individual error analysis, and teach editing and proofreading as a special task that requires its own particular ways of seeing and responding to text. Offer students practical tricks and hints for editing their own work rather than an exhaustive review of grammar.