

## THE IN-COURSE WRITING WORKSHOP IN A PROGRAM OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Claiming the responsibility of teaching its students to write better, the faculty of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts at the University of Michigan voted in 1978 to establish a program of writing across the curriculum. First-year students will continue either to take or be exempted from introductory composition—a course which the English department will continue to teach—but in addition, each student will be required as a junior or senior to take one of the new upper-level writing courses taught by departments throughout the college. Like any other upper-level course in, for instance, biology or anthropology, each course will cover an area of content within its discipline, but each will also give special attention to the demands of writing about its material.<sup>1</sup> As the college phases in the program over a period of three years, departments are trying out different ways of combining their course material with instruction in writing. This report describes the development of one such model—the in-course writing workshop.

The history department's colloquium on the Indochina conflict (1945-1975) was designated in Winter, 1979 as one of the upper-level writing courses, and I was hired to assist with writing instruction. The history

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1. The college set up a board of faculty members from across the college—the English Composition Board—and charged it with coordinating this upper-level writing program, as well as with the following five functions: 1) the development and administration of a writing assessment to determine whether entering students should go into the tutorial program, introductory composition, or be exempted from composition; 2) coordination with the introductory composition program; 3) the development of a tutorial program for entering students who have not had sufficient practice in academic composition to write successfully at the college level; 4) research into writing and writing instruction; and 5) outreach to those high schools which send a significant number of students to the university.

professor responsible for the course had taught it several times before, assigning informal weekly journals and a long formal paper due the last day of class. That winter semester he simply plugged me into his course as a second reader of the journals; he commented on their content, while I was supposed to comment on them as writing.

The students rightly understood these journals as informal and made little effort at producing polished or sustained pieces of prose, yet this was the only writing they did in the course for most of the semester. It quickly became clear that in such a structure my written comments were of little instructional value. Learning from this failure, I proposed that we restructure the writing component in subsequent semesters so I could intervene more in the processes of student writing. Last fall we taught the course with more formal writing assignments, and I organized and ran an in-course workshop which guided student work on each assignment.

### COURSE STRUCTURE: AN OVERVIEW

Students read extensively each week and were expected to respond to the readings in informal weekly journals. Every week they met for two hours with the history professor to discuss the week's readings, hand in their journal entries, and receive their journals of the previous week with his lengthy comments. This readings/journal/seminar format seemed to work well in engaging the students in analysis of and dialogue about the course material. Students were also required to write three fairly lengthy formal papers, and to meet with me for an hour each week in the writing workshop to work on them. Scheduling problems led me to divide the group and meet with each half at a separate time—a fortunate accident, because in the smaller groups I was much more able to attend to each student's writing.

I set two main objectives for the workshop—to help the students begin each assignment, by interpreting what it required and by generating approaches, ideas, and lines of analysis, and to provide them with feedback they could use in preparing a final draft. I structured the workshop, therefore, to intervene at two stages in their writing—in *pre-writing*, before they produced a draft, and in *revision*. In both stages I arranged for students to receive models to consider and to receive feedback on their own writing. I first clarified the particular demands of each assignment: what would a good paper have to do to meet this particular assignment? I then got students to state briefly what they expected their papers to do, and I analyzed their approaches for strengths and possible weaknesses. A first draft was due a week before the final deadline for each paper; I organized the students into small editing groups to read one another's first drafts and provide feedback. After revisions, they gave their papers to the professor

for final evaluation; since I had no responsibility for final evaluation, my role was that of a consultant working with them.

### THE THREE ASSIGNMENTS: PRE-WRITING WORK

The first assignment was an eight-to-twelve page critical essay analyzing journalistic coverage of the Indochina war, due after the first third of the semester. The second assignment, due at the end of the second third of the semester, was an oral history project: students were to interview someone directly affected by the war, transcribe the interview, and write a three-to-five-page commentary analyzing the interview in the context of the war. The final assignment, due the last day of class, was a conventional fifteen-to-twenty-five-page research paper on some aspect of the conflict.

At the first meeting of the workshop I explained its rationale and structure; at the second meeting I began pre-writing work. I asked the students to consider how the assignments might mesh together, perhaps through continuity of theme (i.e., an issue or relationship which emerged from the journalistic coverage or the oral history might be made the subject of the research paper) or through continuity of time period (i.e., one might choose an event to analyze in the research paper, then take one's sample of journalistic coverage from the year the event occurred). I also discussed a handout which listed the kinds of questions the first assignment might try to answer—questions including the following: What view, or range of views, of the Indochina conflict came through in the sample of news media? What terminology was used for the activities of the various contenders for power? What were the apparent criteria for deciding what got reported and what did not? What were the apparent sources of information and opinion? What are the uses and limitations of the daily press and news magazines as historical sources?

The following week I asked everyone to write ten-minute abstracts of their papers-to-be; I then put some of the abstracts on an opaque projector and showed them to the class, leading discussion of strengths and problems in the student's approach. This exercise served 1) to push all the class to attempt to formulate their main ideas, sketch out their proposed development, and discover what difficulties they still faced, 2) to provide some of the students with immediate feedback on those initial formulations, and 3) to provide the rest of the students with models of both successful and problematic approaches.

Pre-writing for the second assignment began with discussion of the mechanical, interpersonal, and conceptual tasks involved in doing oral history—both before, during, and after the interview. The mechanical tasks—making a clear tape recording and converting that into an accurate

transcript—underlie the production of a usable record. Interaction with the informant includes setting up the interview and following through after it, as well as the interviewer's questions and responses in the interview itself. The conceptual tasks begin with the interviewer's determination of priorities before the interview, include interpretation during the interview, and conclude with analysis of the oral history after the interview is transcribed. After spending two weeks in discussion of these tasks (which I also sketched out in a handout: see the Appendix), we spent the next two weeks working with interviews that some of the class had just conducted; we focused on them both as models of interviewing technique and as information to be interpreted in a commentary.

For the final assignment, I discussed with the students the process of research and their particular problems in framing a question and finding, organizing, and interpreting information. Their written responses to the questions on another handout, my research guide (below), helped me pinpoint their difficulties and confronted those who were behind schedule with the steps still ahead of them.

#### RESEARCH GUIDE

1. **TOPIC.** Have you decided on a subject to research?

If so, what is it?

If not, what subjects are you considering?

2. **GUIDING QUESTION.** What question would your research try to answer?

If you haven't established one central question, what questions might you try to answer?

3. **HYPOTHESIS.** What do you think an answer to your question (s) will/ might be?

4. **EVIDENCE.** What information have you already found that relates to your questions?

From what sources?

What further sources do you plan to explore?

What do you expect to find in them?

5. **CONCLUSIONS.** If the evidence you find supports your hypothesis, so what?

What does this research mean in any larger context?

6. **DOCUMENTATION.** Do you have any questions about how to document the information you use in this paper—in handling quotes, in paraphrases, footnotes, a bibliography, etc.?

7. **POSSIBLE PROBLEMS.** What problems do you foresee with this assignment?

What would you (or we) need to do to solve them?

## THE THREE ASSIGNMENTS: DRAFT AND REVISION

Each paper was due in draft form a week before the final deadline. I divided the class into editing groups of three or four; on the weeks that first drafts were due, every student was expected to bring xerox copies of her or his draft to the Tuesday seminar meeting for the other members of the editing group. In the next couple of days, students read and wrote comments on the papers they had received; then I met with each editing group to facilitate the exchange of feedback. I too read drafts when a group member failed to show up for the exchange, or whenever anyone asked me to.

Feedback came along any of the following three lines:

- 1) Can I *understand* everything in your paper? If not, where does it lose me?
- 2) Does your evidence and your interpretation *convince* me? If not, what alternatives can I suggest for you to consider?
- 3) Could your paper be made more *effective*—in its conception of its audience, in its organization, or in its style and mechanics?

Using what they learned through the draft exchange, students could then revise their papers before handing them in to the history professor for final evaluation.

## EVALUATION OF THE WORKSHOP

There were problems. A couple of students participated only marginally, missing several workshop sessions. Some of the oral history interviews were less focused than we wished for; more direction from me beforehand and perhaps some practice interviews would have helped the students focus better. From one to five of the students failed to have first drafts ready for a draft exchange, and thereby missed receiving feedback on those first drafts.

For the majority of the students, however, the workshop made significant differences. They usually got a draft finished—or at least well along—before the exchange deadline, and thus had time to make needed alterations, great or small. For some of them, this critique-and-revision process allowed their writing to become more an integration of what they were coming to know, and less a frantic last-minute churning out of pages.

The most important workshop intervention was in students' conceptualization of the assignments' demands. Students made initial conceptualizations when they had to write about their papers-to-be (in the

abstracts and research guides); they then received feedback and saw other models for approaching the assignment. For those students who got a draft written without successfully understanding the assignment, the draft exchange provided them with more pointed feedback and with more developed models of successful approaches. In the evaluation I did after the first assignment, one student wrote that the editing meeting was especially helpful to him “in discerning what was to be the major point of my paper—what my strongest argument was.” Another described in even stronger terms how the draft exchange helped her reconceive the assignment: “I was lost on the first assignment; it wasn’t until after the first draft I knew what to do.”

In addition to the students’ overall conceptualization, the workshop contributed to the “fine tuning” of papers—the selection of the more elegant or at least less awkward phrase, the insertion of appropriate punctuation, the deletion of redundancy. Finally, the workshop helped student writers by adding to their sources of information: they suggested to each other relevant readings and possible oral history informants.

In their own evaluations of the workshop, the majority of the students described it as helpful at both the planning and revising stages. The pre-writing stage helped by clarifying their understanding of the assignment, by getting them working earlier (“it kicked me in the rear to get started,” said one student), and by helping them sort out their ideas and choose topics. The student whose successive drafts showed probably the most dramatic improvement said of the editing stage, “Good criticism of my draft helped me to think. I learned to criticize and analyze—something I’d never done before.” I asked what changes they would suggest for the workshop itself, and the most frequent response was to ask for more—more or longer editing sessions, and more time between the completion of the first draft and the deadline for the final draft, to allow for more thorough revision.

## CONCLUSIONS

In-course writing workshops can be adapted to many upper-level writing courses. The ideal leader for such a workshop is someone with knowledge both of the content area and of writing instruction; both kinds of knowledge will contribute to his or her effectiveness. If the workshop leader is relatively unfamiliar with the teaching of writing, he or she should be able to participate in a program like our English Composition Board upper-level seminar, where faculty and teaching assistants involved in this program meet weekly for two hours to discuss writing across the curriculum and to analyze and try to resolve the instructional problems that inevitably arise.

Since the amount and quality of student participation in a writing workshop seems to depend in part on the nearness of a deadline, it seems sensible to use the workshop with courses that have more than one major writing assignment. Since all the pre-writing, writing, and editing in a successful workshop demand a significant amount of time from the students, courses with workshops might reward student involvement by offering an additional hour of credit; where that is not possible, the content instructor must make an appropriate reduction in her or his expectations for readings and other work in the course. The in-course workshop can help student writers in a wide range of disciplines grow in competence and confidence; continuing evaluation of such workshops will show in what ways and under what conditions they are most useful.

# APPENDIX

## STEPS IN THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

	Producing a useable record	Interaction with the person	Interpretation
Before the interview:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Get familiar with the recorder.</li> <li>2. Get 60-min. tape (not 90 or 120), because 60-min. is less likely to break.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare your own interview agreement, or familiarize yourself with the handout.</li> <li>2. Get your informant's verbal agreement to do the interview; explain briefly what you are doing.</li> <li>3. Set a time and place for the interview; make it at your informant's convenience, but make sure you will be quiet and undisturbed.</li> <li>4. Think through what this interview might offer your informant.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decide on your priorities; sketch out questions (consider open-ended vs. closed questions).</li> <li>2. Read all the background information you can—everything that will help you understand your informant's story in detail and in overall shape.</li> </ol>
In the interview:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Screen out as much outside noise as possible.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Get the permission form signed; let your informant know how you'll provide feedback.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Try to understand both the <i>what</i> of the person's story and the <i>how</i> of its telling.</li> </ol>



	Producing a usable record	Interaction with the person	Interpretation
	<p>2. Take time to set up your recorder properly (so it records both of you clearly, and is insulated from its own noise). Check to see that it is working.</p>	<p>2. What you want to know may not be what your informant wants to tell you; be alert for that tension.</p> <p>3. Ways of probing: —“cueing” with informant’s words. —asking for elaboration. —asking for specification.</p> <p>4. Summarize.</p>	<p>2. Keep your preparation in mind: it may help you frame questions on the spot.</p>
After the interview:	<p>1. Decide on the extent to which you will edit the transcript for standard language.</p> <p>2. Make a rough transcript.</p> <p>3. Audit the rough transcript: compare the transcript to the tape, from start to finish, and correct errors in transcription.</p> <p>4. Get a clean copy of your transcript to your informant.</p> <p>(5. Get feedback from your informant and use it to revise the transcript.)</p>	<p>1. Get a clean copy of your transcript to your informant.</p>	<p>1. Abstract from your informant’s story its most important features.</p> <p>2. Place this story in the historical context(s) which it illuminates and which illuminate it.</p>