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Faculty Interdisciplinary Collaboration on a College-Wide Writing Guide

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What common elements, if any, can one find about writing in biology, psychology, history, and English? Or, more to the point, what can be done to address student writing problems in these subjects and others? This was the challenge facing our faculty at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee, a small, private, Christian, liberal arts college.

After years of bemoaning student writing deficiencies at our annual faculty writing-across-the-curriculum retreats, we decided in May 1994 to address our concerns collaboratively by producing a campus-wide writing guide. After two years of work at faculty writing retreats and with follow-up committees, we produced *Writing at Carson-Newman College*, now in its third edition and beginning its seventh year of use.

What makes this book distinctive from other writing texts is that instead of one or even several authors, it was written by 41 of our faculty who served as departmental representatives. Thus it is truly interdisciplinary, addressing not only writing commonalities but also disciplinary differences. It was produced with a limited budget, but revenue from its sale continues to fund our WAC program. A required text in all of our freshman English classes, it is designed not just for freshmen, but for all of our students to use throughout their college careers, regardless of major.

To reinforce this multi-year purpose, our bookstore does not buy back this book, and with each succeeding year of use,

teachers in all disciplines have been encouraged to list this book as a required text. For example, during the first year of use, faculty teaching freshman level courses could require this text since all freshmen had bought it; with our seventh year beginning this fall, faculty teaching freshman to senior level courses can assume that students have this book and thus require it as a text.

In order to accomplish our goal of providing writing help for our students across the disciplines throughout their college years, we first had to determine the benefits of such a project, decide how to fund it, and then address some basic problems associated with producing and using it.

Advantages for Our Students

Because of our concern that students were not recognizing the importance of writing beyond their freshman English courses, faculty felt that producing such a book would have several advantages for our students:

1. It would let students know that writing is important college-wide, not just in freshman English;
2. It could provide consistency of treatment of writing among those courses in our general education curriculum which already require writing;
3. It would provide a reference and examples for upper level courses and thereby help to refute the myth that writing is important only in English classes;
4. It would provide a common terminology for students and faculty concerning grammar and punctuation problems;
5. Besides models of typical writing assignments, this guide could also include samples of an application letter and resume to help all students with job searches; and
6. It would give transfer students an introduction to and a reference for writing expectations at our college.

Advantages for Faculty

In addition to these benefits we envisioned for our students, we also felt that such a book would help our faculty in several ways:

1. It would give faculty members across the curriculum an opportunity to discuss and refine common expectations about student writing;
2. It would save time for faculty members by providing information, examples, and instructions for writing to which they could direct students;
3. It would be a useful reference for all faculty, especially for those who feel that teaching writing is outside their own areas of expertise, a common complaint from non-English-teaching faculty; and
4. Revenue from the sale of this guide could fund future workshops, writing retreats, guest speakers, and other activities designed to promote writing on our campus.

Funding of Project

In 1995 and 1996, two Pew Faculty Development Grants totaling $4,500 funded two faculty writing retreats (a total of three nights) where we did most of the work. In addition, I as editor was allotted $1,800 to compile and edit the draft in the summer of 1995 (as director of WAC, I receive three hours of release time per year). An Appalachian College Association Discretionary Grant of $3,000 in 1996 gave us the funds to complete the process of preparing the book for publication and printing it. Therefore, we were able to produce the book over a two-year period for approximately $9,300, but the fact most appealing to our administration was that of this amount, only $1,800 came from new college funds.

Four Problems Addressed Through Collaboration

Problem 1: Getting Campus Support

We felt that the best way to reflect our college's commitment to writing was to produce a writing guide collaboratively, a process which enabled us to address at least four challenges that we faced. My first problem as WAC Director was how to get the majority of our faculty to support such a project. Therefore, an initial step was to determine the extent of campus concerns about student writing abilities. Through a series of interviews and surveys in the spring of 1994 (see Appendix A), I tabulated faculty responses to a number of questions such as the following:

1. List and rank from least to most important the factors that affect your evaluation of student writing in your courses.
2. What specific types of errors do you mark, if any?
3. What other concerns, comments, and/or suggestions do you have regarding student writing in your courses?

When I shared not only the common concerns but also areas of agreement from this investigation with approximately 30 faculty at our faculty writing retreat in May 1994, the group enthusiastically endorsed the concept of a collaborative, interdisciplinary writing guide. Getting approval from the dean of instruction and our academic council was not difficult, since this project had good potential benefits with minimal costs to the college. After presenting this idea to faculty in seven college divisions, I worked with 23 department chairs to choose representatives for our collaborative team. Because more than one faculty member from certain departments volunteered, however, we eventually had 41 faculty participating out of a total of 135.

Once we had begun this project, we informed faculty of progress and asked for input through campus newsletters and e-mail. Further opportunity for campus participation came as we submitted copies of drafts to faculty and students for review. For faculty evaluation, we sent one copy to each of the faculty representatives, an additional copy to each department and major administrative office, and several to the library (the refer-

ence librarian and the head of the library, both very knowledgeable about electronic documentation and Internet validation, provided invaluable aid). Knowing that a book intended for students needed to be reviewed by them, we had four student groups with a total of more than 100 students to critique the drafts.

Problem 2: Assembling Faculty for Work

A second problem of major importance involved how to get 41 faculty together to work with so many conflicting class and lab schedules, not to mention other time commitments. We solved this by collaboration in small groups.

In the spring of 1995, representatives met with their own departments to gather information and data concerning their expectations and suggestions for students writing in their discipline. While communicating via e-mail replaced large group meetings each semester, we accomplished the major portion of writing this book at our end-of-year faculty writing retreats. At these, faculty worked on tasks of their choice in small groups and then reported to the large group for consensus. For example, one group worked on advice for students taking essay exams, another explored expectations for different grades and wrote short themes to illustrate each, a third dealt with common grammar problems, and a fourth worked with common punctuation problems. Work not completed at the retreat was finished by the small groups and submitted for all to review in the draft which I produced the following summer.

Problem 3: Getting Faculty Agreement on Content of Book

Even though we had agreed initially on some common writing concerns, we still needed to determine our points of similarity and difference. To do this, we engaged in some collaborative exercises by departments. For example, each department answered the following questions:

1. What makes for good writing in your discipline?
2. How important is writing to your discipline?

3. What do you consider the most serious grammar errors?
4. What do various letter grades mean for evaluating writing?
5. What kinds of writing should every college student do?
6. What features characterize writing in your discipline?

Points of similarity became Section One: The Writing Process; Section Two: Types of Writing at Carson-Newman; and Section Three: Evaluating Writing (see Table of Contents in Appendix B). Differences were expressed in Section Four: Writing in Specific Disciplines. This section begins with a chart that lists each department; checks in columns indicate the frequency of writing required in this department (daily, weekly, monthly), the importance of writing to perform duties in this major as a career (important, very important), and the importance of writing for advancement in this major as a career (important, very important). Referring students to this chart to find their major helps to convince them that writing is important regardless of career choice.

Section Four also contains a page(s) for each department in two parts addressed to students. The first part describes writing in this department at Carson-Newman and gives an overview of the types of writing assigned, audiences for writing, point of view to use, typical research sources, specialized research tools, and suggestions for successful writing. The section devoted to music, for example, gives students information and examples about how to treat titles of musical compositions mentioned in a sentence depending on whether the title is a "generic," "true," or "popular" one. Books about writing in music that we have in our library are also listed, along with the call number. This section is useful not only to a student majoring in a particular subject, but also to a non-major who needs to know departmental expectations for writing.

The second part of the departmental page pertains to writing in a career based on this subject. It outlines typical writing tasks of selected careers in a field such as music and lists typi-

cal audiences. For example, a church musician might write letters, columns in church publications, program notes, and press releases, while a music therapist might write memos, letters, patient therapy plans, patient evaluative reports, grant applications, and reports to governing agencies. This second part gives students a realistic appraisal of writing expectations in a particular career.

Problem 4: Making the Book Appealing to Students

Realizing that a book is only helpful if it is used, we knew that another problem was how to interest students in this guide. Attacking this problem in several ways, first we considered the overall design of the book. We did not want multiple pages of unrelieved text, but we had neither the time nor skills to format the content in any other way. In yet another collaborative effort, a class in graphic design at Carson-Newman took on this book as a project. Each student prepared a dummy displaying his/her unique design of the first chapter from which a faculty committee chose one to use. The "winning" student was awarded a stipend to format the content for the remainder of the book. Using some pictures, especially funny ones, would make the book more inviting, suggested several student reviewers. Therefore, we collaborated with one of our alumni who drew cartoon illustrations for various parts of the text.

A second way we tried to "hook" students was by using humor throughout the book. For example, to illustrate correct comma and period placement with quotation marks, we used the following: "If the King James Version of the Bible was good enough for Jesus and his disciples," roared the preacher, "then it's good enough for me." In the Glossary, we defined "writer's block" by leaving it blank. After reviewing the entire book, one student paid us the ultimate compliment when he said, "That's the way I would think, rather than a Ph.D. professor!"

We also used Carson-Newman-specific information whenever possible to add local interest to this book. Thus, the con-

tent becomes a mini-orientation for students to our college. For example, to illustrate various prewriting processes in Section One, we elaborated on a word from our college seal: "Appalachian." "Where do I go for help?" in Section One includes the location and operating hours of campus computer labs, as well as an overview of the types of information located on each floor of our library. The section illustrating different documentation styles includes actual citations of books and articles by Carson-Newman professors to show that our faculty members write themselves.

Of course, one of the best ways to get students to use this book is for faculty to put it on their syllabi as a required text, to use it, and to refer to it in class. To encourage faculty to do this, I send e-mail messages, make announcements in faculty meetings, and suggest different uses in flyers which are included in faculty packets at the beginning of the academic year.

Results of the Project

Effectiveness of the Book for Students and Faculty

Overall, reaction to *Writing at Carson-Newman College* has been very positive from both students and faculty. After the first year of use, one of our student honor organizations designed and administered a survey to students in all freshman English classes and to all faculty to assess their reactions and to solicit suggestions for improvement. Students cited as most helpful the sections on word processing and research writing, but asked for more examples of electronic documentation. Faculty asked for a section on Internet validation, and indicated the need for more specific information in the department sections and easier access to topics throughout the book. We incorporated these suggestions in the second edition of the book which was used in the fall of 1998. The third edition (Fall 2002) includes the latest information on electronic documentation. For those upperclassmen with the earlier second edition, I have made these documentation changes available on my web page. We plan to con-

tinue to revise every two to four years to update information.

Just having our book available does not mean that everyone automatically remembers to use it. I find that I need periodically to send out e-mails to remind faculty to list this book on their syllabi as a required text (since students already have it), to ask them to remind their students of the section on taking essay exams at midterm and final examination times, and to have them refer students to the research sections as the semester progresses. I give new faculty an orientation to our writing across the curriculum program and our book at the beginning of the fall semester, and in the spring, I speak to the honors students, reminding them of the ways that our book can help them with writing their honors projects. At our annual faculty writing retreat in May, we usually have at least one session discussing ways we use the book as well as changes that would make it better. Evidence from this retreat suggests that many faculty are using the book effectively with their students in their classrooms.

Effectiveness of the Process of Faculty Collaboration

The process of actually writing and compiling this guide has paid some unexpected dividends for us as faculty. As we wrote together, this project made us remember our own strengths and weaknesses as writers and thus made us more empathetic with our students' writing endeavors. From this process, we gained a reassuring consensus about the basics of good writing and concerns about students' writing. We developed a shared sense of mission: as one faculty member commented, "I liked thinking we will be producing a product for use campus-wide." We also gained an incentive to examine our own uses of writing in our disciplines. One faculty member wrote on an evaluation that he "got some ideas for improving what I do in class," while another stated that working on this book "pushed me to think more about technical writing in my own discipline."

One very "WAC" oriented benefit is that faculty gained a

clearer understanding of what is valued as good writing in different disciplines. For example, certain faculty learned that the passive voice may be preferred in certain disciplines, while some faculty who had pushed for a campus-wide style of documentation realized that one style cannot and should not be mandated for all students if we are to prepare them to write for different audiences in the world outside academia.

In addition, an increased appreciation for the dedication and creativity of other faculty members developed as a product evolved that was greater than its parts. As one faculty member remarked at the end of one of our retreats, "I was impressed by how hard my colleagues worked, how dedicated they were to the tasks, and how creative they were—especially at a very tiring time of the semester." Finally, our collaborative process engendered a greater sense of camaraderie and community among faculty. If anyone happened to visit our group on a night of our retreat, one might see the following:

- professors from biology, English, math, and education writing an essay to illustrate various criteria listed for F to A grades (and hooting with laughter!)
- a musician, an accountant, and a developmental education professor composing illustrations for grammar rules.
- English, psychology, biology, and chemistry professors working on the research/ documentation sections.
- history, philosophy, and English faculty working on the essay exam section.

One faculty member summed up the overall feelings of the group by stating, "I think that besides getting work done on the writing guide, the most valuable aspect of the retreat was the cross-disciplinary interaction."

Jean McGregor, in an article entitled "Collaborative Learning: Shared Inquiry as a Process of Reform," describes a group involved in a common enterprise: the mutual seeking of understanding. Because many minds are simulta-

> neously grappling with the material, while working toward a common goal, collaborative learning has the potential to unleash a unique intellectual and social synergy. (20)

As our faculty "worked toward a common goal," we experienced this "unique intellectual and social synergy," good indications that our collaboration, while producing the desired product, had benefits that we had not envisioned. The truth of the saying that "none of us is as smart as all of us" became real to us as we collaborated to produce this writing guide for our students.

Work Cited

McGregor, Jean. "Collaborative Learning: Shared Inquiry as a Process of Reform*." The Changing Face of College Teaching.* Ed. Marilla D. Svinicki. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. NY: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

Appendix A

WRITING SURVEY*

Name _____ Department _____

1. How important is writing for students in your discipline?
2. Will they need writing for professions in your field? If so, what kind?
3. What kind of writing do they do now?
4. How many writing assignments are required in one semester?
   a. 1-3
   b. 4-6
   c. 7-9
   d. 10-12
   e. 13 or more

5. How long are the writing assignments you give your students?
    a. between 100 and 300 words
    b. between 300 and 500 words
    c. between 500 and 1500 words
    d. over 1500 words
6. What is the basis for assigning writing? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. A summary of what has been covered in class
    b. An extension and/or expansion of what has been covered in class
    c. A substitute for what cannot be covered in class
    d. Other _____
7. How do you teach writing with respect to your assignments? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. by an explanatory assignment sheet
    b. by using a model paper as an example
    c. by having students write assignments in class, or at least partly in class, under your supervision
    d. by breaking the assignment into steps or stages and teaching each step separately
    e. by verbal explanations
    f. by using peer editing to offer helpful suggestions for fellow students in the process of writing
8. What types of corrections do you make on student papers? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. indicating errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and manuscript appearance, but not correcting the errors
    b. indicating errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and manuscript appearance, and correcting the errors
    c. indicating faulty sentences—e.g., vagueness, ambiguity, lack of sense—but not rewriting the sentences
    d. indicating faulty sentences and rewriting them
    e. Other_____

9. What types of comments do you make on papers you assign? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. Comments about *form* (manuscript appearance, organization, grammar, spelling, punctuation) written in the margins
    b. Comments about *form* written in a summary statement
    c. Comments about *content* written in the margins
    d. Comments about *content* written in a summary
    e. Other_____
10. What is the basis for your evaluation of the assignments? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. evaluation based on content only
    b. evaluation based on form only
    c. evaluation based on a combination of form and content (If you check this item, answer the following three sub-questions.)
        1) equal emphasis on form and content
        2) more emphasis on form than on content
        3) more emphasis on content than on form
11. How are grades assigned on the papers? (Check as many as are appropriate.)
    a. a grade appears on the paper together with no evaluative comments (letter or number?)
    b. a grade (letter or number?) appears on the paper together with evaluative comments
    c. evaluative comments appear on the paper with no grade assigned
    d. papers are returned to be revised before final grades are assigned
12. What style of documentation is used for research papers by your department?
13. Do you see problems with the writing of your students? If so, which of the following applies?
    a. problems with grammar
    b. problems with punctuation

c. problems with spelling
d. problems with organization
e. problems with synthesis of information
f. problems with paraphrasing, summarizing
g. other _____

14. What can be done to help raise the writing levels of our students?
15. Are you interested in finding out more about using writing in your classes?
    a. workshop
    b. teaching a writing-emphasis course in your department
    c. team-teaching
    d. other _____
16. The teaching of writing should be the responsibility of
    a. the English teacher
    b. the content-area teacher
    c. other _____

*Adapted from a survey in an article by Dan Donlan, "Teaching Writing in the Content Areas: Eleven Hypotheses from a Teacher Survey." *Research in the Teaching of English* 8 (Spring 1974): 250-262.

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Appendix B

Table of Contents of *Writing at Carson-Newman College*