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The Loneliness of the Long Distance Writer or Are There Pitfalls to Well-Designed Encouragement?

by
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Which writing skills do students need? How effectively does the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program address those needs? In implementing the WAC program, to what degree are instructors responsible? As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed, the questions overlooked most frequently are those fundamental assumptions behind our actions, the assumptions so basic that few if any have ever examined them. What are the "less examined" propositions tacitly assumed by the WAC program?

In this case, the first assumption might rest on asking what kind of writing students will be required to employ after their undergraduate experience, i.e., will they need a "professional" level of writing skill? Is the WAC program designed to provide such skills?

In addressing the effectiveness of WAC, perhaps we should not only address WAC techniques, but a basic assumption behind its implementation--that, if writing instructors find the "right" approach, they can provide virtually all of their students with considerably improved writing skills and the tools necessary for their post-graduate careers.

The Need for Writing Skills

Why do students need to learn writing skills? Forget the business about being better human beings or better communicators. Let's get down to basics. According to my colleagues who have been involved with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program from the beginning, WAC consists of two basic and complementary approaches: (1) writing to learn and (2) learning to write.

These two approaches are interlinked. Certainly one cannot write even passably without learning, and the process of writing enhances learning. It's also been said that an idea does not exist unless it has been written down. Because words are logical tools, the mere process of attempting to codify an idea in ink requires logic, and the more clearly an idea is written, the greater the logic required.

As an instructor, I definitely use writing as a technique for enhancing learning, from the use of factsheets to the assignment of provocative journal topics in composition--or the use of freewriting and provocative essay topics in literature.

Unfortunately, however, even the use of writing to learn is greatly hampered by an inability or deficiency in writing skills. Yes, a student can begin to explore an idea, but a fuzzily expressed concept or proposition may not be a significant improvement over total ignorance--a little learning remains a dangerous thing, particularly if the writing to learn process inadvertently conveys to a student an exaggerated view of his actual abilities.

While, on the academic level, instructors may use WAC techniques for either writing to learn or learning to write--or both--once students leave their undergraduate studies, the vast majority of their writing requirements will be "professional." In its broadest sense, for the purposes of this article, I define "professional" as the ability to communicate with others in inked symbols for purposes beyond

our personal pleasures, gains in knowledge, desires, or emotional or spiritual releases.

Although what we or students do with our personal writing may grant us pleasure, joy, or release, presumably the ultimate goal of teaching writing (i.e., "learning to write") at a college or university is to enhance the professional writing abilities of our students. While language itself is a bridge between people, everyday speech does not rely merely on grammar, word choice, and word position, but also upon facial expression, intonation, inflection, body language, and immediate feedback. By comparison, writing must rely solely on the cold basics of word meanings, structure, and grammar, and therefore demands greater precision.

In the loose professional sense, writing is:

-a method for conveying information accurately and succinctly.
-an organizational or analytical tool.
-a basis for entertainment, such as scripts, screenplays, stories, or novels.

Therefore, by its nature, professional writing must meet the needs of its target audience. A fiction writer must entertain, provoke, or satisfy. Most fiction is purchased because the buyers seek pleasure and/or escape from their own world or life. An economist must convey economic information clearly. An accountant must explain the footnotes and the meaning of the numbers in the annual report.

Few if any target audiences care about the mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual state of the writer unless it detracts from the work, but they do care whether the writer has accomplished the goals of the work. Thus, in teaching writing we should continually get students to ask questions such as these: Does this paper convey information

accurately? Does this essay fully analyze the proposition? Does this description enlighten or entertain the reader?

Recently, the PSC WAC project and others across the country have suggested the need for improvement in writing techniques, and in adopting new processes, such as collaborative and cooperative learning, to interest students in the writing process. This "new wind" in writing instruction is based on a *de facto* assumption that older critical and confrontational methods--the sea of red ink turning a student's paper into a spider web of arcane notations--had failed in producing the writing skills necessary for a truly educated individual and in motivating students to improve their writing.

As part of its evaluations, the PSC WAC project even undertook a survey of student voices, which summarized and evaluated student concerns thus:

> "Students advise their professors to recognize the value of journals, the collegiality of collaborative writing, and the benefits of presentations and research. They want to be presented with more interesting topics and need to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them."[1]

At least some members of the PSC faculty seem to have adopted a similar set of values:

> "Until then, there are plenty of other ways to make science fun and at the same time get students to become better writers."[2]
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> "As students build on and react to each other's ideas, they enter into a collaborative conversation

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1 "Student Voices on Writing at Plymouth State College," *PSC Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum*, 1992, Volume III, Number 2, page 34.

2 Spencer, Larry, "The Inveterate Invertebrate Reporter," *PSC Journal of Writing Across the Curriculum*, 1992, Volume III, Number 2, page 46.

with other minds."[3]

The unwritten thesis underlying these comments appears to be "if we encourage these students through positive means and do whatever is necessary to keep them from being threatened and bored, then they will be motivated to improve their writing."

Fear has been defined as a poor pedagogical tool, but then so is bribery. Fear, at least, has the dubiously redeeming quality of being true-to-life. Seldom will a well-written presentation get the writer an immediate raise or bonus, but a poorly written one will result in definite negatives--from poor grades to poor evaluations or loss of job. Good written skills are *expected*, not rewarded, in the professional community.

One implication of the WAC project and the student concerns is an effort to avoid student boredom. I was bored in learning Latin grammar, and in writing and rewriting essays as a student. I also learned math and grammar through usage and repetition. Certain aspects of learning may always be boring, but boring or not, I am tired of students who were and are so bored that they still will not understand that you cannot join two sentences with a comma (without a conjunction). When I have attempted to explain any number of basic grammatical and structural problems, ranging from faulty subject-verb agreement, lack of parallelism, unreferenced or misreferenced pronouns, usage of words or concepts in improper context, or even the problem of comma-splicing sentences, I often run into the problem that many students do not know the basic building blocks of language--verbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions, possessives, subjunctives, or even what either a sentence or a conjunction happens to be. It is difficult to

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[3] Peterson-González, Meg, "The Circle,: *PSC Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum,* 1992, Volume III, Number 2, page 55.

inject interest into basic grammar, and it is even more difficult to improve the writing of a student who does not understand the need for it. As do all my colleagues, I try. And although I have always attempted to make assignments interesting, the basic focus of my instruction has been on the need for students to master a particular point or skill, not primarily on entertaining them, nor on focusing on ways to make life and learning less threatening.

All learning is a threat. If we learn something, it must either add to or displace previous knowledge and opinions, thus modifying or threatening them. For this reason alone, scholars have been persecuted throughout history. As instructors, our job is to open new venues of knowledge and ways of thinking, and that means threatening some student values. Should we back away from such threats, or attempt to smooth them over?

For what purpose? Will such educational politicking teach better writing? Non-threatening techniques such as collaborative learning or circle discussions appear to improve student understanding and certainly increase student interest, but... the question remains. How useful are such tools in providing students with long-term skills? Personally, I have found the level of "skills transference" obtained by such practices low. That is, even after a discussion succeeds in improving logical understanding and knowledge of the subject at hand, when the same students are presented with an apparently different problem, which can be analyzed or handled by the same tools illustrated and discussed in an earlier collaborative exercise, few, if any, of the students seem able to either analyze the subject matter or improve their writing without, once again, being led through the process.

I use journals in teaching writing courses and find they are effective in encouraging most students to write. Only in a handful of cases, if that, however, are such journals useful in improving the quality of student writing.

The vast majority of journal entries fall far short of the goals of professional writing. Techniques such as circle discussions may well encourage students to share what they have written, but how does that sharing improve logic and writing?

A more senior faculty member suggested that I should allow a "greater diversity of opinion" in my classes. Exactly what will greater diversity of opinion accomplish? As indicated in an earlier *Journal* article,[4] an informal survey revealed that one of the problems facing writing instructors, indeed most professors at the introductory level, is students' equation of opinion with fact.

The value of any opinion must be supported, by fact, example, or logic. Most students are just that--students who are presumably here to learn. While professors can always learn something from a class, any professor worth his or her salt should be able to provide knowledge and learning skills far more effectively than virtually any student, and since time is limited, students presumably should either be learning from the professor,working on some activity which is instructional, or putting what they have learned into practice to hone skills, in this case, writing.

Talking about writing, and even reading one's written works, is not the same as writing. As a professional writer, I love to talk about my writing, but talking doesn't get more writing done. For the most part, talking by either the instructor or the students doesn't get writing done, either.

A second problem with the adoption of less formal, less "threatening" classroom techniques and configurations is the message they can convey. As a colleague stated, "All this informality and student input give students the idea

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4 "The Factsheet as a Device for Teaching Logical Writing," *PSC Journal of Writing Across the Curriculum*, 1991, Volume III, Number 1, page 20.

that their ideas are of equal value to mine." But are student ideas of equal value? Will treating them as such lead to better writing? Or merely an inflated opinion of inadequate writing?

Moreover, some aspects of writing are not matters of opinion. Rules of grammar exist as a necessity for standardization and clarity. Dangling modifiers, of which I see far too many, are not a matter of individual opinion or style, but of meaning. Unreferenced pronouns sow confusion, as do sentences without verbs. Writing by accepted standards is not a matter of opinion.

Nor is learning the craft of writing usually enjoyable or easy. And it is definitely not fun, especially for those students with deficient skills in grammar and organization or with various learning disabilities. Learning effective writing may be rewarding, useful, or interesting, but it is *work*. All the collaborative and collegial exercises will not change that.

While there is great talk these days about the "collaborative" workplace, there is also great confusion about what that really means. As a former government official responsible for producing collaborative written products (legislation, legislative reports, and testimony for a large federal agency), and as a former senior manager of the environmental team of a consulting firm, I understand and have been personally responsible for innumerable such collaborative efforts. The elements of such work are not *produced* collaboratively. Each section is the responsibility of an individual. The final work may be edited and critiqued by others, but at each stage responsibility falls on designated individuals. The final responsibility, of course, falls on the office director or team manager.

With this experience as a background, I have great concern that too great a focus on group support and sympathetic learning atmospheres may remove the understanding by students that each individual is responsible for his or her

written work. In the end virtually all good or great written work is the product of a single individual. While some authors have solicited and/or accepted input and criticism, the choice of words and the responsibility for those words was theirs.

Students taught to write primarily through positive reinforcement and collaborative methods, when faced with critical comments or accurate assessments of their work, may well respond as did one young student of mine--"But you didn't say anything nice about my paper."

I often receive, directly or indirectly, the message that faculty should be more encouraging and supportive. While I believe that I do encourage students, generally, for all the lip service paid by students and administrators to it, "encouragement" by itself leaves a great deal to be desired. What works, at least for me, is a combination of hard work, knowledge, expertise, personal example, and firm and challenging expectations of students. The encouragement may lift their spirits, but I have yet to see a student "encouraged" into handling a difficult or challenging piece of work. Encouraged to read a book or article perhaps... but not to analyze it or think about it.

Merely extending a "hot-house" protection of students through establishing more collegial or collaborative atmospheres could well delay student understanding of the requirements of professional writing. At what point should students be required to meet those requirements?

If an employer asks one of our former students for a memorandum on the effectiveness of a sales promotion campaign or for an individualized instructional program, the responsibility for such written work--and the rewards and penalties--fall on the individual.

Writing is, like marathon running, a solitary discipline, and unless such methods as collegial or collaborative efforts are clearly approached as *transitional* crutches, students will retain a misleading image of the discipline

necessary for success in writing for either graduate education or the real world.

Am I condemning all collaborative, cooperative, or innovative approaches out of hand? Hardly. I have cheerfully borrowed--or, perhaps more accurately, stolen--as many ideas as I thought useful, and the way I teach composition has changed dramatically over the past three years.

I do evaluate each idea or technique which others have suggested or I have investigated. The questions I pose when confronted with a possible change in my composition course are:

-Exactly how will this improve my course?
-How is it of greater value than what I now do?
-Will it make my students better writers *after* they
-have left the class?

The first two questions are obvious. The third is necessary because all too many students focus on solving the instructor rather than making permanent changes in their way of writing or even looking at the world. In effect, they look for the easiest way to meet instructional expectations.

Because change comes through stretching one's boundaries and confronting hard truths, I must continue to question whether too much collegiality and too many collaborative processes actually prepare students for life after college, or whether they simply aid students in postponing the inevitable collision with reality.

Behind the Continual Search for "Better" Writing Instruction

There is an overall philosophical question raised by this proliferation of collaborative, collegial, and non-threatening techniques. On whose shoulders' does the primary responsibility for a student's education fall?

suggest publicly that any student's intellectual accomplishments may be limited, or that, in the case of WAC, interest-building and non-confrontational techniques may be no better than older techniques in developing long-term writing skills.

Are new WAC techniques really better? What do we mean by better? Better at making classes easier for overworked professors, or more comforting because they create the illusion of progress? Better for students who want to write or better for those who have a limited desire to write? These questions should not be taken to indicate I believe that some magically predetermined percentage of students can never learn to improve their writing skills or that they are in some way intrinsically deficient, but to raise honestly the issue of what proportion of success we should expect--or perhaps how to define success in a more realistic fashion.

We have assumed almost automatically, not only in undertaking the implementation of Writing Across the Curriculum, but in insisting on composition courses themselves, that virtually all students can and should learn to write professionally, or at least at a "collegiate" level, but have we ever seriously questioned the validity of that unspoken assumption? Or do we continue to look for an ever more perfect system of teaching writing, endlessly seeking the end of the rainbow or the yellow brick road?