WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: FROM THEORY TO IMPLEMENTATION

TONY MAGISTRALE

In the past year the University of Vermont English Department conducted a series of two-day writing across the curriculum workshops for faculty members representing the diverse university disciplines. The two elements shared by the workshop group were a desire to improve the writing skills of students across the curriculum and a general confusion regarding concrete approaches available to bringing this about. In this essay I would like to share some of the results from the workshops in which I have participated and co-directed.

For the last two decades, or at least since the contemporary emphasis on composition programs in English departments and the plethora of attendant rhetorical strategies for improving student prose, educators have affixed responsibility for poor writing skills on a variety of culprits: television, computers, telephones, teachers who don't know how to write themselves, a general failure to address adequately the mechanics of grammar and spelling, fewer opportunities for writing exercises. The list goes as long as the complaint, and we have still achieved little by way of definite solutions. Our students don't seem to be writing any better (an observation shared by most of the individuals at our workshops), and as a likely correlation, they don't seem to find the activity of writing very meaningful or pleasurable.

These were some of the reasons for our decision to offer a series of writing across the curriculum workshops. If the faculty shared a similar attitude toward student prose — both in terms of its importance to the learning process and its current state of decline — a broader based commitment to student writing, ex-

tending beyond the English department, would at least provide more frequent occasions for student practice. What we discovered, however, is that the *amount* of undergraduate writing generated at the University of Vermont is not the problem; if the hundred faculty members participating in our three workshops are a fair representation of the university as a whole, students are receiving the opportunity to write in nearly every one of their classes. The issue of improved writing skills is therefore not necessarily related to the frequency of student writing, but rather to the *kind* of writing they are asked to produce.

We began each workshop by asking the participants several questions regarding the type of student writing required in their courses and the reasons why writing is included in a sociology or mathematics classroom. The answers we received to these questions were similar to the responses compiled by James Britton in surveys of writing in English high schools. Most of our colleagues use student writing for two purposes: to evaluate and to impart knowledge. Relying upon Britton's earlier research for classifying writing according to the function it serves and its intended audience, the majority of teachers in our workshop — especially those representing the sciences and social sciences — required writing in their classrooms for informational purposes exclusively (see Britton, et al.). The students were required to take notes on lectures, record data for written reports, answer multiple choice examinations, and compose end of the term research models in final draft form. Furthermore, the intended audience for this material was always the professor. When students in the classes performed composing exercises, they were seldom in multiple draft form, and usually took place outside of the classroom — in the isolation of the dorm room, laboratory, or library. As a result, most of the undergraduates at the University of Vermont follow writing patterns nearly identical to those Arthur Applebee found in American high schools (Applebee, et al.). Writing is a self-contained activity that does not include personal or imaginative reconstruction of experience, as in journals, diaries, letters, or personal responses, where the purpose for writing is to engage discovery and direct involvement on the writer's part with new material. Moreover, students were asked to supply the professor with examples of research models from the discipline: those in biochemistry were expected to write like biochemists, those enrolled

in sociology classes, like professional sociologists. A student majoring in the discipline might very well desire to practice writing in the persona of his future profession, but obviously the majority of undergraduates who enroll in biochemistry or sociology courses do not intend to major in the field. Moreover, in the process of teaching students to write in the idiom of specialized disciplines, we are abetting a kind of cross-curriculum schizophrenia. Most of my colleagues are discouraged when individual students ask questions similar to "How do you want me to write this assignment?" or "What style of writing do you want me to use?" And yet these are the responses educators necessarily generate when they limit their students to traditional academic prose models. By restricting the types of writing available within the university curricula students are encouraged to produce language which either reflects a general apathy toward the spirit of critical inquiry or a flat "voiceless" style characteristic of a writer lacking any kind of commitment to the assignment. After all, what other kind of writing is possible when the student is forced by virtue of grade pressure to utilize a writing persona that is highly impersonal and sounds identical to the other members of the class?

As evidenced in the assignment topics and accompanying examples of student writing which we requested from our colleagues prior to the workshop, the majority of teachers at the University of Vermont who include writing in their course offerings assign work which does not primarily involve direct student input. Most of the sample essay examination questions we received (prior to each workshop) did not ask undergraduates to pursue independent research or consider issues in which they might be interested; instead, the educators asked for answers to questions they already knew. From the history department: "Name and discuss the three major issues which led to the outbreak of World War II." From a forestry professor: "How serious is the problem of wildfire and what forest fire control measures are currently applied?" And from a teacher of engineering: "In a 3 to 5 page paper, explain the principle of jet propulsion."

Each of these assignments asks for specific information which is relevant to the course, but each likewise limits the student writer to a perception that there must exist definite answers to these questions; to be right, the student must compose a version of the answer his teacher already knows and wants to hear repeated. As a result

of this procedure, the writer gains little sense of discovering anything new or different about the subject and sharing it with his audience. Recent research on writing has argued that more persuasive and interesting prose originates from writers who are "actively" involved with their material — composing about issues self-generated by the author himself — rather than "passively" engaged in transcribing lecture notes or some other author's reasoning into essay form. If we as educators are truly committed to fostering critical and independent thinking in our students, we must re-evaluate the role writing occupies across the curriculum. If we want our students to acquire a command of the language so it becomes a force for persuasion and self-knowledge, rather than a mere tool for transcription and evaluation, we need assignments which ask them to become more personally involved in the process of writing. If it remains a plausible maxim that the best professional prose originates from authors writing about topics they know and care about, why do we forsake the maxim by asking our students to write always from a foreign perspective, as though they know and care about nothing?

In their essay "Learning to Write in the Secondary Schools: How and Where," the Applebee research team cited, as their first recommendation to improving the quality of writing in American high schools, the need "for more situations in which writing serves as a tool for learning, rather than as a means to display acquired knowledge" (Applebee, 81). My association with writing across the curriculum workshops has demonstrated the relevancy of this conclusion, and extends it beyond the elementary and high school levels to include college work as well. The Applebee research team presents a very broad outline to implementing a process-orientated methodology. On the second day of each workshop we try to extend the Applebee analysis through the detailed recommendations and specific applications generated by individual participants of the workshop in group activity. The following suggestions represent the conclusions of the workshops with which I have been affiliated. We arrived at them inductively, and they are based on consensus opinion.

1. Multiple Drafts. In emphasizing the process over product approach to writing, the teacher receives a more accurate sense of pupil development. Non-graded versions of written work help alleviate some of the traditional academic pressure that students

feel when they are forced to view the assignment as a "one shot" measure for evaluation. This strategy not only produces better "final" copies, but helps to cure mechanical skill problems as well. One immediate result of producing multiple drafts is to demystify the activity of composing; the class learns through experience that good writing is not simply the result of a spontaneous birth, but must evolve in stages. As my co-workshop leader Toby Fulwiler has argued, "students who learn to put writing through personal, exploratory stages before writing a final draft develop more thoughtful papers than students who attempt to compose finished wisdom in one sitting" (Fulwiler, 22-3). Moreover, many of the student revisions should be generated from peer group interaction, thus liberating the teacher to move among individual groups or concentrate on individual instruction.

2. Journals. Ask the class to use journal entries before and after reading assignments, for expressing reactions to class discussions and lectures, as a starting point for generating paper topics and research, and to record impressions of thoughts, feelings, moods, and experiences. Begin and end each class with a five minute writing entry. Ask students to write on a focused theme related to class content (e.g. their own theories about why the institution of slavery evolved before beginning a lecture/discussion about racial relationships in contemporary America). This exercise helps to focus thinking directly on the subject and will often, if students are requested to read entries to the class, provide introductory discussion material.

3. Prose Models. Show models of effective student writing and contrast it with less effective prose. The instructor questions students into explaining why one example is the better of the two. Where is the writing at its strongest and weakest? The "model approach" to learning helps to define what constitutes good writing, while at the same time illustrating that style and content are inextricably related.

4. Assignments. Compose writing assignments which seek to raise questions, pose problems, and pursue areas of original research that the individual student is interested in exploring. One purpose of using writing in the classroom should be to emphasize student involvement by making learning personal. This is accomplished less effectively when the instructor assigns work designed to pro-

duce guided and unimaginative prose (e.g. canned research papers, recall-testing, note-taking and copying exercises). Before we can expect our students to create essays which are a pleasure to read, we must first create assignments which are a pleasure to write.

5. Audience. Nearly all writing performed in academic settings is composed with a single audience in mind: the teacher. Our students write on subjects we assign, and if they are at all motivated by grades and ego fulfillment, they usually rely upon a rigid and safe form of diction and language structuring gleaned from years of producing academic research papers. Attaining fluency in the language of academese may equip our students for survival in school, but it remains only a single voice in a world which will ask them to speak in tongues. Providing writing exercises where class members are asked to write to friends, to themselves, to a classmate, and to an administrator or expert in the discipline, enlarges the student's range of dialogue; urging students to experiment with a plurality of prose styles for a variety of readers is a way of demonstrating the important choices available in using language and the appropriateness of establishing proper contexts for different writing voices.

6. Collaboration. A classroom environment fostering student discussion of current research and drafts of writing increases the acceptance of criticism and criticizing. In his book *Telling Writing*, Macrorie advocates frequent discussion among students to create a workshop atmosphere in the classroom. Responding orally to one another's work helps students to clarify and organize writing concepts; the act of reading one's own prose out loud helps to focus attention on language that does not sound appropriate.

7. Composing Assignments. Instructors working within the same or related subject areas should establish periodic meetings to discuss strategies and specific examples for advancing student writing within the field. This is one method for colleagues to share common experiences in the classroom, while at the same time discovering (and incorporating) unique techniques employed by different instructors.

The English department belongs at the center of any writing across the curriculum program to help co-ordinate its various activities, but the responsibility for improving student writing cannot and should not rest there. The activity of producing writing

assignments which are creative and thought-provoking increases the opportunity to improve student comprehension and attitude in the classroom. In scheduling writing activities which reflect the pedagogy suggested in this essay, students cannot help but develop a greater sense of commitment to the specific material of the course, while at the same time increasing their confidence in general writing skills. A process-orientated approach to composing links together the diverse elements within an individual course; through journal entries and multiple drafts essays, members of the class have a better chance of enlarging course content by discovering theme interrelationships and contrasts. If writing is, as Janet Emig insists, an act of discovery as well as "a unique mode of learning," it remains an untapped resource available to every classroom instructor, regardless of the subject being taught (Emig, 122). The real value of a writing across the curriculum workshop forum is that it helps to stimulate thinking about incorporating less traditional forms of writing in order to achieve more effective educational results.

Tony Magistrale is Assistant Professor of English and co-director of the university sponsored writing across the curriculum project at the University of Vermont, Burlington.

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