

### 3

## WRITING IDENTITY

### *The Independent Writing Department as a Disciplinary Center*

Anne Aronson

Craig Hansen

*People who know how to teach students to write well in the English Dept. are valued by my colleagues, but I sometimes wonder whether this collegial respect comes from a genuine admission that teaching writing is a valid discipline or from their relief that somebody else does the dirty work.*

Comment from an informal survey on the WPA-L listserv

Is an independent writing program—actually, an independent department in our case—any different from any other writing program? In fact, we share the familiar struggle for academic identity and meaningful recognition. The perception of writing as a service course is so pervasive in academic culture that any attempt to expand that perception creates dissonance. Yet, in our attempt, we have experienced some progress, some frustration, and have learned much along the way. In this chapter, we describe our attempt to create a different identity—where writing is more than the service course, where writing is a major, and where writing is a recognized academic discipline.

#### HISTORY

Our development as a writing department reflects in many ways a comment by John Trimbur: “[T]he relations of the study and teaching of writing to English departments is both accidental and overdetermined—the result not of a necessary belongingness between the two but of a particular historical conjuncture when written composition replaced rhetoric just as English departments were taking shape in the modern university” (27). Whether the English/composition relationship is historical accident or sensible partnership, circumstances at our institution allowed us to separate writing from English department “belongingness.” These circumstances need some explanation.

Although part of a large state system, Metropolitan State University is atypical in a number of ways. Metro State has a tradition of alternative approaches to education: until the late 1980s, there were no traditional academic departments, majors, or grading systems. Writing, as a discipline and an area of instruction, was part of a “communication cluster.” Consequently, when, as new faculty members, we developed the department of writing in 1993, our closest connections were with the areas of communications and media studies—not with the English department. This, along with certain other characteristics of Metro State, has given us unusual freedom in envisioning and developing a department devoted to writing.

Though Metro State is now more like other institutions in many respects, most of Metro State’s nine thousand students remain nontraditional—a diverse, urban group of working adults (the average age is thirty-three). The faculty also maintains some nontraditional characteristics. Full-time, tenured, or tenure-track faculty—half women and half men—meet within colleges as a whole (as opposed to departments) to make curricular and policy decisions. Although the administration has made efforts to establish more formal procedures, Metro State is what Stephen Ball refers to as an interpersonally administered educational institution. It is a site characterized by lots of face-to-face contact, sometimes elusive decision-making processes, and personal relationships between subordinates and management. Further, Metro State has a distinctly entrepreneurial feel; it’s an institution where change is fundamental and ever present.

Given this overall institutional context, we experienced little resistance to the initial concept of a writing department. This concept from the beginning was for a broad-based program, one that included academic writing instruction, a writing center, and programs in creative, professional, and technical writing.

#### MARKETING

We have done very little to market our department as a department—nor have we actively marketed our two undergraduate majors (described in more detail later in this chapter)—as we have experienced steady growth. Similarly, we have not felt a need to justify the department within the university: we have generally had the support of both faculty in other departments (and colleges) and the university administration. In terms of our majors, the professional and technical

writing areas have attracted students because Metro's adult student population tends to be vocationally oriented. However, we have been somewhat surprised by the growth in creative writing. Though this does not readily lead to well-compensated employment, adult students have stories to tell; this, coupled with a rich pool of instructors (more about that below) has resulted in a strong program. Overall, we have 220 students as undergraduate majors and over fifty master's students.

Despite this general disclaimer, we have undertaken a few specific direct or indirect marketing efforts. For example, as a department, we have sponsored readings, writing panels, and other events. We have also cosponsored a creative writing journal, which we advise. This effort—we hope—has created a higher profile for creative writing. Another example is the M.S. in Technical Communication program. As a start-up M.S. program, we needed to reach potential students currently in the workplace. To this end, we have held information sessions, invested in professional-quality brochures, created an advisory board of industry representatives, and managed to plant a few stories in student or local newspapers. This has been an expensive and very time-consuming effort. Finally we, like programs across the country, have invested department time and resources into creating a reasonably thorough website (<http://www.metrostate.edu/cas/WRIT/TCindex.htm>). The site, primarily designed and programmed by department faculty (in their spare time), with some student help, generates inquiries from within and without the university.

#### STRUCTURAL SUPPORT

Metro State, like many state-sponsored colleges or universities, has not been awash in resources. Nonetheless, the College of Arts and Sciences has made some investment in the development of the writing department—however limited. There is overhead in creating and maintaining a department, which the university has provided without question. But, despite seven years of solid growth, we have had little luck in obtaining new tenure-track positions. In the past two years, we gained one full-time position (because it was grant funded for two years) and one half-time position. Our full-time faculty still remain hard-pressed, especially in terms of advising. Just this year, we have succeeded in gaining a clerical support position shared between the writing center and the writing department. Previous to this, we shared a pool of support with many other departments, which was often frustrating for all concerned.

In another important area of structural support, release time, our situation has largely been determined by our faculty union contract and is quite similar to release time arrangements with other departments. Our department chair position receives a standard release with some additional release for managing specific programs (e.g., the M.S. in Technical Communication). Our department also received a one-time, four-credit course release to design, develop, and implement the M.S. in Technical Communication.

Structurally, our department is quite different from every other department in the university—though this may not persist. First, we have had department cochairs since the department's inception—the only cochairs in the university. This is not a formal part of our structure, but rather something that arose from convenience when the department started and that has continued to work well (with the same two cochairs). Secondly, the writing center is associated with our department, but the director reports to the dean. This reporting structure is mandated by union rules (and, in fact, our new support position will not report to the department either: faculty are prohibited from supervising clerical and professional employees).

Finally, our diversity of responsibilities and programs is very unusual—from involvement in writing assessment of new students, to composition classes, to tutoring, to several undergraduate and graduate programs. The writing department has become larger and more complex than most other departments and requires a high level of commitment by the department cochairs and the faculty. Indeed, a possible drawback of independent writing departments is the heavy load of administration; in ours, the chairs have the double burden of writing program administrator (WPA) and department chair.

In one area we are structurally similar to most other departments: our university was envisioned from the start to use many practitioners and professionals with advanced degrees to teach. It is not unusual for a writing program to use adjunct faculty (which we do), but all other departments at Metro State also use large numbers of adjuncts, called “community faculty.” The vast majority of these faculty teach only one or two classes a year, which poses some challenges in ensuring consistency within our program.

Writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) has been handled through infrequent workshops and internal conferences. However, the university is seriously committed to a writing-intensive curriculum (one of its traditions), and students in professional programs, such as nursing or

accounting, do a fair amount of writing as part of their class work. Most recently, the writing center has been at the center of WAC initiatives. The writing center has grown in scope and service in recent years, after a difficult early start, where it was primarily grant funded.

## CURRICULUM

When we began the Department of Writing, we had a small number of intermediate-level writing courses, primarily devoted to academic or business writing. Our department now has a rich curriculum including general education composition classes and an array of upper-division classes in creative writing, journalism, and technical communication. At the lower-division level, we offer a first-year sequence (“Writing 1” and “Writing 2”), developmental courses, and courses in business and technical writing. Since the typical student transfers to Metro State with some college credits, we have never had to offer vast numbers of lower-division sections. Building on our “cluster” heritage, our majors are interdisciplinary: that is, they include classes from related departments. For example, the screenwriting major in the media studies department requires creative writing, and our technical communication major requires a media studies class. This arrangement is not only efficient, but helps maintain collegial relationships across related departments.

By union contract, the faculty controls the curriculum. Consequently, we have developed the department’s curriculum without any administrative interference (although they have voiced opinions). We do, of course, have to gain approval for all new or changed curriculum through a college faculty committee. Our curriculum does show some signs of ad hoc development, and we continue to refine and expand it.

As mentioned above, the writing department offers several degree programs:

*B.A. in Writing.* This major has two tracks: one with a creative writing focus and one with a professional (but not technical) writing focus.

*B.A. in Technical Communication.* This is a highly structured, interdisciplinary program.

*Minor in Creative Writing.* This minor has attracted students from diverse majors—from English to accounting.

*M.S. in Technical Communication.* We have aimed this program at working adults by offering evening and weekend classes and by sometimes customizing the program to student needs.

When we started the department, there was no major (or concentration, as it was then known as ) in writing. We have developed all these programs since 1993.

#### LABOR CONCERNS

In our department, tenured or tenure-track faculty teach most of the upper-division classes, while community faculty teach the majority of the lower-division offerings. At one point, community faculty taught 70–80 percent of all of our classes. More recently, the ratio has changed so that tenured and tenure-track faculty teach about 40 percent of the classes. This is due, in part, to a small increase in these faculty, but it is also due to increased teaching loads for tenured and tenure-track faculty.

Minneapolis/St. Paul is a major urban center with an active arts community and many new technology companies. This creates a large pool of qualified adjunct faculty for professionally-oriented classes (such as “Technical Writing”), all genres of creative writing, and specialized classes (such as “Writing for Publication and Profit”). We train new faculty on an individual basis (essentially by appointing a full-time faculty member as a mentor). We also have an annual meeting with all faculty to discuss issues of concern and interest (use of new technology, grading concerns, etc.). Our university has a teaching and learning center that offers new faculty orientation, as well as workshops and an annual conference for all faculty. Our writing faculty have been involved in designing or participating in these sessions.

#### TENURE

Tenure and promotion at Metro State are granted by the administration. Faculty for the College of Arts and Sciences vote to recommend tenure, and this vote is important in a successful tenure application. While our faculty have been granted tenure without undue difficulty, tenure could become problematic, given a different mix of faculty or a different dean. The reason is one common to all involved with writing instruction: these programs involve high levels of unrecognized administrative effort, relatively few opportunities for high-profile research, and a general misunderstanding of writing as an academic discipline.

We believe being a separate department offers distinct advantages for the tenure process. First, departmental status tends to support the viability of writing as an academic discipline. Second, we can recommend tenure as a department before the case is submitted to the college faculty

for a vote. A departmental recommendation, supported by testimonials with explanations of the department's work, is very persuasive (and is good public relations for the department). Third, as a separate department, we have been able to develop degree programs that help anchor the teaching and research activities of our faculty: this also strengthens the tenure case.

#### PRACTICE, ART, PROFESSION AND DISCIPLINE

In an effort to learn more about how our Metro State colleagues perceived our department, we recently sent out an informal survey to faculty and professional staff asking them, among other things, about what they saw as the primary function of our department. Some responses were terse and uninformative (e.g., "to teach writing"); others were comprehensive and better captured the complexity of what we do. One response—clearly from a friend of our department—stands out. The purpose of our department, according to this writer, is "to provide leadership at the university in all activities related to writing as discipline and profession, practice and art." We wish we had formulated this eloquent mission statement for the department ourselves. We'd like to unpack the terms of this definition (in a slightly different order) as a way to comment on our experience as an independent program that has worked toward establishing disciplinary identity.

*Practice.* Practice is, of course, key in our work as an independent writing department. Practice pervades the curriculum, as students negotiate tasks as diverse as writing a public service announcement and writing a sonnet. More significant, perhaps, is our emphasis on having a staff of practitioners. These writers—poets, novelists, technical writers, editors, freelancers, journalists—are essential to the success of our program. The union contract that governs our hiring practices has reduced the number of credits adjunct faculty can teach to ten—two or three classes each academic year. A few of our faculty—those who see writing instruction as their vocation—are justifiably unhappy with this situation. For most, however, the teaching load fits well with their other writing and work activities. Take, for example, Suzanne, a recent hire who is carving out a reputable career as a fiction writer and poet; she teaches a couple of composition classes for us a year and works as a caterer. She would not want a full-time adjunct position, given her commitment to developing her writing. Another example is Donna, who has a full-time job as an editor of an international engineering journal. She teaches two classes a year in editing and

document design. Both of these women are gifted teachers; their effectiveness in the classroom stems both from their abilities to inspire, motivate, and guide students, and from their practical experience as writers.

The situation is different for those of us who are principally academics—the tenured and tenure-track faculty. We all have professional writing experience, but most of us in recent years have made academic work a priority over professional writing. As our department has gained majors and now a graduate program, however, we have been drawn to developing our work as writers. This is not to say that scholarship is not writing practice; obviously it is, but in the context of our curriculum, it is only one limited piece of what we offer. Anne's recent sabbatical consisted of taking courses in writing creative nonfiction and working part-time for a communications company writing and editing grants and other documents for nonprofit organizations. On his recent sabbatical, Craig wrote a novel, as well as a variety of academic writing projects. We think that these sabbatical proposals were warmly received by everyone from the dean to the president of the university at least in part because writing is perceived as a discipline in which practice is necessary for teaching.

*Art.* This term has at least two possible meanings relevant to our department mission. On the one hand, "art" is *techne* in rhetoric: the methods, techniques, and strategies that are used in practicing effective writing. In imagining rhetoric as an undergraduate major or course of study, David Fleming considers "art" an essential element in the curriculum. Rhetorical art, he says, is "a theoretical vocabulary providing the language user (speaker, writer, listener, or reader) with a way to isolate, analyze, and manage communication situations, goals, resources, acts, and norms." This art, says Fleming, becomes internalized through "practice" (183).

But "art" also alludes to the status of writing as a fine art, a practice of the imagination, an act of creativity. One of the most difficult "marriages" in our department is that between the most vocational and application-oriented of writing activities—technical communication—and the most creative and impractical of writing activities—poetry, fiction, and other creative genres. It is easy to think of these seemingly incompatible uses of written communication as discrete subdivisions within our program, and in many ways they are. But because they live in the same structurally autonomous department, because technical communication specialists work side by side with novelists, we have had an interesting opportunity to see the possibilities for cross-fertilization. One example of a connection between creative and professional writing is demonstrated by the course,

“Written and Visual Communication,” a general education composition course that exposes students to the relationship of the verbal and visual. The course has been taught individually or in teams by technical communication specialists, poets, artists, composition specialists, and media scholars. While one class session may be devoted to words and images on an e-business web page, another class session may look at synesthesia in the poetry of Ezra Pound. Bridging the divide has also influenced our own research; Craig recently presented a paper on the aesthetics of technical writing. While these connections are possible in any curriculum, the structure of our department forces us constantly to revisit links among the various kinds of writing we teach.

*Profession.* Information on professional opportunities is made available to our students through the curriculum, internships, classroom contact with instructors who are also professionals, guest speakers, and advising. We are continually in the process of learning what the range of career opportunities is for our students. We try to foster connections with public and private employers and to stay informed about social and economic trends that affect career tracks for writers. While the job market is fairly open for graduates specializing in technical communication, it is less so for those focusing on professional writing. Recently we have discovered the value to students of gaining expertise in an area outside of writing. One recent graduate, for example, who had a background in botany and biology in addition to a major in writing, is now employed as a public information specialist at the USDA. Another student, who has pursued New Age philosophies as a hobby, is now an editor for Llewellyn Publications, a growing company specializing in New Age materials.

*Discipline.* This is the most complex and problematic term. Since the department’s beginnings, we have seen the work of our department as disciplinary in that we are communicating knowledge and a way of knowing that writers across the many divides of genre and profession share. We realize that the disciplinarity of composition is much debated, particularly in discussions of first-year composition. Sharon Crowley, for example, has forcibly argued that the low status of this service-based course makes the “goals of disciplinarity—the pursuit of knowledge and the professional advancement of practitioners”—virtually unattainable (253). Others disagree, arguing that there is a disciplinary identity in composition: its grounding in rhetoric (Goggin), its unique focus on student writing (Miller 1994), or its concern with critical literacy (Sullivan et al.).

As a department that offers majors and advanced study in writing in addition to composition, we believe we are better positioned to meet disciplinary goals than programs that focus on first-year composition only. We have identified a disciplinary core to our department, driven by questions that are familiar to most writing professionals: What role does written language play in construction of self and other? How is writing related to the use of other symbol systems, particularly the visual? What is creativity, and what are the possibilities for creative use of written language? What constitutes a genre? How does writing affect audiences, and how is writing affected by audiences, situations, technologies, and social/historical contexts? How does writing relate to reading, thinking, and learning? What is the relationship between the professional and the personal in writing? Who has power and agency in a specific writing situation? We believe that these questions are as relevant in a first-year composition course as they are in a technical communication capstone or a fiction-writing course.

That said, we do acknowledge real tensions between what we consider our disciplinary efforts in the department and our service function. We see Crowley's point when she says that "the imagined construction of composition as 'low' work exerts so much ideological force within the academy that even if composition were to achieve a disciplinary status that is recognized beyond its own borders, its image might not alter appreciably within the academy" (254). After all, the questions listed above aren't precisely the questions that some administrators, employers, and colleagues in other departments expect us to address, particularly in composition courses that fulfill general education requirements. In their minds, the questions that drive curriculum might be something likethese: What is the appropriate way to write an annotated bibliography or a feasibility study? How can ESL students learn to write better in English? What's the proper use of the comma? The tension between discipline and service recently came to light when we were informed by our dean that the administration was unhappy with the quality of student writing and could possibly earmark money to hire a faculty member in writing-across-the-curriculum. Although we would welcome a WAC hire in the department, our strategic plan was to build on creative writing first. Clearly the pressure to meet the service needs of the university community were derailing our desire to build up a significant curricular component in our department.

This tension between service and discipline emerged in our survey of perceptions about the department. We asked respondents to rank in

order of importance what they felt were the “functions or activities” of our department. We gave them the following choices: “providing help with career development”; “supporting or developing writing as an academic discipline”; “improving student writing”; “sponsoring student publications”; and “providing opportunities for tutoring or mentoring in writing.” The clear winner was as expected; sixteen of the twenty-one respondents said our top-ranked function was “improving student writing.” Similarly, the item that received the most “2” rankings was “providing opportunities for tutoring or mentoring in writing.” We consider these two functions as representative of our “service” orientation. However, eleven of the twenty-one respondents placed the item “supporting or developing writing as an academic discipline” among the top two of the department; nineteen placed it within the top three. The written responses to the question about our primary function were also revealing. Although many reiterated the importance of service (“help students develop skills in writing for academic work and daily life”), many respondents perceived that we were doing more: “I see two: to help all students improve their writing and to offer serious study in writing for those who want to focus/major on a ‘small’ specialty.” This response still dichotomizes the apparent service function of first-year courses and the disciplinary function of advanced courses, but it is a step in the right direction.

## CONCLUSION

Both of us have taught in departments where writing was part of an English department and was identified almost exclusively as a service-oriented program and not as a discipline. Our experience at Metro State has led us to strongly favor independent writing programs—particularly independent writing *departments*—for several reasons.

First, independent writing departments have institutional power that is usually unavailable to writing programs embedded within other departments. A writing department’s budget requests, staffing needs, and curricular plans must, at least structurally, be treated the same as those of other departments. Furthermore, the WPA can become a department chair, on equal footing with the chairs of English, accounting, and psychology.

Second, the structure of independent writing departments works toward resolving some of the professional development and tenure issues that have plagued composition specialists. In a separate department, faculty have a much greater opportunity to help establish criteria

for tenure and promotion that differ from those of English departments. In a practice-oriented field of study, faculty are more likely to be recognized for practice, particularly for writing practice outside of the academy and for teaching practice.

Finally, with an independent department structure, writing programs are likely to be regarded more as disciplines and less as the purveyors of skills instruction. We believe that majors and minors play an important role in persuading other academic departments that writing is a discipline. We agree with John Trimbur that composition has been overinvested in the first-year course, isolating it “without a larger curriculum in writing to keep it company, to extend the work it initiates of examining and producing forms of writing” (11). It is much easier to reimagine “composition” as a discipline when we place it within the larger—and in some respects simpler—context of “writing.” Trimbur is also concerned that in becoming an authorized department with institutional power, composition will lose its edginess, its ability to critique the center from its position at the margin. “The objection has been raised that instituting programs of study in writing amounts to a status-conscious bid to exchange our identification as low-class service providers for academic legitimacy, disciplinary standing, and professional advancement” (23). Charles Schuster puts this a different way, arguing that faculty in a discipline like English hold private office, while composition faculty hold public office. The English scholar works away from the public; the composition scholar’s responsibilities always bring him or her in contact with university and local constituencies. But in many institutions, including Metro State University, the educational environment calls on *all* programs to have a public function. The idea of “service,” perhaps better articulated as responsibility to the community within and outside the academy, is something that pervades the educational missions of most colleges and universities. In placing themselves firmly in the context of this public calling, independent writing programs and departments need not give away their community focus for privileged disciplinary status. Writing can be a discipline with a focused curriculum and still be committed to the democratic, community-oriented values that have always marked composition studies.