

Controversy Across the Curriculum

Ending Composition as We Knew It

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Often enough those of us involved in the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) effort have looked past first year composition, focusing instead on curricular reform and faculty development aimed at promoting writing in courses beyond composition. Often these efforts have begun with our involvement in institutional discussions of graduation requirements and general education. At my institution, I have been part of such discussions, representing the humanities division on a campus-wide committee charged to review and reconsider our general education program, including the place of composition (which we have required for years) and the possible proposal of writing-intensive courses (which heretofore we had not required). As a group, we spent over a year and a half listening, discussing, arguing, and, finally, proposing. And during this extended discussion, I frequently was asked about composition, not so much as a teacher of it, but rather as a de-facto expert/apologist for its aims and its function in the general education curriculum.

Among many questions, our committee has wrestled with these: what is first year composition, what are its legitimate purposes, and who should teach it? Our discussions gave me a window on a series of assumptions about this course, assumptions I now realize are firmly grounded in curricular history. Those same discussions have also surfaced a variety of what I consider misunderstandings—and, occasionally, outright hostilities—towards composition teachers who some believe are simply doing a poor job. Joseph Harris in his book *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, quotes a biologist at his institution, and it is sentiment I have heard from some of my colleagues too: “The thing is that most of us think that too many students can’t write worth a damn, and we wish you’d just do something about it” (85). Our general education committee has done something about it. With faculty assembly approval, we have eliminated composition as a general education requirement. In its place, we have instituted a required first year Inquiry Seminar, taught by any teacher on any topic that lends itself to inquiry, provided the course adopts certain pedagogical practices and encourages in students a self-conscious aware-

ness of the intellectual habits of mind associated with those practices. These courses carry an IQS designation rather than the designation of any one department, and at my institution they are now the only curricular exceptions to regular department-based courses. The Inquiry Seminar guidelines approved by the faculty assembly will seem familiar to WAC advocates:

INQUIRY SEMINAR GUIDELINES

- clear intellectual focus
- frequent student discussion; class participation and speaking (informally and formally) are figured as a part of the course grade
- use of a common grammar/punctuation handbook for teaching and reference purposes
- use of informal writing to help students explore course content and articulate questions (roughly 20 pages)
- at minimum four formal writing projects using the writing process, including provision for feedback and revision (roughly 25 pages of finished writing)
- at least one project requiring library/on-line research, hence discussion of research strategies
- discussion of ways writing situations differ according to the writer's audience and intent

To many of my colleagues outside the English department (and to some inside), eliminating composition seemed radical and, to a few, immediately irresponsible. After all, ending composition flies in the face of a century of curricular precedent, so as you might expect, I have repeatedly been asked to offer some rationale for such substantial change. I do so in a single—albeit painful—sentence: composition doesn't work. More fully: composition cannot possibly do the job that the rest of the institution asks and expects of it. Why not? Because, as I see it, the premises that first year composition was founded on in 1897 when Harvard deemed it the only course required of all students—those premises are too seriously flawed.

Composition in Historical Context

In the history of American higher education, composition began not as a single course but rather as a set of curricular practices. Prior to the Revolutionary War, virtually all American colleges were organized around some form of orthodox Christianity, with their primary purpose being the education of young men for the ministry (Brubacher and Rudy 8). This

purpose was naturally reflected in the long-established medieval curriculum centered on Greek and Roman literature and on the Bible. "In addition, such subjects as Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, ethics, politics, physics, mathematics, botany, and divinity were to be studied" (Brubacher and Rudy 14). Though the courses of study from institution to institution varied somewhat—for example, Yale's President Ezra Stiles required Hebrew study of all students until 1790—all courses of study emphasized the centrality of Greek and Latin languages and literatures. In short, the entire curriculum was language-intensive.

In addition, most institutions prior to the Civil War operated on the recitation system, a system built on the teacher's citing of a text and the students reciting of that same text (Brubacher and Rudy 82). At its worst, this reduced education to a tiresome, occasionally petty exercise of rote memory, but as David Russell points out, the recitation system was

... at least structured to include many kinds of activities: oral reading, note-taking on spoken and written material, translation, paraphrase, historical and philosophical commentary. Students not only manipulated language (and languages), they did so in progressively more sophisticated ways throughout their schooling, leading to full-blown public speaking and debate (40).

In short, higher education up to roughly 1870 was a richly language-based enterprise. If it allowed students few or no electives (since all students took the same course of study), it also guaranteed frequent and progressively more demanding practice in language use, with no split between course content and what we would now term "writing" and "speaking."

For a variety of reasons, all this changed dramatically after the Civil War. The single-curriculum model was seen as restrictive and unresponsive to new developments in scholarship as well as new needs in American society, needs made especially evident with the 1862 passage of the Morrill Act establishing land-grant colleges. Clearly, the old curriculum and its language-rich practices were no longer the only model. As Iowa State Agricultural College President Welch said in 1871, "knowledge should be taught for its uses... culture is an incidental result" (Brubacher and Rudy 64). Institutions like Harvard also recognized the world had changed. In 1869, Harvard's newly inaugurated president Charles W. Eliot began a campaign championing what he termed "the elective system," an effort aimed at transforming Harvard's curriculum from a single prescribed track to one that offered students wide choice in what they would study (Rudolph 293). Eliot's move was entirely successful: Harvard dropped subject requirements for seniors in 1872, for juniors in 1879, and for sophomores in 1884. Freshmen requirements were substantially scaled back in

1885, and “by 1894 a Harvard freshman’s only required courses were rhetoric and a modern language” (Rudolph 294). By 1897, the sole common requirement for Harvard graduation was a year of freshman rhetoric.

Thus a curriculum based heavily in classical languages—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—gave way to a curriculum taught in English and meant not to perpetuate culture as consciously expressed in language, but rather to equip graduates with the knowledge required of them by a changing world. As the curriculum widened, the old recitation practices were abandoned, typically replaced by the lecture system that asked teachers to speak and students to listen and take notes. In this historical process, content split from its expression, and language activities gradually came to be seen as impediments to the efficient coverage of course content. The required first-year rhetoric course became the sole vestige of an old, admittedly out-dated, but also language-rich set of curricular practices. And ultimately, all responsibility for these practices—all responsibility for the written expression of any content—fell to this single course. Recall again the complaint of Harris’s colleague: “The thing is that most of us think that too many students can’t write worth a damn, *and we wish you’d just do something about it*” (emphasis added).

In the view of the institution as a whole, language practices became merely another content, in this case a content viewed as rudimentary, basic, and foundational. New disciplines developed (and continue to develop), yet for at least the first half of the 20th century, higher education presumed that a single writing course would provide sufficient foundation for language expression in any course in any context. The WAC movement as well as many advances in our understanding of the cognitive and social processes of writing all stem from a recognition that writing is not a single, rudimentary and foundational content. We know that one composition course is not sufficient. Yet many, many institutions continue to require composition without examining its aims or understanding its history.

Composition defined as a remedial, foundational course is at least as old as Yale’s 1822 required remedial first-year course in English grammar, though by 1834 it had been dropped in favor of stiffer admission requirements (Brubacher and Rudy 13). In fact, discussion about whether or not to require composition as a course has always circled around the notion of admissions requirements and the need for remediation, thus consistently asserting the composition course as something preparatory to the real business of higher education. Citing William Payne’s collection *English in American Universities* published in 1895, Robert Connors notes that the Harvard decision to require composition was not universal: by 1895, “Indiana, Nebraska, and Stanford had all abolished freshman composition in favor of strong entrance requirements” (49). Connors also

quotes Stanford professor Melville Anderson, who applauds the abolition of freshman English by saying: “Had this salutary innovation not been accomplished, all the literary courses would have been swept away by the rapidly growing inundation of Freshman themes, and all our strength and courage would have been dissipated in preparing our students to do respectable work at more happily equipped Universities” (49).

The 1994 catalog copy for my own liberal arts institution lists first year composition as the single effort needed to satisfy the “writing effectively” general education requirement. The implication is quite clear: first year composition is meant to equip students to do just that—write effectively.

It’s the foundational fallacy that dooms this enterprise: a fallacy that asserts composition is, at its most reductive, merely a thorough knowledge of grammar and, at its most ambitious, a discrete set of writing skills, the presumption being that writing well is a matter of seamlessly transferable mastery. From this view, context ought not to matter, audience shouldn’t matter, nor should the writer’s prior familiarity with content, or her interest or attitude, or even the amount of allotted time; good writing is good writing. The foundational fallacy’s primary corollary takes all this a step further: it quite squarely rests primary responsibility for all writing instruction on composition teachers and no where else. We’re supposed to take care of it. Joseph Harris’s quote from his colleague has been mentioned earlier. Harris also quotes Richard Rorty as giving this more-or-less typical, thumbnail description of first-year composition: “I think the idea of freshman English, mostly, is just to get them to write complete sentences, get the commas in the right place, and stuff like that—the stuff we would like to think the high schools do, and, in fact, they don’t” (85). Of course such a description merely perpetuates a very old model. It ignores more than three decades of studies and discussions that we now recognize as the discipline of composition; in shorthand, it ignores everything from Janet Emig’s 1971 publication of *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* to the present.

Asserting a New Model

What seems odd about all this to me now is the sense that for some time we all have known composition couldn’t live up to its historical billing; we’ve known that we could not possibly do the writing teaching for all of our colleagues and all of their courses. We’ve known that the apparent split between “writing” and “content” is not merely false, it’s counter-productive. Yet we have continued teaching composition or training others to teach it. Our students have continued to take it—what choice have they had? And so we’ve spent term after term greeting new

room-fulls of people who, for the most part, view composition just as the curriculum itself asserts. They too see composition in these same historical and reductive ways, as another content either unnecessary (“I already know this”) or more of the same old torture (“I’ve seen this before and I’ll never learn it”).

I emphatically do not mean to suggest that first year composition was or is worthless. Typically it offers students small courses that let them form a genuine acquaintance with each other and with the course instructor. Genuine learning communities can thus result. And often enough it is a composition course that leads students to significant recognitions of complexity and nuance rather than more simplistic intellectual views. In many ways then, a composition course serves as an introduction to the intellectual life that defines higher education. Composition courses also have at their core a presumption that student thought is important and that its careful, accurate expression is worth a term’s attention. Thus, while its curricular slot and function argue for composition as a content unconnected to any other, the course activities, readings, and practices have often worked hard to link good writing and good thinking, consistently affirming the argument that writing is “a mode of learning” (Emig 122).

In our committee discussions of the Inquiry Seminar, we have tried to preserve and highlight these useful, positive aspects of composition. The Inquiry Seminar is described as

. . . an in-depth, collaborative investigation of a compelling subject. [It is a course that] explores and practices the relation between thinking and communication, both oral and written. [And] it embodies the goals of the entire Linfield Curriculum in developing critical thinking skills common to every discipline and vital to becoming an educated person. (Linfield 1996-1997 Faculty Assembly Agenda 33)

While we want to retain the positive aspects of composition, our goal here is also admittedly reformist: for students and for faculty alike, we hope to substitute a different set of assumptions about writing itself and a larger, common assumption of responsibility for “good writing.” The comparisons below summarize the changes a first-year seminar program can assert. But this should be emphasized separately: instead of “college writing” taught only by English faculty, we now have seminars with such titles as “Justice,” “Creativity,” “Imagining Better Places,” “Domestic Violence,” and “Environmental Perspectives,” taught by faculty from areas such as anthropology, music, nursing, art, business, speech, religion, education, political science, biology, sociology, philosophy, physics, English, and modern languages.

Proposition: Required first year composition reinforces various historically based assumptions; a program that abolishes first year composition challenges those assumptions and works to replace them.

COMPOSITION

common view: writing is writing; content and context don't matter

common view: writing remains the responsibility of English department; if other teachers care about good writing, they're weird (a WAC program complicates this view)

faculty view: writing in the first year is mostly a matter of addressing error; students who have completed composition should now and forever write error-free prose; error is/should be a matter for English faculty only ("the experts")

faculty view: English teachers at all levels don't do a good job teaching writing because students keep having to take more of it, and "students still can't write"

student view: a composition course is just more of the same—unnecessary for good writers, more drudgery for the rest

student view: the institution thinks we're unprepared for college ("we have to get past remedial stuff to get to the real thing")

student view: the institution will tell us what to take and when

INQUIRY SEMINAR

writing happens in many contexts; writing well requires adaptation

writing is a responsibility shared by many teachers from many departments

all writing is an integral aspect of learning and articulating course material; errors result from many factors and are one important element in a larger view of writing

writing facility can always be improved; writers continue to learn from many teachers

an inquiry seminar—what's that? (i.e. curiosity, challenge)

the institution thinks we can do this

we have to make educational choices

As these comparisons suggest, a move to replace composition with a first year seminar is a move to assert wide responsibility for writing instruction and writing practice. This position is hardly new. Connors quotes Preston Slosson writing in 1913: “the real way to make sure that every Columbia graduate, whatever his other failings, can write whatever it may be necessary for him to write as briefly, logically, and effectively as possible, is not to compel him as a freshman to write stated themes on nothing-in-particular but to insist on constant training in expression in every college course (51).” And the emphasis on writing in every college course takes us directly to writing-across-the-curriculum, a movement and a curricular notion that came into being based on the recognition that a single first year course could not achieve its historical ambitions.

The WAC movement has consistently argued for a view of writing considerably at odds with the historical view of composition. A WAC view of writing asserts that every writing activity is situated and in some sense unique. WAC embraces writing as a large set of possible practices or processes. It argues in a variety of ways for the importance of audience and particular purpose. It affirms writing as a set of intellectual and emotional behaviors that, while they can be improved, cannot in their nature be mastered. It views errors as the result of many factors involving content, language knowledge, and writer motivation. And it argues for the considerable value of exploratory or informal writing as a fundamental tool for engaging course content and both extending and deepening one’s understanding. In short, WAC has sought to replace a notion of writing mastery with a notion of considerable and varied writing practice. Given all of that, if we really believe that writing ought to extend across the curriculum, and if we already encourage the identification of writing intensive courses, then why not consider extending these same principles to the first year?

This is, I hasten to add, not an original idea. It has been enacted at various institutions already—at institutions like Pomona College, Dickinson College, Coe College, and Bucknell University to name a few. Cornell runs its first year seminar program with teaching assistants from departments across campus.

However strongly I am now persuaded of the merits of this proposal, I am equally strongly aware of its local, specific nature. I would not presume to advocate its adoption anywhere else, because I know a thousand local variables can come into play. Some of them are institutional: how much does an institution truly value undergraduate teaching and how is that valuation reflected in promotion and tenure guidelines? To what extent does a particular institution foster a sense of common community and shared responsibility? What sort of students attend the institution? How satisfied are faculty with the status quo? Other questions are

even more practical: what happens to an English department graduate program if composition goes away? And if English department faculty don't teach all those sections of composition, if that requirement is replaced, then who will staff this new requirement? If someone in, say, philosophy teaches a first year seminar, who will teach the philosophy course that otherwise would have been taught? Participating faculty immediately raise their own questions: how can we teach both ambitious course content and writing? And what about those faculty who feel intrigued but tentative or somewhat unprepared?

If these questions seem somehow familiar, it's probably because they are pretty much the same writing-across-the-curriculum questions that arise when an institution moves to adopt a WAC program. And the responses here can be quite similar too. We have some practice with these problems, and we do not have to reinvent the wheel. A first-year seminar program needs the same kind of institutional support and funding that any WAC program needs. It means faculty development workshops and the individual follow-up discussions that they inevitably provoke. It means a long-term and institution-wide commitment.

If nothing else, the proposal to eliminate composition can foster a genuine institution-wide reconsideration of what writing is and who is responsible for it. Faculty gathering in a series of workshops to discuss these issues have already begun counteracting the historical assumptions about composition as a course and writing as both process and product. This begins an institution-wide attention to what Lucille Parkinson McCarthy terms "the context-dependent" nature of all writing (153). A first-year seminar program rich in language activities suggests fertile links between writing and speaking. It suggests writing is a complicated linguistic and social activity central to human learning and understanding. And it suggests that the shared responsibility for good writing, as for good learning, extends to every department and every course.

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