Panel 2

What Must Be Done to Ensure That College Students Communicate Well in Their Fields?

Steven Youra
Director, Hixon Writing Center
California Institute of Technology
Moderator

Panelists
Mary Burgan, *General Secretary, American Association of University Professors*
Ken Cox, *Instructor, Department of Chemical Engineering, Rice University*
Brian Huot, *Professor of English and Director of Composition, University of Louisville*
David Jolliffe, *Professor of English, DePaul University*
Sharon Quiroz, *Editor,* Language and Learning across the Disciplines*, Director, Communications across the Curriculum Program and Academic Resource Center, Illinois Institute of Technology*
Tracy Volz, *Assistant Director of the Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication, Rice University*

With the turn of a new century, it seems as though everyone has gone into the forecasting business—especially stockbrokers and academics. Our own field has marked the emerging era with a wonderful essay collection, *WAC for the New Millennium* (ed. McLeod, et al., NCTE 2001). In the same spirit, this panel looked to the future by reflecting on best current theory/practice (guided by the stockbrokers' caution that past performance is no guarantee of future results.) To set the stage for the discussion, the moderator briefly considered the title assigned by the conference organizers: *"What Must Be Done to Ensure That College Students Communicate Well in Their Fields?"*

The passive construction begs the question of agency. Just *who* is supposed to ensure that students communicate well? With regard to WAC, it turns out that this ambiguity is appropriate. WAC work is shared among teachers from different fields, and increasingly, with participants from *beyond* the curriculum (as Eli Goldblatt put it in a recent *CCC* article) in projects that involve non-academic constituencies (e.g., business, engineering, community groups). Since the WAC enterprise is collaborative, the "who" is plural, often shifting, and sometimes up for grabs.

- *"Ensure"* in the title reminds us that assessment is critical if WAC/WID efforts are to improve teaching and learning, especially as we are asked to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of this work to legislators, deans, funding agencies, and accrediting boards (such as ABET, in engineering).

- *"Communicate well in their fields"* raises a different set of questions: How does effective communication (in its myriad forms—written, oral, visual, electronic) differ among various fields & genres, and how can we benchmark, measure, and improve something as intangible as our students' ability to communicate?

Our panelists offered a range of perspectives, with resonances—points of contact and areas of difference—that we explored with the audience in discussion.

Mary Burgan addressed a key political/economic issue—the allocation of faculty resources for teaching writing across the curriculum. She stressed economic factors over pedagogical issues because of the irreducible fact that writing instruction is a labor-intensive activity. Burgan offered four "exhortations" to promote successful writing instruction across the disciplines in the current academic environment marked by increasing competition for limited funds and by rewards that go to raising an institution's national ranking.

- We must stop exploiting part-time and adjunct faculty. The situation is unfair to the instructors, it isolates student writing from other intellectual activ-

ity, and it falsely implies that "someone else" should attend to this essential feature of every field.

- Composition specialists, invested in their own expertise, must be open to having colleagues in other disciplines work with writing. "[T]he theorization of the field of composition must be decoupled from the notion of 'good enough' writing pedagogy."

  Faculty across academic fields must overcome disciplinarity and participate in WID programs via graduate training, modeling from senior faculty, and informed support from disciplinary associations.

  Institutions (chairs, deans, and provosts) must reward WAC work with recognition (money and status) for good teaching that includes attention to language.

Ken Cox posed two questions: "Why should teachers across disciplines include writing when they already have plenty to teach?" and "What does it mean to have students 'communicate well in their fields?'" As a chemical engineering instructor, Ken is particularly concerned about the particular skills that his students need for professional success after graduation. He explained that professional practice has changed radically in the past twenty-five years. In the old days, a research engineer in industry could do good science and report the results to a manager who had the same level of expertise. That manager would communicate the information to a range of audiences, including those who were far less specialized. But that scenario has changed: Many engineering grads now become consultants and must communicate to broad audiences. Even if they go to industry, engineers now often work on small teams in which each person's communication skill is critical for a project's success. The typical audience for engineers' communication is no longer a single expert in the field, but a range of readers and listeners—decision-makers and others who have diverse specialties or little engineering background. Therefore, our students must learn to communicate effectively with such audiences and to recognize and translate jargon.

Brian Huot extended the discussion of politics by way of genre, citing a local example as paradigm case. He began by suggesting that genre study can be a useful way for us to extend writing instruction into the disciplines, in collaboration with faculty from other fields. Brian contrasted the WID approach with a more generalized WAC effort—one that "often focuses on the generative power of writing for teaching and learning"—and he emphasized that institutional structures and rewards must support developments in either of these writing-intensive approaches. To illustrate these programmatic and structural imperatives, he then described a situation from his own school, University of Louisville, as a negative example: Brian led a WAC effort based in English department. But "[e]ven though a review of our initial plans by outside evaluators had recommended that a writing center be established and that disciplinary faculty receive some kind of compensation for their increased efforts, these measures were not enacted." As a result, all schools and colleges at the University, except Arts & Sciences, voted not to keep the WAC requirement for graduation. "I cannot help but wonder if we would have been able to sustain our program had we employed a different institutional structure." On another note, Brian stressed that those of us who work with language across disciplines should continue to learn research and theory in allied fields (e.g., literacy, dialect analysis, applied linguistics, composition, disciplinary discourses, etc.).

David Jolliffe argued that we must attend to genres, as students are asked to employ them in different disciplines and as genres are made and remade to enable and to structure power relationships. He stressed the need to engender uncertainty in students to complicate their decision-making and genre choices, and he bemoaned the fact that in WAC situations, "faculty members frequently assign students to write something they label an *essay*, without realizing that the definition of this genre is highly malleable and differs from one field to the next." David stressed that situation and genre are critical and noted that WID faculty "often ask students to write in one of the discipline's preferred genres without helping the students see the genre as a principal tool of the discipline's epistemology and methods." For a scholar working in a field, genre is more than format. Citing the work of David Russell and Carolyn Miller, he claimed that genre has

a critical dual function—to "help writers recognize recurrent rhetorical situations and . . . to shape and constrain knowledge work." Genres emerge as substantive and stylistic features in recurrent rhetorical situations and are recognized as conventional by members of a disciplinary community. David explained that a genre allows a writer to report information while the conventions and constraints give structure to whatever is reported. Therefore, he concluded, genre must play a central role in WAC/WID pedagogy. Students must be taught to ask: What situation am I in? How should I respond substantively and stylistically?

Sharon Quiroz modified the panel's charge by asking: What must be done to ensure that college students communicate well *in fields of science and technology*? She noted that her own professional move from a liberal arts institution to a technical school raised new problems for her work in WAC. She explained first, that in working with language in engineering and science education, the primary instructors must speak English. This would mean both linguistic competence and uses of language beyond mathematics. She cited research demonstrating that students who are required to write regularly about technical concepts are better able to understand specialized articles in their field. Second, Sharon noted that in technical institutions, faculty feel pressured to bring in large research grants, sometimes at the expense of attention to teaching. Third, she suggested that technical institutions must develop new incentives and rewards for teaching excellence, perhaps by establishing new kinds of appointments that stress pedagogical excellence more than research. Finally, she noted that external factors and organizations can have a positive influence, for example the stress by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) on "educational outcomes," including effective communication.

Tracy Volz emphasized the importance of instruction in oral presentation, especially for students in professional fields. She noted that two problems in conventional curriculum design often undermine such efforts: First, oral presentations are typically assigned at the end of the term, when students are overwhelmed with other work. Second, presentation experiences are often limited to a single senior capstone course, a high-stakes situation that comes too late and with too much

pressure to be effective. Furthermore, in these limited situations, students do not usually receive enough coaching in advance or feedback afterwards. Alternatively, Volz argued, "[t]he integration of oral presentation assignments throughout a course and curriculum that focus on this purpose. . . not only will improve students' learning but also will provide multiple opportunities for students to practice and experiment with oral presentation skills when the stakes aren't quite as high." In addition, communications activities that include career planning, explorations of the particular profession, and role-playing, will "generate enthusiasm, build students' self-confidence, allow comparisons between their expectations and actuality, and prepare them to take charge of their futures."