

The University of Pittsburgh's Writing-Designated Courses

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Five years ago, as part of a general reform of undergraduate instruction, faculty at the University of Pittsburgh instituted a writing across the curriculum program, the central component of which was and continues to be the Writing-Designated Courses (hereafter called "W-courses"). The W-courses, which were to be distributed throughout all departments of the College of Arts and Sciences, were envisioned as writing-intensive courses that could address perceived needs for 1) improving the facility of all Pitt undergraduates in written academic expression; and 2) enacting the faculty's commitment to writing as a centrally important way of knowing in all academic pursuits.

The W-courses were intended to build on, not replace, the existing composition requirement. With the exception of a handful of students who, on the basis of their placement essay, are exempted from composition (less than 1/2 of 1% annually), every Pitt undergraduate must pass at least one composition course (for example, General Writing, Research Writing, Written Professional Communication) by the end of her or his sophomore year. Additionally, about 40% of each entering class is required (again, on the basis of the placement essay) to pass a Basic Writing course in the freshman year before moving to the general composition requirement.

After fulfilling the composition requirement, each student must take, in order to graduate, a minimum of two W-courses in subjects or departments of her or his choice. (As an alternative, some students elect to take one W-course plus an additional course in composition such as Critical Writing, Written Professional Communication, Language of Science and Technology). Although seeing to it that students meet their composition requirement is the business of the English Department, the W-courses have been, from the start, a university-wide venture. W-courses in, for example, history or biology are not taught by or with the formal assistance of English teachers; they are taught by faculty in history or biology.

Each year, faculty from all departments submit to the College Writing Board proposals for courses that they would like to teach with W-designation. Though the College Writing Board (CWB) is chaired by the Director of Composition, its volunteer members have over the years represented many university departments including history, physics, sociology, German, linguistics, and biology. CWB members have been among those faculty most energetic in acting on their belief that writing matters--for all students, in all disciplines.

In deciding whether to approve a course for W-designation, the CWB looks for several qualifying criteria: in the course proposed, students should be expected to write a minimum of 20-24 pages, and this writing must be distributed throughout the term,

not handed in all at once at the end of the course; the course must offer students opportunities for significant revision of their writing--revision, that is, that entails more than just correcting mistakes; these revisions, initiated typically by a professor's comments on a draft, must be carried out in the context of ongoing student-teacher collaborations (that is, the course should be structured to insure that professors have time to read students' work carefully and return it promptly, and to insure that students have access to their professors for conferences about the work in progress). Further, proposed courses should have small enrollment limits, ideally no more than 22 students.

When the W-courses began five years ago, there was, of course, some anxiety about how the program, in practice, was going to work. Though faculty had almost unanimously approved the new undergraduate writing requirements, many professors were uneasy about the roles they were to play in designing and teaching the W-courses. "But I simply don't know how to teach writing," was a frequent comment. In responding to this concern, the College Writing Board argued that while it is true that faculty across the disciplines have not spent as much time, day-to-day, teaching writing as English teachers have, and while it is also probably true that teachers in other departments have been less concerned than English professors to rationalize writing instruction, faculty in other disciplines still know a great deal about teaching writing. The Writing Board argued that, whether they recognized it or not, many professors in other disciplines had been teaching writing all along. Academic disciplines exist not apart from but within their discourses. In acquiring expertise, academics have constituted their authority by learning to command a discourse, by learning to understand and manipulate the conventions by which members of a discipline define, investigate, and represent their subject. And when a history teacher, for instance, then sets out to teach history by teaching her students to write like historians --to gather information, interpret it, organize it, and report on it, given the specific requirements of the discipline--she is teaching writing.

"Given the specific requirements of the discipline"--and specific teachers' ways of positioning themselves within and against requirements--within the range of Pitt's W-courses there are various kinds of discipline-specific and individually particular kinds of writing being encouraged and enacted. Perhaps the best way to get a sense of what "writing" has meant in the W-courses, in practice, is to consider some specific courses, diverse accounts of how particular teachers have imagined the parts of writing that can be taught.

Mariolina Salvatori, of the English Department, has recently taught as a W-course Introduction to Critical Reading, a course which is a prerequisite for the Department's literature majors and which requires that students write and revise a number of papers on their readings of some canonical texts (most recently, King Lear, Madame Bovary, and "The Wasteland") and on professional critics' reading of those same texts. The goal of the course,

says Professor Salvatore, is "to engender a reader's understanding of the process and functions of critical reading." The idea, then, is not to ask students to produce a series of ever-closer approximations of professional literary interpretation, but rather to involve students in the process of questioning the sources and methods of all literary interpretation, including their own. For each primary text, students write first a preliminary "position paper" highlighting some "difficulty" or "starting point" that their reading of the text has suggested. These position papers are responded to both by Salvatore's comments and class discussion of sample papers. Students then write a second paper that looks at the primary text through some professional critical interpretations that have been made of it. These papers are, in turn, responded to through written comments, class discussions, and individual conferences. And then students write a third paper articulating their critical understanding of both the professional critics' and their own ways of reading. Salvatore notes that while class discussions of primary and secondary texts and of students' responses to them often result in insights into critical reading, it is in articulating, through writing, their understandings of what has gone on in the classroom collective that students demonstrate what they have learned. In their papers, she says, "students become the multiple voices" they have heard in class. In response to their early papers, students get Salvatore's and their classmates' questions about the reading practices these papers represent. As the course progresses, students, when they write, "begin to ask these questions of themselves."

Problems in Public Management, a W-course that has been taught by Raymond Owen of the Political Science Department, introduces undergraduates to "the concepts, techniques, recurring problems, and key ideologies in administrative theory and practice." Professor Owens notes that the course as he teaches it is "anti-vocational"; that is, students are discouraged from seeing it as "a 'how to do it' guide to public administration." Owen sees the student writing and revision in his course--based on a sequenced set of five assignments through which students read and respond to documents and problems in public administration--as enhancing students' abilities to act critically toward both the professional studies they read and their interpretations of these studies. "I point out every assumption, every sloppy use of inference, and insist that the paper be revised with the assumptions explained, and any factual assertion reexamined both for its basis and the adequacy of the original authors' use." Although Owen does not consider Problems in Public Management a "research paper" course, he does require students to observe standard social science formats for footnoting and bibliography construction. He finds a number of distinctive merits to requiring regular student writing. In "regular courses," he says (that is, non-W-courses), "students don't know if they're learning anything until after the midterm." And he has noticed that, much more than in the lecture courses he also teaches, students in the W-course seek him out for conferences about their work. He says, further, that the writing and rewriting

he requires forces students "to face what they think and integrate that with what other people have said." Though he is "extremely careful to treat each student as an individual," he wants his students to use writing as a way to learn to participate in the public forums within which individual concerns can help shape social practice.

In asking the College Writing Board for optional W-designation for her Wave Motion and Optics course, Physics Department professor Julia Thompson proposed that the 3-credit course she had been teaching (already requiring substantial writing) be weighted as a 4-credit W-course for those students willing to do even more writing. In the approved course--a lecture/laboratory treatment of "classical wave phenomena with examples from sonics, mechanics, optics, and electromagnetism"--all students keep laboratory journals, but students wanting W-credit revise their "pre-lab" reports (discussions of projected procedures, methods of data analysis, and anticipated results) in response to Professor Thompson's written comments, and incorporate these revisions in each week's final laboratory report. W-course students also expand their final lab reports by adding the sorts of "introduction" (historical background) and "discussion" (possible applications) sections that would appear in a published research report. Thompson believes that these contextualizing components of technical communication will be especially important to those students who go on to management positions in research corporations, where "they'll have to explain what the point of a proposed experiment is, how it fits in" with other work in the field. Students taking the course for W-credit also write mid-term and final project reports, drafts of which are responded to by Thompson through written comments and individual conferences. Thompson believes that for all physics students writing can be a means of revising expectations and methods: "You find loose ends when you write things down." When a student talks with his professor about an experiment, the professor may assume she knows how the student derived a particular result, "but it's only when they write their reports that we see what they have really done."

These are some of the ways, then, in which writing and revisions are taught within Pitt's W-courses. In these courses writing and revisions are not appendages to or embellishments of the "real" work of the course. Rather, writing here makes the work appear, defines it. And faculty in any discipline know a lot about writing-as-work; it has constituted their disciplines. When faculty in any department at Pitt set out to teach a W-course, they begin with students who have a basic facility in written expression (as implemented by the composition requirement) and a place to turn in case they still need help (Pitt's professionally-staffed Writing Workshop). With these givens, it makes sense for faculty teaching W-courses to teach student writing by responding to it as they would to the work of a colleague--asking for clarifications or more illustration, questioning research methodology, highlighting the absence of sufficient supporting evidence, wondering about the interpretation of data,

making suggestions for further reading, encouraging further development of promising but thin sections of text, noting departures from conventions for source citation, speculating about possible applications to other problems within the field, praising what they find admirable. Faculty in any department, that is, enable student writing by treating it as an effort (though a beginning effort, of course) to establish authority within the mysteries of a discipline. This, after all, is how the faculty themselves have learned to write--at least within professional contexts.

When academics write, they have the benefits of lots of help (colleagues, research assistants, journal editors, librarians, reviewers, graduate students) and lots of chances (notes, drafts, preliminary conference presentations, revision after revision). The College Writing Board continues to believe that it is unconscionable for undergraduates not to get versions of these benefits, and thus it routinely rejects proposals for W-courses whose writing consists of essay exams and/or unrevisable term papers. Neither essay exams nor single-draft term papers provide for writing as learning, as a way of knowing--for the sort of writing, that is, that has created professors. Further, the Board continues to insist that W-designated courses must provide--through full and prompt teacher response to student work, through student-teacher conferences--for the sorts of collaboration that govern professional writing. But to accept this extra responsibility (if "extra" is the right word here) means that faculty can expect more of their students. Instead of muttering to themselves, "This writing is unacceptable," then accepting it nonetheless, faculty can expect their students to regularly produce more and better writing. At least within the W-courses, students and faculty at Pitt now treat revision as a matter of course.

Not all faculty, however, teach W-courses. Despite their overwhelming endorsement of the new curriculum five years ago, despite the Dean's enthusiastic support of the program, many faculty are not interested. For many of her colleagues, notes Professor Thompson, teaching a W-course would take more time than they feel they can give to undergraduate instruction; other teachers, suggests Professor Owen, are rankled by the absence of institutional and economic benefits: "The rewards structure is not geared to this type of effort." For those faculty who do choose to teach W-courses, there is no master plan, no College Writing Board policy booklet listing 312 "cognitive skills" for teachers to teach or 902 "learning outcomes" for their students to achieve. There is simply a group of teachers committed to offer to their students what they themselves have discovered: writing as a way of knowing, revision as the central activity of writing.

Writing within the disciplines depends on more than generic "reasonableness." Different disciplines have different procedures and routines for validating the articulation of knowledge. For teachers and students, what writing "is" depends on the various ways it is imagined and performed, on the multiple ways in which writing creates understanding.

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