

Building a Community of Writers
Across the Curriculum at Rollins College

Twila Yates Papay
Director of Writing Programs

"I'm just a born-again composition teacher joining the rest of your groupies up here," remarked an environmental science professor to renowned writing specialist Donald Murray after a long day of workshops at Rollins College. "I don't know whether to go home and write or plan a new journal assignment." What the environmental scientist did that evening I don't know. But a philosophy professor went back to writing a book he had been stuck on, renewed by the sudden realization that the first draft need not be copy-perfect.

These professors and others like them are discovering the terrific powers unleashed in the most unexpected directions when we commit ourselves to the ultimate use of literacy: we read and we write, after all, to explore . . . to learn . . . to know. Rollins did not start out with anything so profound, of course. Actually, some faculty simply decided that students might be writing better if they practiced more often. What followed was a grant proposal, a "writing reinforcement" course requirement, some faculty training on grading papers, another grant, the creation of an upper-level Writing Center, the recruitment of a Director of Writing Programs. With experience has come growth and discovery.

Premises

At the core of the Rollins College model for writing across the curriculum is our realization that writing implies community. Accepting Donald Murray's contention that "writing is a private act with a public intent," we insist that writing, after satisfying the self, is intended to be shared with an audience, and the process of exchange so essential to a community of writers enables us to foster intellectual growth. Out of this conviction, our premises arise.

1). Teaching writing requires information and exchange. It is both unfair and unrealistic to ask faculty members across the curriculum to teach writing without preparing them to do so. Not only must they be offered strategies for incorporating writing instruction into their own disciplines; they must also be encouraged by opportunities to share their own success stories and to hear colleagues tell what has worked for them. The need for information is acute. One highly respected historian and writer at Rollins reports that before attending a workshop it never occurred to him to allow (require?) students to write more than a single draft, though he always revises his own work extensively. Moreover, the exchange of ideas among participating teachers is crucial, not only to establish credibility, but also to insure broad ownership.

Another historian who adopted a suggestion to assign response cards has become our local expert on their use, a ready source of information beyond the program director's office. Enthusiasm for any strategy thus propagated becomes infectious, strengthening the program from within.

2). To draw upon their own experiences and share strategies with students, teachers must be writers themselves. Stressing again the value of community, we encourage faculty to discuss their own writing problems in the classroom, just as students are urged to think of themselves as professionals. The value of such a view was underscored recently when an economics professor observed that all his colleagues at a workshop session on grading were noting sentence structure problems which severely interfered with meaning. "Those are the same problems I had in my dissertation," he remarked. "Improving my own writing will apparently make me a better reader of student texts as well."

3). To our students we insist that writing implies audience, that it demands the ability to reshape the writer's idea into a format appropriate and comprehensible to the intended reader. Learning to write in this way requires response, preferably from classmates or peer tutors, conferences over the text with the teacher, and frequent revision until the draft reaches final form as reader-based prose. This is a particularly difficult concept for some students. In rejecting a tutor's suggestion that a paper be rewritten to clarify several muddled passages, one student recently remarked in the Writing Center, "Oh, my professor doesn't care whether it makes sense. He only wants us to answer the discussion question." To overcome such misconceptions, we try to build the opportunity for community into many of the assignments we design.

4). Finally, we follow Janet Emig and others in maintaining that the writing informs the learning. Our goal is not to replace "content" with writing instruction or to append a "writing component," but rather to design a variety of pedagogical approaches intended to enrich and deepen the learning process through practice in composing. A new extension of that focus is our experimentation with collaborative writing as a means of collaborative learning, including preparing group journals, passing a computer disk around for each class member to remake a paper in process, and designing peer discussion and writing projects with group conference sessions in the Writing Center and with the instructor. Because our focus is upon the learning, then, faculty in every discipline at Rollins are able to participate, offering "writing reinforcement" courses, and seeking to fulfill our two goals: teaching the writing strategies of the particular professional discipline, and improving the overall quality of student writing.

Program Elements

Writing Reinforcement is one of eleven general education requirements at Rollins (freshman composition being another), and some twelve to twenty courses (representing nearly every discipline, most often at the junior or senior level) are shaped and designated

as fulfilling the requirement each term. To offer such a course, faculty members must take a two-week training workshop which introduces them to composing process theory, revision tactics, writing as a mode of learning, informal writing, and a number of strategies and pedagogical devices. Methods of grading are discussed briefly, but faculty members are encouraged to grade less and use writing in more varied contexts. When released from their perceived task of exhaustively editing, many teachers find early draft work liberating and motivating. As the training progresses, ownership is stressed. Former participants come to speak, and the newly enlisted are urged to consult their own views of good writing and contribute to the shaping of the Program. (Faculty members are paid for taking both the original workshop and one-week renewal workshops, available to them every six years.)

Just as vital as training is ongoing support for developing new courses and experimenting with old ones. Continuing faculty development takes many forms: workshops, brown bag lunches, mid-term breakfast chats, conversations, colloquia, private consultations with the program director and visits by her to department and division meetings (not to mention urgent telephone calls which begin, "I have five minutes until class starts, and I'm beginning to wonder about my idea to . . ."). With the writing ethos thus affirmed on campus, even the Athletic Department has found a place, inviting the director to meetings and discussing means of bringing athletes to work more extensively on their revisions. Finally, visits by consultants (Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Toby Fulwiler) include preparation and follow-up meetings. And new ideas are regularly injected into the program: the publication of student writing, weekly memos proposing new uses of the Writing Center, and the distribution of assignment proposals. (Wide distribution of materials appears to be helpful in itself. A biology professor, for example, arranged to assign a research paper with a Writing Center component when research guidelines were dropped in mailboxes.)

Beyond faculty development is our most vital form of support, the Rollins Writing Center, an upper-level facility with peer tutors trained to serve as sophisticated readers of fellow students' texts. (Tutors from across the disciplines are trained in initial sessions and through a full year's credit-bearing course; they are paid for their hours in the Center.) Prepared to see the potential in a complex piece of writing, the tutors raise appropriate questions and send writers back to the word processor filled with enthusiasm to create the next draft.

Most amazing, perhaps, is how well the Center works, divided as we seem to be between those who build some use of the facility into every assignment and those who have yet to discover the tutors' capacities. Earlier this term, for example, an English professor remarked that his students' work lacked depth and range. Told that he might try Writing Center invention sessions, he exclaimed, "You mean I can actually send students there before the final draft?" Now all his students visit the Center before each paper. Moreover, an economics professor announced at a

recent meeting that his students' first graded work was twice as good as in the past since he had started sending them with drafts to the Writing Center. Most exciting, perhaps, is the range of tasks our tutors perform, as faculty assign students to seek help in invention, development, definition, structure, peer group analysis, sentence-combining, journal preparation, test revision, research assessment, and the like. Even faculty come into the Writing Center seeking a tutor's opinion on test questions or assignments, or to schedule a tutor to provide classroom support during small group writing activities.

Best of all, the students return. Doubtful as they are of faculty assessments, they respect the peer tutor's perspective. And students who come initially for training in WordPerfect on our six IBM PCs find themselves turning from the screen to ask, "Does this sound okay? Do you think I have a thesis sentence? Does anybody know if Professor Hobo would want examples of wandering gypsies in my paper?" Of course, the pleasure sometimes turns to hostility when we are overbooked or all the computers are in use, and when we hold an "All-Nighter" at the end of each term students may resort to amazing stratagems to gain machine and tutor time, but generally the Writing Center is a civil and civilizing place! As one student who had been urged to take his work to the Rollins PC lab where machines were available remarked, "But it's so much more people-y here."

Finally, the Rollins model includes not only a Director of Writing Programs, but also a Writing across the Curriculum Committee with divisional representation to provide advice, policy recommendations, and review. The Committee also concerns itself with such sticky matters as whether a new syllabus satisfies the guidelines and whether enough writing reinforcement courses are being offered in each discipline.

Replication

There are, of course, as many ways to guarantee the failure of a writing across the curriculum program as to obtain the proverbial cat skin, but the following are my personal favorites:

- 1). impose it, especially from above;
- 2). put a committee in charge, including no individual with released time or real expertise, no one whose first commitment is to the program;
- 3). place too high a burden on the faculty (particularly with improper training, no training, or excessive time demands);
- 4). fail to provide proper support in faculty development or Writing Center services.

Yet to create a successful writing across the curriculum program, only two items are essential: a broad-based will to improve the level of writing on campus and proper training. (Of the two, the latter is the harder to obtain.) If these two conditions are met, a program may gradually evolve with broad ownership and an ever-widening circle of interest. The Rollins model works because of stalwart faculty determination--a strong commitment to the goals and ideals our program represents. Were

it to depend primarily upon time and energy, the program might not endure, for even the most committed faculty have a number of concerns to address. Consequently, a vital element of our success is our continual pursuit and sharing of time-saving devices, ways of easing the heavy burden of papers and conferences imposed by any writing course. (In training the faculty to assign multiple drafts, for example, we always recommend use of the Writing Center, and we explain the principles of the three-minute conferences.)

Secondly, our program depends heavily upon strong administrative backing, not only for moral support and access, but also for such more tangible items as released time, recognition in the faculty evaluation process, time incentives, secretarial assistance, and . . . yes. . . occasionally money.

Consequences

The foreseen consequences of our intensive activity are pleasant and predictable: more and better student writing, stimulating and unexpected student writing, a different kind of learning. Yet I am more charmed by less predictable occurrences: an increase in faculty ownership of writing, the teaching of writing, and the exploration of pedagogical matters; a new enthusiasm for informal writing and the discoveries it engenders; the spillover effect in other courses. Most surprising of all, perhaps, is the serendipitous fruit of our labor: a renewed interest among faculty in their own writing. Our first faculty workshop on academic writing drew fifty participants, and several professors have inquired whether auditing the training workshop might not improve their own writing skills. In short, our community of writers has been extended to accommodate students and faculty alike. A member of the English Department maintains, "We have to make the world safe for learning!" If the world of writing can extend that learning to us as well as our students, so much the better!

Guidelines for the Writing Reinforcement Program
Spring, 1986

All students at Rollins College are required to take at least one R (writing reinforcement) course. The purpose of the Writing Reinforcement Program is to offer a wide array of R courses and to assure that all students experience at least one course (ideally several) in which the writing skills of a particular discipline are advanced while students receive training and practice in improving writing skills, whatever the level upon entering the course. Thus, a weak writer might reasonably be expected to develop adequate skills in a Writing Reinforcement Course, while a strong writer might begin to develop a more professional outlook and style. While it is our hope that eventually virtually all courses at Rollins College will include some written work as a pedagogical tool to enhance the learning in each discipline, the "R course" should be a writing intensive course in which the students learn to use writing for a variety of purposes and to revise their papers as they explore their thinking more deeply and fully. Use of the Writing Center should be integrated into the "R course" in order to encourage students to learn to write like professionals: to write, to revise, to show their work to responsible yet friendly "readers," to receive intelligent responses which lead to further revisions.

A. General Policies

- 1). Because the "R course" is intended to help students at all levels develop their writing expertise in particular fields, no students will be exempted from the requirement on the basis of superior writing skills. (Under special circumstances, an independent study may be designed to fulfill the R requirement, but only under the guidance of an "R faculty member," and only with the prior approval of the Writing across the Curriculum Committee.) R credit will not be granted "after the fact" for any course. Nor will R credit be granted for non-R courses.
- 2). Since the evolution of writing skills requires time for intellectual growth as well, "R courses" cannot be condensed into the Winter term.
- 3). Since the Writing Reinforcement Program is intended to offer training in writing for particular fields, most "R courses" are normally offered at the junior and senior level, in which greater intellectual maturity may be expected. However, the Writing across the Curriculum Committee may upon occasion approve a sophomore-level "R course" if this seems appropriate.
- 4). Passing an "R course" implies completion of all requirements in the course. This means that students who have not done the written work should not receive passing grades in the course. (One may not pass the course without

receiving R credit for it.)

5). Satisfaction of the W (writing), requirement is a prerequisite for the R course.

B. Preparation of Faculty

1). In order to qualify as an "R faculty member," one must enroll in an "R Workshop." The stipend for taking this two-week workshop is currently \$1000, and participants must develop one "R course" while taking it.

2). Developing an "R course" includes shaping a syllabus for submission to the Writing across the Curriculum Committee, as well as designing a series of writing assignments intended to teach the content of a particular discipline while offering students intensive practice and training with writing in the designated field of study.

3). "R faculty" may elect each fifth or sixth year to take a one-week "Renewal Workshop." The stipend for this workshop is currently \$500. While refining a particular "R course," workshop participants may choose to develop applications to other courses as well.

C. Obligations of Faculty

1). After the initial "R Workshop," faculty members will be expected to offer one "R course" per year for at least six years. (It would be useful, but not obligatory, if this should include the sabbatical year.)

2). After six years of service, "R faculty" will be encouraged but not absolutely required to continue offering an "R course" each year. This may be done with or without participation in a "renewal workshop."

3). Taking a one-week "Renewal Workshop" carries with it a four-year, four R course obligation.

4). "R faculty" are expected to develop "R courses" which meet the recommendations spelled out below. Copies of syllabi for all "R courses" should be submitted to the Director of Writing Programs each year. The Writing across the Curriculum Committee will conduct periodic reviews of syllabi.

5). The Writing across the Curriculum Committee is responsible for assessing the quality of performance in the Writing Reinforcement Program. Decisions regarding renewal of "R faculty members" will be made by the Committee, with recommendations from the Director of Writing Programs.

D. Course Recommendations

1). Every "R course" should have a cap of fifteen students. (A faculty member may then elect to add one or two students in particular need of the course.)

2). Every "R course" should include a variety of informal and formal writing assignments. (For example, these might include such items as, though not limited to, the following: journals, letters, response cards, in-class jottings, rough drafts, blueprints or outlines, short answer examinations, essay examinations, summaries of readings, short reports,

research reports, formal papers, research papers.) One goal of the instructor should be to use the writing creatively as a pedagogical tool to inform the learning in a given discipline.

3). "R courses" should include scheduled conferences to discuss student writing in progress.

4). Every "R course" should offer practice and instruction in strategies for revision as well as some specific discussion of the demands of writing for the particular discipline.

5). Every "R course" should require at least 6000 words of written discourse divided among the various types of writing selected.

6). Every "R course" should have a syllabus which spells out the writing assignments in sufficient detail for students to understand what will be expected of them as the term progresses. The syllabus should also include information regarding how the various writing assignments will be assessed and incorporated into the final grade. On the syllabus, too, should be some explanation of how the Writing Center will be used in relation to the course work, how the professor will be receiving reports on work in the Center, and how Writing Center participation may affect due dates, revision work, and final grades.