

Teachers in all Disciplines Should Teach Writing

Walter Foote

Written assignments should be submitted and resubmitted. Few learning experiences demonstrate more clearly than does writing that skill development and growth occur through successive approximations (Metcalf, 38).

Students were asked to bring extra copies of their written report to class on the day of their oral presentation. Copies were distributed at random to other class members for evaluation (Corrington and Keedy, 418).

[Keeping] a journal makes it almost mandatory for the student to monitor his/her own learning... (Graves, 8).

English teacher's shop talk? No, those three quotations reproduced above are from The Journal of Physical Education and Recreation, Engineering Education, and News for Teachers of Political Science, respectively.

Why are these PE, engineering, and political science teachers writing like English teachers?

They are part of a recent and growing trend in both England and North America--a trend known as **Writing Across the Curriculum**. The assumption is that teachers of all disciplines should also be teachers of writing--or, better yet, that they should teach their disciplines at least in part through the teaching of writing. James Britton puts it this way:

Many teachers... entertain the belief that an English teacher has

only to teach pupils "to write" and the skill they learn will be effective in any lesson and in any kind of writing task. As a result... a learning process properly the responsibility of teachers of all subjects is left to the English teacher alone, and the inevitable failures are blamed upon him (Britton, The Dev., 3).

Britton's emphasis on writing as a learning process is central to the **Writing Across the Curriculum** movement. On one level it suggests the obvious: Writing ability will decline--no matter how well it is developed in English courses--if students do not continue to write in other courses, just as students' math skills will decline unless they continue to use math in physics, chemistry, engineering, and statistics. This enlightened conception of writing itself can unfortunately lead to superficiality if writing is seen merely as a skill learned in English classrooms, and one that needs to be maintained or polished, or perhaps remediated in disciplines other than English.

Writing Across the Curriculum programs limited to this notion of writing as a basic skill are in danger of failing because non-English faculty members already see the teaching of writing largely as the chore of enforcing correctness, a chore which in fact distracts them from their real work--teaching the subject matter of their courses. They voice one all-too-familiar objection to **Writing Across the Curriculum**: "Why don't you people in English just do your job and let me get on with mine?" The answer is crucial: A truly enlightened writing program regards the process of learning

through writing as inseparable from the process of learning the subject that is being written about. And, as a bonus, in the act of their writing, students also learn about themselves as they relate to their insights about their subjects.

Writing: "A Mode of Learning"

Janet Emig refers to writing as a "mode of learning":

Writing represents a unique mode of learning--not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique.... Lev Vygotsky, A.R. Luria, and Jerome Bruner... have all pointed out that higher cognitive functions... seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language--particularly... written language (Emig, "Writing as", 122).

Emig's message echoes through the published works of Stephen Judy, William Irmischer, Nancy Martin, and Neil Postman, all of whom argue for writing as a mode of learning and, by extension, for involving teachers of all disciplines in writing instruction. Postman argues that every discipline is its language, and the proper study of every discipline must include how language is used to shape the knowledge of the discipline. What are the disciplines' central questions and how are they asked? How do its **facts** and **truths** differ from those of other disciplines? What are the contending metaphors which express its theories? How does it make its definitions?

Each subject is a manner of speaking and writing. There is a rhetoric of knowledge, a characteristic way in which arguments, proofs, speculations, experiments, polemics, even humor are expressed (Postman, 162).

It is for such reasons that faculty members in all disciplines should be writing teachers and language teachers. It is in the language of their disciplines--not only in the surface conventions and formats of that language use but also in the ways in which writing can be used as a mode of learning in that discipline--that subject area faculty are

specialists. Teaching writing in the disciplines is not a chore distracting from subject matter; it is a medium for teaching and for learning that subject matter.

Often students find that writing as a mode of learning in all disciplines makes them want to write well. Two of our **Writing Across the Curriculum** courses at **Grand Valley State**, **Writing in Mathematics** and **Biomedical Communications**, emphasize writing as both a powerful alternative and an essential supplement to learning from computer printouts and electronic media. Because writing is increasingly important on the job, students want to develop as writers in the courses they elect to prepare them for their future careers.

What do Writing Across the Curriculum Programs Mean to English Departments?

Losses

The loss of some students' bodies?

Surely. **Writing Across the Curriculum** courses will remove students from some intermediate and advanced composition courses formerly taught in English Departments.

The loss of some good will?

Yes, for those who understand the teaching of writing as only a **basic skill**, who see **Writing Across the Curriculum** as a way for English faculty to shirk responsibilities.

The loss of some control over the kinds of language students learn to write (much of which we English teachers customarily find reprehensible)?

Perhaps, but as Richard A. Lanham humorously suggests, there are two sides to this issue.

Loss of some students from literature courses which are also considered writing courses?

Yes, but this can be prevented in the main
(cont. on p. 88)

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by keeping writing requirements separate from literature requirements and by making some literature courses electives in a **Writing Across the Curriculum** program.

Gains

Gain of a shared responsibility among departments for instruction in literacy and, by extension, gain of prestige for teaching English?

Yes. We are, after all, the experts on writing, and no **Writing Across the Curriculum** program I know deposes composition courses in English from their important function within writing programs. It is the English teacher's expertise which forms the basis of **Writing Across the Curriculum** programs, often through interdisciplinary faculty workshops offered by English faculty. Furthermore, the learning in these workshops does not move in just one direction. In workshops on all academic levels in which I have participated--the **Bay Area Writing Projects**, the **Michigan Tech** workshops, **The University of Michigan** programs, and those at my own institution--learning about writing is enriched with learning about language and philosophy and science and history. Workshop leaders become familiar with the discourse of other disciplines; and therefore they lose their literary provincialism and better appreciate the work of their colleagues in history, philosophy, science, the social sciences, and in the other arts as well.

Faculty in other disciplines become our colleagues in more than name only. At **West Chester State** (PA), Robert Weiss reports that several faculty members outside the English department are bringing the insights of their disciplines to research in basic writing. In the past academic year, at their own professional conferences, my colleagues in three of **Grand Valley's** departments--history, political science, and health science--presented papers on the teaching of writing in their fields. Other faculty at **Grand Valley** have become involved with the holistic scoring of placement essays.

The gains for English faculty from the **Writing Across the Curriculum** approach

far outweigh the losses. A language-centered English curriculum, anchored in **Writing Across the Curriculum**, will strengthen not only the teaching of writing, but also the teaching of literature. A curriculum which makes writing an integral way of learning in all disciplines will also ensure better teaching in these disciplines. The ultimate beneficiaries will be our students.

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Middleton (cont. from p. 82)

tion, Bruner claims that such discourse is also the "only way of saying things right and powerfully to oneself" (Bruner, Toward, p. 152). Although finished written products are useful, they are fossils of the living, dynamic process that produced them. Janet Emig views this process as a unique means of knowing, embodying more of the characteristics of successful learning strategies than reading, listening, or speaking. In particular, it provides immediate visible response and a record of the evolution of student thinking (Emig, 128). Analysis of writers' behavior demonstrates that writing is not merely **expression** of ideas already in memory, nor **discovery** of meaning, but the **making** of meaning--"conscious probing for analogies and contradictions, to form new concepts and restructure old knowledge of the subject" (Flower and Hayes, 28).

Finally, integrating writing into the subject course gives a means of **doing** rather than **studying** a subject. David Hamilton's description of writing in science applies to virtually all other fields. He states that the student is not ignorant without writing but is restricted to "a collection of data, an unorganized array of insights and intuitions" (Hamilton, 33). Conversely, "writing science" demands that the student "clarify meanings not only with sentences that follow each other intelligently but also with control over implications and ramifications of thoughts" (Hamilton, 37).

The union of composition with content courses will enable students to develop as