

Bringing Writing In from the Cold

When my colleagues hear that I teach first-year composition, they figure I must be a saint, a masochist, or a victim of blackmail. It's axiomatic in our trade that established academics do not *voluntarily* teach comp unless they have a Mother Teresa complex. Far from aspiring to sainthood, however, I teach the course largely for careerist reasons, seeing it as a source of research material for my books and articles. That may make me something of a special case. But you'd think that, in a profession in which so much rides on getting our writing published, it wouldn't be hard to convince anyone that teaching basic writing might sharpen our writing and thus help advance our careers.

When I started teaching in 1963, it was common practice for "regular" English faculty members to teach first-year composition. Today, however, though we still give lip service to the importance of writing, we hand the course over to graduate students and contingent faculty members. Diane Chin, a writing-program administrator and instructor at my university, says she daily confronts "the fundamental contradiction that lies at the heart of the issue. If writing is so damn important, why are the lowest-paid, least secure, most overburdened people in the 'academic community' made responsible for teaching it?"

One of the most depressing moments for me at MLA job interviews is when candidates are reassured that, if they get the job, they "won't have to teach comp." The only thing more depressing is when colleagues who are revolted at the very thought of teaching composition complain that their students write poorly. They blame bad student writing on the high schools or on their own campus writing programs and take no responsibility for the problem themselves.

Nevertheless, I won't wax nostalgic for the days when most regular faculty members taught basic writing, for I'm sure that writing is taught better today, given the training writing instructors get from rhetoric and composition programs, the field responsible for most of the interesting thinking about pedagogy that has come out of English departments. Without succumbing to nostalgia, however, I do think the effectiveness of first-year writing instruction is impaired by a system in which the regular faculty teaches literature while a separate staff of TAs and adjuncts teaches the introductory writing courses. This two-track system increases the isolation of writing from literary studies as well as from the other disciplines. And the separation of writing from literature in English is mirrored in foreign language departments. Read the recent report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (see <http://www.mla.org/flreport>), and you'll find you can often replace "foreign languages" with "basic composition" without missing a beat.

Of course, if this increasing reliance on contingent faculty members continues, the problem posed by tenure-line professors' disappearance from first-year writing courses will be "solved" by the disappearance of tenure-line professors altogether. Now that contingent faculty members compose a shocking three-fourths or more of the teaching staff at some campuses, even upper-division courses are increasingly taught by temporary employees. This exploitative two-track system needs to be fought using a variety of tactics, including unionizing, lobbying, and an aggressive public information campaign that gets the word out that the professor—that beloved icon of American life—may soon be an extinct species. "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" big time!

The word also needs to get out that the two-track system lowers the quality of education, not least because it widens the disconnection between writing courses and the literature and other subject matter courses taught by the regular faculty. At most universities there tends to be little communication between the composition program and the disciplinary faculty about what is wanted or expected in student writing. Faculty members in the disciplines rarely have a clear idea of the philosophy of writing informing the composition program, while composition teachers (through no fault of theirs) tend to be equally in the dark about what instructors in the disciplines look for in their writing assignments—assuming they give some.

As a result of these disjunctions, students often receive contradictory messages about writing as they go from subject to subject and course to course. You might think colleges would ask the entire teaching staff to meet occasionally to align their writing lessons and try to get consensus on such questions as, "Is writing in the sciences and the humanities fundamentally different, or is there common ground?" But of course we rarely have such discussions (or didn't till outcomes assessment came along), either because we presumably agree about these questions and thus don't need to discuss them or because we presumably disagree about them and thus discussing them would be pointless.

So we leave it to students to sort out on their own the mixed messages they get about writing—and if they can't, it's their problem, not ours. Students can go from a teacher at 10:00 who wants them to make a strong argument of their own in their papers to one at 11:00 who mainly wants evidence that they've read the assigned material. This (along with many other contradictions I could list) explains why students often ask us questions like, "Do you want *my* ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?" Such questions suggest that our students' other courses give them no basis for predicting what we want in ours, which is to say that, considered as a collective enterprise, we're unreadable, that *homo academicus* can be comprehended only one at a time.

To put it another way, our courses at any moment are often fighting one another or canceling one another out, and our solipsistic confinement in our classrooms prevents us from realizing it. The contradictory writing advice students get in going from course to course deprives them of the reinforcement and redundancy learners need—especially those who have at best a shaky grasp of what it means to join an academic community—and this in turn undermines their success in college and their social and economic aspirations.¹

What, then, can be done about the systematic isolation and obfuscation of writing in the university? If it is neither practical nor desirable to go back to the days when regular faculty members taught basic writing and language courses as well as literature, how can the disconnect between writing and literature—and the other disciplines—be overcome?

One response to the problem has been first-year seminar programs, consisting of writing-intensive courses taught by regular faculty members on topics related to their research. First-year seminars bring regular faculty members back into the first-year classroom, focus on writing, and are often lively, but in my experience they are rarely effective in dealing with

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student writing. The theme that the students write *about* tends to become so central that writing issues don't get the attention they require.

An approach I prefer is one that combines the elements of writing-across-the-curriculum (and language-across-the-curriculum) programs and of so-called learning communities. In this approach, first-year writing courses are paired with general education courses for a cohort of students that takes both together. Campuses I know of that have developed versions of this approach include the University of New Mexico, the University of North Florida, the University of Iowa, and my own University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC).

In UIC's Co-Write program, students who enroll in designated first-year composition sections concurrently enroll in the same section of introduction to literature or of introductory psychology, history, political science, or even chemistry and mathematics (see <http://www.uic.edu/las/college/info/cowrite/>). The writing assignments in the composition course are keyed to the readings and topics of the general education course, and the writing course instructor becomes a coach who helps students write their papers for the subject matter course. The graduate and undergraduate tutors of UIC's writing center serve as useful intermediaries between the paired courses.

This course-pairing strategy brings regular faculty members back to writing instruction, but it does so by coordinating their subject matter courses with a writing course rather than by having them teach writing courses themselves. Since both kinds of courses have to be offered anyway, coupling them seems an efficient use of resources. And since first-year students are required to take the writing and general education courses anyway, having them take the two together makes educational sense. Writing is an ideal candidate for coupling since, having no exclusive subject of its own, it can be paired with any subject. The division of labor made possible by the coupling helps overcome the conflict that often plagues first-year seminars (and some basic composition courses themselves), in which writing issues compete for class time with the subject matter.

I can attest to the value of such course pairing, having taught a first-year writing course at UIC that was linked to an introduction to German literature. I found it a bracing experience to coach my students in how to write their essays for someone else's course, an experience that made me feel that for once my students and I were on the same side, collaborating to meet the external demands of another course. It was also exciting for my German colleague, Astrida Tantillo, and me to feel that in a small way we were bridging the chasm between first-year writing and literature.

It's true that pairing writing and general education courses this way doesn't challenge the two-track hierarchy that relegates writing instruction to the lower ranks—a problem, as I've said, that needs to be directly tackled on its own. There is always the danger that established faculty members will take advantage of their non-tenure-track partners, a danger that can require tactful program leadership to overcome. Nor will course pairing work if it becomes so time-consuming that it burns out already overtaxed instructors on both sides. In the pairing I taught in at UIC, I did have to do some extra reading to keep up with the assignments of the other course. But the amount of such reading (and of communication with my course partner) was modest and was readily compensated for by my satisfaction in getting more out of my teaching efforts.

This problem figures to lessen over time if the instructors get to repeat the pairing. Though course pairing doesn't change the two-track system, it does get the tracks working together, thereby counteracting the isolation of contingent faculty members, a benefit that has been appreciated by the graduate students and lecturers I've spoken to at UIC.

Course pairing will also fail if it becomes too expensive. At UIC the continuity demanded by course pairing, which is disrupted if the teaching staff turns over every semester, became a reason for raising the salaries and improving the job security of the lecturers in the program. This has proved a mixed blessing, however, as the administration, after paying special stipends to the program staff for several years (and after running into problems with registration, lack of assessment, and lack of coordination between instructors), has reportedly discontinued Co-Write—a recall for retooling, I hope, rather than a permanent termination. On the other hand, course pairing is less expensive than team teaching while offering similar pedagogical benefits. According to Elaine Maimon, president of Governors State University and a leading rhetoric and composition scholar who has worked in course-pairing programs, "paired courses can be cost-effective because each instructor teaches his/her own class." And if course-pairing programs are successful, they may help universities attract increased support from donors and legislatures.

Ultimately, course pairing will have limited value if the teachers on both sides of the pairing don't reach a consensus on what they are looking for in student writing—particularly on those questions students ask, such as whether we want their own arguments in papers or summaries of the reading. My answer to that question is that, whatever the discipline, students need to learn both to read and summarize arguments made in the field and to develop their own positions in response. Whether they agree with me or not, however, teaching staffs should meet at least once a semester to discuss such fundamental questions, which are not only about writing but also about how subject matter is structured and taught.²

In my view, the potential of pairing basic-writing and general education courses is far from trivial, especially if the practice becomes a model for pairing other courses and disciplines at the middle and upper levels. Course pairing can help us begin to put our Humpty Dumpty of a college curriculum back together again, and, if that happens, we might see improvement not just in student writing but our own.

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NOTES

1. This analysis has support from current researchers, who often find a strong correlation between curricular integration and students' engagement in their learning. See Zhao and Kuh.

2. In case anyone is wondering, reaching consensus on common argumentative practices and how to identify them for students is not opposed to what I've elsewhere called "teaching the conflicts" but a precondition of it.

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