

Developing a Culture of Writing at Virginia State University: A New Writing Emphasis

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Abstract: Beginning in the fall of 2008 (and continuing through the spring of 2013), Virginia State University, America's first fully state supported four-year institution of higher learning for Blacks and one of two land-grant institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia, launched a comprehensive and ambitious program to develop a culture of writing (and thinking) to enhance its students academic and professional success. This program stems from the university's desire to enhance teaching and learning through writing and to meet a SACS accreditation requirement to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan that focuses on a significant issue that relates to student learning. Together, electronic portfolios, Washington State University's "Guide to Rating Integrative and Critical Thinking," and a variety of comparative data on persistence and retention, are being used to assess the development of a culture of writing at Virginia State University.

Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her 2004 CCCC Chair's Address "Made Not Only in Words, Composition in a New Key," states, "We have a moment. At this moment, we need to focus on three changes: develop a new curriculum; revisit and revise our writing across the curriculum efforts; and develop a major in composition and rhetoric" (308). Regarding the first change, Yancey calls for

developing a new curriculum for the 21st century, a curriculum that carries forward the best of what we have created to date, that brings together the writing outside of school and that inside. This composition is located in a new vocabulary, a new set of practices, and a new set of outcomes; it will focus our research in new provocative ways; it has as its goal the creation of thoughtful, informed, technologically adept writing publics (308).

Virginia State University's new and ambitious writing program, "Developing a Culture of Writing to Enhance Students' Academic and Professional Success," addresses that "moment," and it is my purpose here to articulate how. More specifically, my purpose is threefold: (1) to describe how we have defined that moment in our institutional context; (2) to articulate how we have connected it to a new WAC initiative; and (3) to consider how our WAC initiative, which is being implemented now, includes both critical thinking and electronic portfolios as necessary components.

Immediate Context

Since the mid-nineties, Virginia State University has been experimenting with a variety of approaches to teaching first-year writing. In response to the University's re-structuring initiative which began in the fall of 1994, the Department of Languages and Literature, which houses the writing program, re-designed its two first-year writing courses and phased out its developmental writing and reading courses. The impetus for this change was the mandate by the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV) that colleges no longer offer remedial courses paid for by state funds. After the first year of offering the restructured courses, faculty concern about student performance in the courses coupled with the University's desire to shore up the first-year writing program led to the appointment of an ad hoc committee to redesign the two first-year writing courses and to pilot the new courses in the fall of 1995. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the redesigned courses was the print portfolio that counted for fifty percent of the student's grade.

In addition to revising its first-year writing program, however, the university also initiated a writing across the curriculum program; however, like many WAC programs across the country, the program was not sustained, in part because of inadequate support by the university. Likewise, several attempts were made by the department to develop a Writing Center, but the efforts were not supported by the university; and the Writing Center closed in 2003.

Our current initiative, the new twenty-first century writing emphasis at Virginia State University, stems from the university's desire to meet several goals, among them

1. strengthen the writing and thinking abilities of all students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, especially in view of its goal of becoming a Level Six Research Intensive Institution
2. enhance teaching and learning in all undergraduate degree programs
3. prepare students for graduate school and for entry into their profession, and
4. meet the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' (SACS) Core Requirement 2.12 of the Principles of Accreditation to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a five-year plan to enhance student learning.

In sum, we see the QEP process as an opportunity to develop a 21st century culture of writing based in part on a newly imagined wac program.

Virginia State University: A Brief History

To understand why the goals listed above are appropriate for VSU, it might be useful to provide some historical background. Virginia State University, founded in 1882, is America's first fully state supported four-year institution of higher learning for Blacks and an institutional member of the network of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). A comprehensive university, it is one of two land-grant institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The mission of the university is to promote and sustain academic programs that integrate instruction, research, and extension/public service in a design most responsive to the needs and endeavors of individuals and groups within its scope of influence. Ultimately, the University is dedicated to the promotion of knowledgeable, perceptive, and humane citizens who are secure in their self-awareness, equipped for personal fulfillment, sensitive to the needs and aspirations of others, and committed to assume productive roles in a challenging and ever-changing society.

The U.S. News and World Report in 2009 named Virginia State University the top public HBCU in the country among master's-level institutions; the fifth best public HBCU overall; and the 15th best HBCU, public or private, in America. In addition, Virginia State University is listed among twelve colleges and universities cited by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in having achieved unusual success in retaining and graduating students (Student Success in State Colleges and Universities, p. 6).

Thus, in response to a call for a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and building on this past, Virginia State created the plan "Developing a Culture of Writing to Enhance Students' Academic and Professional Success." To create a culture of writing to enhance students' academic and professional success, the new program in writing (and thinking), has five major goals:

1. to provide all entering students a strong and effective first-year writing program that emphasizes academic writing and includes the critical literacies of critical thinking, reflective practice, and technology;
2. to create opportunities for students throughout their general education program to practice writing and critical thinking in a variety of contexts both informally and formally as a way to continue to strengthen the writing and thinking skills developed in the first-year writing program;
3. to provide opportunities for students to continue to develop their writing competencies and critical thinking skills through discipline-specific and genre-specific informal and formal writing activities in their major courses (designated Writing Intensive courses) taught by expert writers well versed in specific areas;
4. to require all students to develop a senior eportfolio for assessment; and
5. to develop a Writing/ePortfolio Studio (WEPS) to provide writing assistance and eportfolio support to students, faculty, and staff.

Defining a Culture of Writing

The definition of "culture of writing" that undergirds our writing initiative is characterized by goals that speak to the resources, both material and attitudinal, needed for this culture to thrive. They include

- a university-wide shared commitment to the teaching of writing, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in all academic programs;
- a demonstrated commitment of the university to support a wide range of writing activities, including writing across the disciplines and writing intensive courses in the majors;
- adequate funding, human resources, strategic planning, curricula changes, and administrative support to sustain these efforts on a long-term basis;
- university support for faculty development activities that prepare faculty to deliver a robust writing initiative in all academic programs and that nurtures the nascent culture of writing at VSU; and
- a commitment to provide and support opportunities for students to participate in all forms of 21st century literacies, inside and outside of school, to include academic and social writings: blogs, text messaging, facebook, websites, and other electronic media.

The culture we seek to foster thus embraces the entire university: the first-year writing program, the writing across the disciplines emphasis, the writing intensive emphasis in the majors, the research efforts of faculty involved in the Inter/National Coalition of Eportfolio Research, the campus newspaper, the poetry club, the honor societies, the Writing/ePortfolio Studio, and other campus organizations. Our goal is get the entire university involved in writing.

And how will we operationalize these ambitions? The plan to develop this "culture of writing" focuses on three areas: introduction to academic writing in the first year; writing across the disciplines; and an emphasis on writing intensive/capstone courses in the major in the junior/senior years. A critical component of the plan will be the use of eportfolios for instruction and for assessment. All of this activity will be supported by a University-wide Writing/ePortfolio Studio (WEPS) designed to support this culture of writing. The culture thus includes informal writing practices and formal writing assignments, with the goal to help every student and faculty member in all disciplines to see writing (and critical thinking) as a means of learning throughout college and to view the first-year writing practices (and courses) as foundations for disciplinary writing practices in the major.

The first step of the Quality Enhancement Plan focuses on academic writing, on the idea of the intellectual practice of transfer as the foundation of a student's academic career, and on the use of curriculum to link students to their intellectual heritage. Our specific intent in the first year writing program is to help increase the likelihood that students will take what is learned in the first year program—about composing processes, about texts and ways to create them, about rhetorical situations in framing—and use it to good effect in other writing situations—in other classes, in other programs, in other institutions, in the workplace, and in other parts of life itself (Yancey, 2007, p. 13). Faculty in Languages and Literature began this effort by revising English 110 and 111; in doing so, they consulted the most recent composition research on transfer and first-year academic writing practices, the revised WPA Writing Outcomes, and VSU's local outcomes.

In addition to the two first-year writing courses in which students must earn a grade of "C" or better, all students must also complete with a "C" or better an introductory literature course, either ENGL 201: Introduction to Literature or ENGL 202: Introduction to African American Literature. Each course includes selections of African American literature; such literature plays an important intellectual role at VSU in its ability to remind students of their heritage (which is also the case at other HBCU's: see, for example, Teresa Redd's "Keepin' It Real: Delivering College Composition at an HBCU"). In addition, we believe that the cultural connection between students' heritage and their lives will increase both the value of the eportfolio to students and their engagement in school activities, as has been the case elsewhere (see, for example, Eynon, 2008).

The second step of the Quality Enhancement Plan focuses on writing to learn in the general education courses and in the disciplines and on the development of critical thinking skills across the curriculum. As is the case with WAC programs elsewhere and as Carol Rutz and Nathan D. Grawe (2009) explain in their account of the QR initiative, we are employing the faculty workshop as an agent of change: faculty throughout the university are participating in workshops to learn how to use informal writing practices in their courses to help students improve their writing, thinking, and learning. Focusing on writing practices and critical thinking skills throughout the university, not just in required English/composition courses, faculty and students will see writing and thinking as (1) a means of learning and (2) as a means of preparing students for professional writing practices in the upper level courses in their major.

The third step of the Quality Enhancement Plan focuses on writing intensive courses in the major. Departments are identifying courses within each major that will be designated as writing intensive courses based on specific criteria, including the amount of writing required by students enrolled in

the course. University-wide guidelines for writing intensive courses will contextualize the specific requirements and guidelines established by the faculty within the department or major offering the course.

The fourth step, which is critical to the success of the QEP, is the establishment of a strong Writing/ePortfolio Studio (WEPS). In order to develop a culture of writing to enhance student academic and professional success, the institution is developing a major support mechanism offering assistance to students, faculty, and staff in meeting the immediate and long term goals and objectives of the writing/thinking initiative. The Writing /ePortfolio Studio—a teaching, tutorial, and on-line facility—offers writing and eportfolio assistance for students, faculty, staff, and the University community.

To meet the writing requirement of the university, every student will thus be required to enroll in five writing intensive courses: the two first-year writing courses (ENGL 110: Composition I and ENGL 111: Composition II); a sophomore level introduction to literature course (ENGL 201: Introduction to Literature or ENGL 202: Introduction to African American Literature); and two writing intensive courses in the major (e.g., a designated writing intensive course, a capstone course, a senior seminar, an undergraduate thesis course), one of which may be a culminating course. Each department will designate at least two courses that all majors are required to take during their undergraduate experience. Departments that have already developed writing intensive courses such as senior seminars and capstone courses are not required to develop new courses; however, all courses designated as "writing intensive" must meet the minimum criteria established for a writing intensive course at Virginia State University, which will sound familiar to those familiar with such designations, as we see in the University of Hawaii program:

1. the course uses writing to promote the learning of course materials;
2. the course provides interaction between teacher and students while students complete writing assigned writing;
3. writing contributes significantly to each student's grade;
4. the course requires students to do a substantial amount of writing (a minimum of 4,000 words or about 16 pages), and
5. the course is restricted to 20 - 25 students to allow for meaningful professor-student interaction.

Discipline-specific criteria are being developed by faculty in each major or program through a series of formal faculty development workshops and discussions that commenced in the spring of 2009.

The Role of Both WAC and WID in VSU's Culture of Writing

More than two decades ago, the late Edward P. J. Corbett (1986), speaking at a faculty development workshop at Norfolk State University, made the following statement:

The development (in rhetoric and composition) that has most excited me since I became a part of academia has been the writing across the curriculum movement. One reason the WAC movement became so exciting to me is that I recognize it as being the kind of liberal arts venture that people like Isocrates and Cicero tried to make of the rhetoric course in the ancient schools. Everyone in the academy becomes, in a very real sense, a teacher of writing, and those who are specially trained to be teachers of writing have to widen their

purview and be willing to exercise students in the kinds of writing demanded in a variety of disciplines.

Since Corbett's statement, of course, writing across the curriculum programs have flourished, and in general, as Sue McLeod suggests, over time two approaches toward them have developed. In the "Introduction" to *Writing Across the Curriculum* (2000), McLeod points out that the two approaches are defined by the kinds of writing they value.

The first approach, sometimes referred to as cognitive, involves using writing to learn. This approach assumes that writing is not only a way of showing what one has learned but is itself a mode of learning—that writing can be used as a tool for, as well as a test of, learning. The work of James Britton and of Janet Emig undergirds this approach, which is based on constructivist theories of education. Knowledge is not passively received, the theory goes, but it is actively constructed by each individual learner; these constructions change as our knowledge changes and grows. One of the most powerful ways of helping students build and change their knowledge structures is to have them write for themselves as audience—to explain things to themselves before they have to explain them to someone else. In the curriculum, this approach advocates write-to-learn assignments such as journals and other ungraded writing assignments aimed at helping students think on paper. The second approach to WAC, sometimes termed rhetorical, involves learning to write in particular disciplines, or in what researchers have begun to think of as discourse communities.... It emphasizes more formal assignments, teaching writing as a form of social behavior in the academic community. The work of theorists on the social construction of knowledge, summarized by Kenneth Bruffee, underlies this approach. Knowledge in the disciplines is seen not as discovered, but as agreed upon—as socially justified belief, created through ongoing 'conversation' (written as well as oral) of those in the field. (p. 3)

As suggested by the five required courses and the faculty workshops, the culture of writing at VSU quite intentionally builds in both approaches.

Connected to both approaches is critical thinking, a concern shared by academics across the country, as demonstrated by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, in his *Our Underachieving Colleges*. Bok notes that teaching students to think critically was cited by a majority of university professors in a survey regarding their view of the principal objective of an undergraduate education. He comments that it is not enough simply to provide facts, dates, lectures, and tests to students; such experience only encourages students to quickly recall sufficient details needed to convince the professor that the student has retained enough information for a passing grade. According to Bok, even when students do learn concepts and theories, these have little value unless they can be applied to new circumstances long after formal classroom instruction has ended. In citing research by other investigators on critical thinking, Bok (2006) identifies three teaching strategies that foster critical thinking in students:

1. Critical thinking and learning in general can be enhanced by giving students problems and having them teach each other by working together in groups.
2. Teachers who focus attention on the process of problem-solving can also help their students. Researchers find that teaching students different strategies for solving problems can improve

thinking. Encouraging students to reflect on their methods of reasoning and to try different approaches when initial efforts fail can significantly enhance performance.

3. In addition to adjusting their teaching to promote active learning, instructors need to give students frequent opportunities to test their cognitive skills and receive prompt feedback on the results.

According to this view, critical thinking is an essential component of learning and can be developed through pedagogy keyed to its development.

Currently, attention is given to critical thinking at VSU in three ways: (1) in the recently instituted Freshman Studies Seminar, a new course in the revamped General Education Program; (2) in a limited number of sections of critical thinking as a formal course; and (3) in the First-Year Writing Program where critical thinking is included in the list of student outcomes for writing. An intentional goal here is to teach critical thinking through infusion in first-year writing courses, in general education courses through writing across the curriculum (WAC), and in intensive writing courses required in all disciplines (WID). Instead of relying on special courses in critical thinking, our expectation is that every teacher will create an environment in which "students are motivated and encouraged to read deeply, question assumptions, engage in divergent thinking, look for relationships among ideas, and grapple with real life situations" (Carr, 1988, p. 73). We are encouraged in our efforts, of course, by such work elsewhere, especially that at Washington State University. WSU developed a "Guide to Rating Integrative and Critical Thinking" and asked faculty in a variety of disciplines to integrate the rubric after they adopted it in their teaching. In the four courses in which the rubric was used variously for instruction and evaluation, student writing received significantly higher ratings than in the four courses in which the rubric was not used. Over several semesters, writing continued to receive statistically higher scores than the writing emerging from courses where no such rubric was included. Virginia State University plans to adopt the WSU Guide to Rating Integrative and Critical Thinking; faculty will be trained in faculty development workshops to adapt the rubric for use in their courses and to assign and evaluate student writing using the critical thinking rubric.

Electronic Portfolios and the Culture of Writing

A critical component of the plan is the use of eportfolios for instruction and assessment. The literature on eportfolios provides much support for the use of electronic portfolios to foster and assess students' writing and thinking competencies from the first-year writing courses to the point of graduation. Such portfolios at VSU, containing a collection of students' writing from their first year composition courses through their major courses, will serve a number of important functions.

Portfolios, at their best, require students to be thoughtful and reflective learners. An education that relies on lectures and exams as a means of assessment, a method that Paulo Freire refers to as the "banking concept of education" (1970, p. 53), leads only to short-term learning and students who are not reflective learners, but as stated by Bok, regurgitators. As Freire explains,

in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (1970, p. 53)

Portfolios can work against this type of repressive pedagogy, requiring students to actively engage in the collection and selection of materials by which they will be assessed. Furthermore, they require the students to reflect upon their learning. A senior portfolio as designed for VSU of writing requires the student to consider the progress that has been made, the bumps along the way, the triumphs, and the road ahead. Constructing a senior portfolio is only possible, of course, when the student's education has consisted of multiple opportunities for writing and reflection at each stage of education. Reflection, as we saw earlier, creates more knowledge and a deeper level of critical thinking.

How well our students retain what they have learned in first-year writing and apply that knowledge to their other courses is still unclear, although anecdotal evidence suggests a mixed result. That, of course, is what the QEP plan is designed to address. Recognizing that competence in academic writing takes place throughout the students' four years of college—as demonstrated, for example, in Lee Ann Carroll's (2002) recent study of student-writers at Pepperdine University—we require a senior portfolio that will contain essays and other written materials from the students' entire college career, including material collected from their major course work. The final reflective essay will require the student to make explicit the changes and adaptations necessary to writing for different audiences in different genres. The reflective essay will be the most important part of the senior portfolio (as it is in the classroom portfolio), since it is the reflection about the pieces collected that leads to deeper and continued levels of thinking and learning (Cambridge, 2001, p. 2).

This senior portfolio will be composed electronically. The electronic portfolio (or "eportfolio") is more than just a fancy new technological innovation that replicates the print portfolio. Rather, it presents a number of advantages, from its ability to be shared with multiple audiences (including future employers or graduate schools), to its ease of storage and portability, to the way it allows for a clearer articulation of the process behind the finished product.

Despite the training and technical challenges that typically attend the implementation of such a program, the introduction of the senior eportfolio will, in the end, provide a number of important benefits to our students. In the spirit of Yancey's observation that "what we ask students to do is what we ask them to be" (2004, p. 738), we are asking them to be deeply reflective writers who can articulate their own writing process and do so using the kinds of technology that they will encounter in the professional world. To date, VSU students in fyc have created what Yancey calls a print uploaded eportfolio, one presented on a CD-ROM or web-based template. With the recent availability of the portfolio function within BlackBoard, however, instructors and students in the Department of Languages and Literature are just beginning to move towards a form of eportfolio that combines the templates of a commercial product (albeit, very general templates) with the possibilities of other kinds of texts (e.g., visuals).

As in the case of critical thinking, in implementing a senior eportfolio, we are benefiting from the experiences of those who have come before us. One of the leaders in electronic portfolios is LaGuardia Community College, whose work with eportfolios has garnered recognition from the Association of American Colleges and Universities as well as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ("ePortfolio at LaGuardia Community College"). Their experience, which began in 2001, has demonstrated that time will be required for a campus-wide model to take hold. It takes careful thought and implementation, as well as patience with set-backs and delays. The benefits, however, are tangible. According to LaGuardia, their eportfolio system has given their students a place to collect and save their course work in a format that allows them to demonstrate their achievements to a wide range of readers, including faculty, other students, friends, and family in NYC and around the world ("ePortfolio at LaGuardia Community College"). Students have used their portfolios to showcase "essays, poetry, original paintings, drawings, oral interviews, family photographs,

annotated resumes, and a range of projects that represent who they are as students and emerging scholars" ("ePortfolio at LaGuardia Community College"). In addition, some students have used their portfolios for very practical purposes, such as supplementing their admission applications to 4-year colleges ("ePortfolio at LaGuardia Community College"), a process that is currently supported by a FIPSE grant.

Another institution that has garnered attention for the success of its program is Valley City State University in North Dakota. A small university of around 1000 students, VCSU implemented an eportfolio program as a means for students to demonstrate competency in the eight abilities the University has deemed necessary for a successful VCSU graduate (Corwin, 2005, p. 4). From its inception in 1995, the project has been a university-wide endeavor (Corwin, p. 4), beginning with the first year when they learn basic technology skills as part of a required General Education course. As students progress through their major programs, they work with advisors within their majors to prepare senior eportfolios that have been tailored by each department to suit its individual needs (Corwin, p. 7). The introduction of eportfolios at VCSU has already had a number of positive results. From a pedagogical point of view, VCSU has found that "students are becoming self-directed, self-assessing learners" (Corwin, 2005, p. 11). And while the data are not causal, students seem to be leaving the university better prepared for the business world, as indicated by employer surveys: their view of VCSU graduates has increased steadily since the inception of the eportfolio requirement (Corwin, p. 12).

Electronic portfolios have also found a home at HBCUs, where the technology has been adapted by the students to suit their particular needs. For example, Spelman College uses end-of-the-semester Web-based portfolios in their first-year writing courses. While there has been much written about the ways in which electronic publishing can erase the body and allow the writer (especially a female writer) to "re-imagine themselves different from their material and socially situated selves," Stephen Knadler has discovered that his students seek instead to "make their racial identity visible to a networked diasporic community" (2001, p. 236). His Spelman students have used their portfolios as sites of what he calls "resistant memory where they might be seen, heard, and—most importantly—'felt'" (2001, p. 236). Many of them are the product of middle-class homes and, thus, feel pressured "to code switch, to police themselves against acting 'Black, Black' and to express only one part of their carefully negotiated hybrid identities" (2001, p. 237). In their portfolios, they refuse the silencing of themselves as women as well as the masking of themselves as not "Black/ Black." Instead, they celebrate their voices as they talk to each other within these portfolios.

In sum, eportfolios are becoming a widely accepted tool for demonstrating the knowledge and abilities of soon-to-be college graduates, and we hope to provide similar evidence of enhanced writing and thinking from our own program.

What Counts as Success?

The assessment model for determining the extent to which the "culture of writing" (and thinking) has developed will involve several components, three of which are most important here: (1) the senior eportfolio, developed from the first year to the senior year, will serve as a means of demonstrating to students, faculty, parents and future employers that a proficient level of writing and critical thinking skills as well as technology literacy has been achieved; (2) Washington State University's "Guide to Rating Integrative and Critical Thinking" will be used in selected general education courses, in writing intensive courses, and with the senior eportfolio to measure students' growth in critical thinking; and (3) a variety of comparative data will be analyzed to determine retention rates and persistence rates. In addition, the program will administer several attitudinal

surveys to assess the impact the program has had in creating the "culture of writing" as envisioned by the university. Taken together, these data will help us answer the following questions:

1. Will a sustained program of writing beginning at the freshman year and continuing through the senior year produce graduates who are proficient in writing and thinking?
2. What are the value-added results of a writing program that utilizes first-year academic writing with emphasis on transfer, writing across the disciplines, and writing intensive courses?
3. What impact does the senior eportfolio have on students' writing proficiency, critical thinking skills, and technology literacy?
4. Can a required university-wide writing program develop a culture of writing to enhance students' academic and professional success?, and
5. What implications might this research have on writing programs that use eportfolios, WAC, and WID emphases to enhance students' writing skills?

To our knowledge, this is the first WAC/WID/technology infused program of its kind, and as we go forward, we look forward to sharing the results of our efforts.

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