

CHAPTER 11.

DEPARTMENT OF RHETORIC, WRITING, AND COMMUNICATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

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*The University of Winnipeg's Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications has the distinction of being the first independent writing program in Canada. Conceived in 1986 as The Writing Program, it underwent a review in 1993, separated from the English Department to become the Centre for Academic Writing, and then began offering a communications program in partnership with a local college. CAW launched a B.A. in Rhetoric and Communications in 2003; three years later, with fourteen full-time faculty, a writing centre, and a peer tutoring program, it was granted departmental status and took its current name. Evolution in our curriculum and institutional status have demanded compromise. Our chief concerns have been to strike a balance between rhetoric and writing and meet two objectives: to provide first-year students with the rhetorical skills necessary to disciplinary success, and to develop in upper-level students *facilitas*—the ability to assess a variety of rhetorical situations and respond both ethically and effectively.*

With a population of approximately 670,000, the city of Winnipeg—the name comes from the Cree word *win-nipi*, meaning “muddy water”—is Canada’s seventh largest municipality and home to more than half the residents of the province of Manitoba. It is located at the geographic centre of North America and the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, on a site where First Nations people met and traded for centuries. After the Hudson’s Bay Company established a strategic post there in the nineteenth century, the region experienced steady immigration from Europe and neighbouring Ontario. Residents of the modern city are mostly of European descent and primarily

English-speaking; however, Winnipeg has considerable ethnic diversity, including the largest French-speaking community west of Quebec and the highest proportion (about ten percent) of First Nations people of any Canadian city (<http://www.statscan.gc.ca>). The latter also constitute the fastest-growing ethnic group in the city and province. Improving the access of Aboriginal students to postsecondary education has consequently become an increasing concern for the province, one which the recently-established University College of the North is designed to address.

Though modest, Manitoba's diversified economy has remained relatively stable for decades; given its water resources and potential to export hydro-electricity, the province seems to have a promising future. Particularly noteworthy is the cultural life of its capital city. In addition to its several theatres, art gallery, provincial museum, and symphony hall, Winnipeg is home to an internationally recognized ballet company, to the Festival du Voyageur (the largest French winter carnival west of Quebec), and to large folk, jazz, fringe, film, and writers' festivals. Two universities and several colleges offer a variety of post-secondary options. The largest of these institutions is the University of Manitoba, with an undergraduate and graduate student population of about 26,000.

The smaller University of Winnipeg is one of the oldest post-secondary schools in western Canada. It was established as Manitoba College in 1871, merged with Wesley College in 1938 to become United College, then received its charter as a University in 1967. With approximately 9,000 full- and part-time students, the University has traditionally been an undergraduate institution, rooted in the liberal arts. In recent years, it has undergone a number of significant changes, including the development of joint programs with local colleges, several new departments, graduate studies, and a "global college" that, in the words of our current president, former Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, aims to "*enhance and promote global citizenship in its many dimensions*" (<http://www.uwinnipegcampaign.ca/academic/globalcollege>).

HISTORY OF WRITING INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

The Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications—the academic unit with primary responsibility for writing instruction at the University of Winnipeg—has gone through several permutations over the past twenty-some years. Formally instituted by the university's senate as the Writing Program in 1986, it began operations the following year as a subdivision of the Eng-

lish Department, with a faculty of seven full-time instructors. It was seen and sold by administrators as a means of raising retention rates and of helping the university to improve access for historically under-represented groups. To this end, the Program relied mainly on a writing centre (equipped with computers, coordinated by faculty, and staffed by tutors who were meeting the practicum requirements of Education courses); and on two sequenced, pedagogically eclectic writing courses (part process-oriented, part expressivist, and part current-traditional), at least one of which was a requirement for any student who had graduated high-school with less than an honours standing in English. These were modest beginnings, certainly, but in Canada, where writing instruction at most post-secondary institutions was at best limited and first-year composition courses did not exist (Graves, 1994), the Writing Program garnered national recognition. In 1992 Canada's best-selling national magazine described it as "a model for universities across the country" ("Class options," 1992).

An extensive review of the Writing Program led to the formation of the Centre of Academic Writing (CAW) in 1995. This second phase marked an important advance, not only for the curriculum at the University of Winnipeg but to some extent for the status of post-secondary writing instruction in Canada, since CAW became the country's first independent writing program. We had a faculty of ten, all teaching writing and rhetoric courses exclusively. Guided by two main premises—that our university's heterogeneous population called for a diversity of approaches, and that our main task was, nonetheless, academic and disciplinary acculturation—we radically altered and expanded our curriculum. Students could now meet the writing requirement through a range of introductory courses (Academic Writing for broad discipline areas, such as the Social Sciences; courses with a multidisciplinary focus; courses "linked" with introductory sections in disciplines such as History and Environmental Studies; and extended courses, primarily for second-language students). CAW also began to develop a handful of upper-level writing and rhetoric courses.

With independence came greater institutional status and opportunities for curricular growth and diversification. In the second half of the decade, we teamed with a local college to develop a Joint Program in Communications aimed at students preparing for careers in journalism, advertising, or public relations. The enthusiastic response to this initiative, which combined a liberal arts focus with practical training, suggested further potential for communications studies. Accordingly, after extensive consultation about the kind of program that would best fit our faculty, students, and institution, we began in 2003 to deliver a new degree specialization (a "major") in "rhetoric and communications." Along with several core courses (in rhetorical criticism, professional editing, communication theory, and research methods), this major offered a variety

of theoretical, analytical, and practical courses in writing and rhetoric. Together, the major and the Joint Program soon drew enough interest to make our student enrolment among the university's largest. In 2006, we appealed for and were granted department status, entering our third phase as the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications (re: <http://rhetoric.uwinnipeg.ca>).

THE DEPARTMENT OF RHETORIC, WRITING, AND COMMUNICATIONS

Like any historical synopsis, the above account leaves out many complicating details. The picture it creates of institutional harmony and steady progress towards departmental independence may be too sunny. It is true that writing instruction and instructors have been given unusual, even extraordinary support at the University of Winnipeg, particularly when considered in the context of Canadian higher education; however, the evolution of the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications has not always been smooth, nor has its current configuration been anything like an historical inevitability (Turner & Kearns, 2002). The process of becoming a full academic partner has required negotiations among competing demands, among them disciplinary ideals (i.e., “best practices”), institutional constraints, and local exigencies. Our success notwithstanding, becoming what we are has involved some compromises.

In what follows, we describe the current state of writing instruction at the University of Winnipeg—and in the process, consider some of these compromises—by examining three key topics: the focus on instructional delivery from within the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications rather than across the disciplines; the relationship between rhetoric and writing in the Department; and our Writing Centre.

WRITING INSTRUCTION: FROM A DEPARTMENT OR ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

In a 2006 report on trends in Canadian universities, Tanya Smith identifies three features of strong postsecondary writing instruction: the delivery of at least one course, early in the undergraduate programs of most students, focused mainly on academic writing, and of one or more additional writing courses at an advanced level, with a disciplinary or professional emphasis—in other words, a writing across the curriculum (WAC) component; a degree specialization or program devoted to academic or professional writing; and a supportive institutional culture. We are fortunate to enjoy an element of all three at the

University of Winnipeg, but we have faced some push and pull between the first and second features, even with institutional support. Commitment to a specialized degree program has necessarily reduced our capacity to foster advanced disciplinary writing instruction and similar WAC initiatives.

WAC once seemed a viable, even appealing option for the university. Writing Program and CAW faculty in the late 1980s and the 1990s produced a newsletter to promote the exchange of information about classroom practices and discussion of disciplinary rhetorics; we designed research projects on disciplinary grading practices; and, under the guidance of an interdisciplinary committee, we mounted writing workshops, arranged visits by prominent writing specialists, and began to define criteria for writing intensive courses. Rhetoric became a topic of interest, and colleagues spoke enthusiastically about “writing to learn.” Early success of this kind is, however, difficult to sustain; attempts to foster WAC must be constantly re-invigorated, as many scholars have noted. Moreover, coming as they do from outside traditional departmental structures, such efforts depend heavily on “the individual commitment of faculty members” (Russell, 2009, p. 164). The burden for junior faculty working in a small Canadian university like ours proved especially demanding (Kearns & Turner, 1997). We were climbing mountains without much assistance or adequate equipment —struggling simultaneously to effect institutional change and to begin professional lives that might include research, even as we worked in a discipline for which we were not trained and in a country that lacked WAC models, strong national venues for rhet/comp scholarship, and “a concrete center for scholars to meet and exchange ideas” (Clary-Lemon, 2009). Tenure was waiting at the peak.

Professional survival meant that CAW needed to re-invent itself, in ways that drew more effectively on our strengths. This (and the increasing popularity of our courses) prompted the decision to design three- and four-year bachelor of arts degrees in Rhetoric and Communications (not, for instance, “Composition” or “Writing Studies”). Since most of us had, like the preceding generation of American compositionists, come to the teaching of writing from the study of literature,¹ it seemed sensible to emphasize courses that bridged the gap between text analysis and production, using the former as a means of facilitating the latter (see below). Movement in this direction was to some extent simultaneously a movement away from WAC and the constant, concomitant demands of work-shopping and consultation. Given our theoretical conviction about the value of WAC, this was, for some of us, a considerable loss.

But WAC was never abandoned altogether. Our first-year writing courses remain grounded in WAC principles (the versions of Academic Writing described above); and we continue to offer advanced courses such as Commu-

nicating Science, Strategies for Technical and Professional Communication, Professional Style and Editing, and Rhetoric in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which collectively appeal to students from across the university. It seems, moreover, that many of our colleagues are still committed to writing. A recent in-house survey indicates that faculty in nearly all departments (including such unlikely sites as math and physics) use writing assignments. Many report the allocation of class time to writing instruction (e.g., suggesting strategies or showing examples of effective student writing); an awareness of writing as process (giving opportunities to write multiple drafts, offering feedback on drafts, facilitating revision through conference and peer response); and the use of writing-to-learn activities (such as informal, exploratory writing). Our Writing Centre is also multi-disciplinary, both in the students who come seeking assistance and in the tutors who provide it. In this institution, writing is not seen as a concern of only the Humanities or the province of an English Department.

We suspect that, even without a full-fledged WAC program, the presence of an independent writing department helps sustain a climate of interest in writing. But we are aware that efforts of the sort just described may be primarily a happy consequence of the University of Winnipeg's traditionally small class sizes. Unfortunately, as in many universities, this is beginning to change, as several respondents noted. Indeed, caps for our own first-year writing classes have risen to 28—well over the number (20) recommended by the (US) National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

The decline of WAC, and with it the kind of oversight that WAC committees can provide, may be responsible for one further problem. When the Associate Dean recently analyzed first-year syllabi in the Arts, a somewhat startling fact emerged: the amount of writing and the proportion of final grades determined by writing assignments vary widely from section to section, even within a single department. Such inequities—certain to be noticed by students at some point, and rightly so—may undermine the attitudes to writing we are trying to foster.

RHETORIC AND WRITING

As much as the literature refers companionably to “rhetoric and composition” (or even “rhet/comp”), the relationship between the two has, in the US, often been vexed. In the 1970s, one scholar called it “obscure at best” (Douglas, 2009, p. 85); another described it in the 90s as “unstable” (Goggin, 1995). Being situated in Canada—and, we would add, in geographically isolated Winnipeg—has had its advantages in this respect. The very lack of a strong disciplinary tradition in writing or speech communication has given us greater license,

making it possible to avoid some of the difficulties faced by American writing programs, even as we drew heavily on American theory and practice.

The key terms in our department name suggest our comfort with the rhet/comp relationship: they are intended to advertise our emphasis on rhetoric even as they reaffirm our long-standing commitment to writing. Indeed, the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications sees the two as inextricably linked, and still considers itself a “writing program.” All our first-year courses and almost one third of our upper-level courses focus on academic writing. Despite differences in specifics, they have a larger common purpose: increasing our students’ rhetorical awareness of academic and/or disciplinary styles, genres, and epistemic criteria in order to improve their own writing processes and written products.

In this sense, consistent with the classical tradition of “hermeneutical rhetoric” (Leff, 1997), a concern for student writing is also deeply embedded in the remaining two-thirds of our department’s upper-level courses. In these, interpretive analysis and theory are not ends in themselves but a means “to enhance the reader’s inventional skills as writer and speaker” (Leff, 1997, p. 199). Moreover, consistent with the tradition of small, liberal arts universities, we see the goal of enhanced inventional skills in broad, civic terms rather than discipline-specific or professional terms (Turner & Kearns, 2002). One of our main goals is to develop what Quintilian called *facilitas*—the ability to assess any rhetorical situation and respond appropriately, which is to say both effectively and ethically. For this reason, the focus of our rhetoric courses is as likely to be non-academic as academic discourses. Students may, for instance, analyze new journalism, nature essays, or magazine writing with the goal of producing a piece of their own; they may develop a communications strategy for an institution; or they may work with community organizations to produce other practical, “real-world” texts for a variety of audiences.²

PEER TUTORING

The presence of student supports for writing is a feature we share with most Canadian universities. In fact, the ubiquity of writing centres in Canadian universities led many to think that our former name, “the Centre for Academic Writing,” represented a unit offering primarily tutorial assistance rather than credit courses and degree programs. That our writing centre has operated under the aegis of a department rather than within Student Services or the library, as is common elsewhere, has made all the difference: it has allowed faculty dedicated to writing to guide its evolution—not administrators, who often have quite different ideas about what such programs can and should do.

This has not, of course, meant complete autonomy. But it has meant a considerable degree of independence, allowing us to fund the writing centre securely and at the same time implement efficiencies that take disciplinary ideals into account. Originally, for instance, centre administration and the teaching of tutors required the time of two instructors; when we created a permanent staff position for the Computer Writing Lab, we not only freed up faculty time but also gained technological expertise and more efficient management of tutoring appointments. The decision to rely on paid tutoring also resulted in greater efficiency and helped compensate for the diminishment of WAC. At one time, the opportunity to tutor was available only to students taking an array of practicum courses, an arrangement that reduced our pool of tutors to Education and English students, prioritized the learning of the tutor over the learning of the tutee, limited tutoring time available to a few weeks each term (usually, Fall and Winter terms only), and drew heavily on department teaching resources. Combining paid tutoring with much shorter preparation courses opened the door to a wider range of students (including those in requirement-heavy science programs), increased tutoring hours, and significantly reduced the demands on faculty time. As a result, we now attract peer tutors from across the disciplines, well-prepared to address the diversity of student need (two-thirds of those who come to the Centre have been referred by colleagues in other departments). One faculty member alone is responsible for teaching, hiring, and supervising tutors and for what we might call “public relations”: asking our colleagues to let good writers know about tutoring opportunities, weak students about opportunities for help, and keeping them well-informed about the principles and benefits of peer tutoring.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE DEPARTMENT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Department now has a full-time faculty of fourteen. Six are instructors, with no contractual obligation to publish. For them, the development of a major has been professionally invigorating, providing new opportunities for research as they prepare for advanced courses. For the eight of us in the professoriate, teaching new courses has been similarly invigorating, and so too has teaching students who share our passion for rhetoric and composition. But just as important is that we have been relieved of the constant work of inventing a place for ourselves in the institution, now that independence, departmental status, and the major are *faits accomplis*. The result has been accelerated research productivity: we are publishing on visual rhetoric, journalism, gay and lesbian

studies, critical pedagogy, literacy and social action, texting, the history of writing instruction, and composition—among other things. One of our newest colleagues was recently appointed editor of *Composition Studies*.

As a junior department, we may yet face obstacles from which other departments are generally exempt. While it is true that our tenure applications now proceed without undue complication, every one of our professoriate remains at the rank of assistant or associate professor. Indeed, to this point no one has applied for full professorship—partly because research productivity has been attenuated by the burdens described earlier, and partly (the authors suspect) because the experiences of our earliest tenure candidates has made some of us gun-shy (see Turner & Kearns, 2002). It seems that departmental status has been accompanied by greater respect within the university, and that colleagues from other departments appraise our work as they would their own. But when the time comes for our first application for promotion to professor, we will await the results with some trepidation.

The most recent initiative in the Department is a proposal for a graduate studies program, with a focus on rhetoric, writing, and public life. Its status remains uncertain, as does the status of grad studies generally at the University of Winnipeg; resources are an issue, as always, but so too are concerns that such a shift may undermine the university's real strengths, which lie in undergraduate education. There has also been talk of an undergraduate program in journalism. The authors feel some ambivalence, mainly for fear that such initiatives also risk over-taxing our resources. Yet re-invention of this kind may also prove again to be a stimulus to faculty, and in the case of Grad Studies, constitute another important step in the progress of writing and rhetoric studies in Canada.

NOTES

1. The proportion of degrees in English literature has been subsequently reduced, but it remains the case that most of us were trained in text analysis of some kind and learned to teach writing largely “on the job.” Of eight PhDs, three are in English literature; three are in English with a focus on rhetoric (two from Canada, with a focus on rhetoric and/or text analysis, and one from the US, in rhet/comp); one is in rhetoric and professional writing (also from an American university); and one is in Education with a focus on cultural studies and critical pedagogy. Our most recent appointment at the instructor level has an MA in Communication Studies.

2. The meaning of our third key term, communications, is rather harder to explain. Since it refers to the dimension of our department that has the least to do with writing,

we've chosen not to grapple with it here. For a discussion of the difference between Communication Studies in Canada and the US, see Brent (2006).

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