

# Introductory Composition Belongs in the English Department

Jay Jernigan

The teaching of writing on the college level has for nearly a century been the province of English Departments. Yet who among us can quarrel with the idea of cross-curricular writing programs administered extra-departmentally? I certainly can't. Good writing should be the responsibility of the entire academic community, not of just us English teachers, much as morality should be everyone's concern, not just the preachers'. I'm sure each of us has experienced a version of a recent conversation I had with a colleague from another department. With self-righteous attention to detail, he told me that in reaction to wide-spread report of students' verbal deficiencies he had begun to give essay exams to his lower division students in lieu of multiple-choice tests. Then he said, "My God, they're virtually illiterate! What's wrong with you guys in English? You aren't doing your job!" I thought, but, in cowardice didn't say, "Oh, if we could only make it your job too, how much more effective that would be!" Yet can we do so, pragmatically?

Perhaps we can, to some extent. Here in Michigan, for example, **Wayne State** has quite successfully put university-wide emphasis upon writing by requiring its students to pass an English proficiency exam during their junior year. Funded by the General Motors Foundation, the **Department of Humanities at Michigan Tech** sponsors four-day **Writing Across the Curriculum** workshops for other faculty of that institution. And beginning with its Class of '83 **The University of Michigan** will require for graduation a junior/senior level writing course in a student's field of concentration or a related field. Each type of program is at the least an admirable

attempt. But note: Each requires of most students a standard freshman composition course. It's my contention that to be successful a cross-curricular writing program must be built upon a conventional introductory composition course, preferably taught by the English department.

In spite of its inherent problems of administration and pedagogy, an introductory composition course is needed today as much as or more than at anytime in its 90-odd year history. Students now enter college with lower levels of writing competence and lower SAT or ACT verbal scores than well before Sputnik. For whatever reason--a McLuhan generation mesmerized by radically transformed communication media, fallout from the McCroryite's visceral approach to teaching, or our Zeitgeist itself--too many first-year college students have too little knowledge of ?  
diction, syntax, and rhetoric. They use a dictionary only to look up spelling; they punctuate by the "pause rule" exclusively; they can hardly organize chunks of material larger than a paragraph.

Yet it is a truism among us that the systematic teaching of grammar (hack, spit!) and punctuation is a waste of time, and that the study of diction is both impractical and a bore, given our students' attitudes and limited attention spans. So what's left? Either "pre-writing" in its various forms or rhetoric, which in name at least has become the substance of most introductory composition courses. Here I must pause to confess a pedagogical heresy on my part--though it probably isn't, because I'm convinced that in practice most of us are eclectic and recognize the differences between letter and spirit, truism and truth. I confess that in my composition classes I've never

been able to separate rhetoric from "grammar," just as I can't teach punctuation without also teaching syntax. And I know I'm not alone in practicing this "heresy" because most introductory composition courses I'm familiar with do in actuality cover the basics of effective organization and effective English usage in conjunction with weekly writing assignments. Given the verbal inadequacies of many of our students, I believe it fruitless to try to develop a writing program without such a course as a start. I also believe that English teachers should staff that course because they have at least some commitment to the subject matter, in contrast to most other faculty members.

My own admittedly limited experience with a cross-curricular writing program suggests it won't work because it requires extraordinarily competent and faithful teachers. Once, back in the '50's, I taught **core curriculum** in eighth and ninth grades; it was a program that used the same teacher to combine the social sciences with communication skills under the rubric of "interdisciplinary studies." Most of the teachers I knew who taught such classes were social science teachers: and most taught social science to the exclusion of communication skills, especially composition and grammar. For we were too insecure about our knowledge of grammar to attempt to teach it and too overworked to assign many compositions. Besides, we thought social studies more interesting. In theory **core curriculum** seemed a good idea; in practice it failed because the teaching of composition and its elements got ignored. Perhaps team teaching could have saved it, but that's another set of promises and problems.

The concept of **core curriculum** has remained alive on the college level at **Michigan State**, where for over twenty years an **American Thought and Language Department** has handled the freshman composition requirement along with a general humanities program in a three-course sequence. Prior to that, **MSU** taught its freshman composition through a **Communication Skills Department** in the form of a speech-writing **core**. But the success of either of those forms of interdisciplinary studies in teaching freshman composition is at best moot.

**MSU** now requires some of its students to take a remedial composition course called the **Comprehensive English Program (ATL 101A or B)** as a prerequisite to the core sequence. And a few years ago the **English Department** at **MSU**, partially because of dissatisfaction with the **ATL** writing component, set up two conventional introductory composition courses (**English 101 and 102**) which students in the **College of Arts and Letters** may substitute for the **ATL** requirement.

It has been my experience that courses which combine literature with writing have not proven effective introductory composition courses because, first, literature and its critical apparatus too often take precedence in the classroom; and, second, only the most sophisticated first-year student is able to use literature comfortably as subject matter in learning about composition. As they have demonstrated all too fully of late, what most first-year students need is a course devoted to the practice and discussion of general expository writing taught by someone who knows rhetoric (and grammar) and who is interested in teaching writing. Many high school students have never had such a course. They have been taught writing exclusively within the context of thematic literary units, such as **Identity; Justice; Something Strange; Men, Women, Roles and Relationships; Only in America**--to name a sampling of current high school course descriptions. No matter how competent and willing the teacher is, it seems inevitable that within this format the elements of writing will be short-sheeted. Thus we have another reason why students come to college unable to write well.

I fear that without a standard introductory composition course, a cross-curricular writing program at the college level would occasion the same effect: the teaching of subject matter, whatever it is, will take precedence over the teaching of basic writing skills. And it is at this point that I have serious doubts about junior/senior level writing courses in the students' own fields. **The University of Michigan's** program, for example, is well-funded and has promise. But, if the senior professors handling those courses employ graduate assistants, who are

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use of "language more widely rather than more 'correctly'" (Martin, p. 166). A further study, of children aged 7 to 9, agrees with all the work that has followed from the Bullock Committee's recommendations: "A concern for purpose and audience, for patterns of development in language mastery, for the effects of context on writing, for the treatment of writing and action to ease the learner's difficulties, is the foundation on which a policy for writing may be elaborated with some confidence" (Harpin, p. 156).

Various professional publications have summarized the new trends in British education for an American audience (for instance, Gerrard and a series of articles in English Journal). Among the best and most provocative of the British studies is one still little known here, and its conclusion parallels the views of faculty at **The University of Michigan** and at many other American schools: "To plan ways in which we can effectively improve our pupils' learning is inevitably to consider how we use language, the language environment of our school, the language expectations we have of our pupils, and the tuition and encouragement we give in language" (Marland, p. 264). In promoting **Writing Across the Curriculum**, American teachers need imaginative and persuasive principles and techniques; the British approach has much to instruct us in our task.

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**Jernigan** (cont. from p. 74 )

understandably eager to demonstrate their prowess in their own fields, to teach the writing component, what will in fact happen to the onerous, unappealing task of teaching writing? I fear that, in spite of orientation programs offered them in the teaching of writing, the graduate assistants will neglect writing in favor of their subject matter. If instead these same courses are relegated to non-tenured

junior staff members, who know the facts of academic life and are eager to earn tenure, won't the same thing happen to the tedious job of teaching writing? We must wait for the Class of '83 to graduate to discover how successful the program is.

Ah, but if in actuality we could incorporate the teaching of writing in courses beyond introductory composition within the student's own field, if we could indeed convince the entire academic community that good writing is everyone's responsibility, then I too would lift my voice in strident yea-saying. For under such a system my colleague from another department would be less self-righteous, realizing that the teaching of writing is his job too.

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**Britton** (cont. from p. 56 )

a radiant water galaxy. It's a world of its own in a special way. Under its foam crested surface, there exists a universe of plant and animal life. With the tiniest microscopic beings to the most humungus creature that ever lived, the sea is alive!" (Our Friends in the Waters, a Book on Marine Mammals Written by the Kids in Room 14, Old Mill School, Mill Valley, California, 1979).

I shall call this kind of learning **Learning I** in order to distinguish it from my third category of purpose, **Learning II**. In **Learning I**, we are in fact organising the objective aspects of our experience; in **Learning II** we are organising the subjective aspects of our experience, and though it is a familiar enough process, we do not usually recognize it as learning. The principle of organization of **Learning I** is, in essence, logical: that of **Learning II** is artistic. In the terms devised by the **London Writing Research Project**, **Learning I** employs language in the role of participant--a spectrum from Expressive to Transactional; that of **Learning II** is language in the role of spectator--a spectrum from Expressive to Poetic