

A Rationale for Writing in the Content Areas

James Middleton

"Like spinach and tetanus shots that young people must put up with because their elders say they must," (Kitzhaber, p. 3) college composition often becomes an intellectual purgatory, usually because it fails to give students a clear sense of the audience, the purpose, or even the content of their writing. In Michael Stubbs' view this vague focus makes writing the essay in a composition class more difficult than the work of the professional writer (Stubbs, p. 115).

James Britton documents for us that the intimidating "teacher-as-examiner" is, in fact, the students' most common audience. Therefore students see little real purpose for their writing beyond getting it finished and receiving a grade. In addition, overemphasis on the communicative function of writing has focused students' attention on the written product--which transmits the already known--while overlooking the writing process--which generates the writer's ideas and understanding. Without substantial content of its own, the work of the composition course becomes a true muddle: some instructors emphasize the "basics" of grammar, mechanics, and writing modes in isolation from rhetorical purpose; others attempt to create content by focusing on literature or current events, thus producing mirror images of introductory courses in literature or sociology or political science; still others change the content with each assignment, thus creating a shifting quicksand in which students are frustrated if not lost altogether.

I contend that composition can be more effective and meaningful--honest in its definition of purpose, audience, and content--by linking itself to content courses. Although instructors from both areas have avoided such unions in fear that they would not be able to cover their

individual material in such a setting, two models approach the ideal union which can guarantee time for both writing instruction and content area instruction:

*The first, the **adjunct model**, welds the three-credit composition course to the three-credit content course, forming a linked six-credit course. Although this model need not incur the expenses of team teaching, it does require that instructors share expectations and mutually reinforce each other's efforts.*

*The second, a **mutual-backscratch-model**, trades a segment of the writing course over to content instruction for a return from the content course. This model can, but need not, involve actual movement of instructors between courses.*

The goals of these models for courses which are process-oriented are not limited to what happens in the classroom. Professor Thomas Sawyer of **The University of Michigan** looks beyond the classroom in saying that specialists have a civic responsibility to explain and justify proposed policies and, "If professionals fail to write clearly and persuasively, they fail period" (Sawyer, 3). Richard Larson, of CUNY, similarly claims that students' ability to comment on their observations and experiences may be the most valuable skill they can bring to their roles as professionals and citizens (Larson, 152). Both Sawyer and Larson remind us that writing can move students beyond the limitations of the textbook and class discussion.

In the act of reaching out to readers, writers also reach inward to touch themselves. While observing that clear, graceful writing is useful in communication
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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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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

writers while helping them to learn the content of their subject area course. This union can increase interest in writing by making it useful and powerful beyond the life of the composition course. Many of the writing programs reported in this issue of **forum** are designed to meet the concerns I have cited in this article (see pp. 65, 71, 75, 78, 83).

Writing programs which can achieve the goals outlined in this article must be based on writing experiences that emphasize the writing process, not just the term paper at the end of the course; they must require extensive pre-writing, both guided and unsystematic, free from premature evaluation; they must use writing as a problem-solving procedure; and they must occasion teacher reaction or peer reaction to multiple drafts of written texts. Such a program requires energy and commitment from both students and instructors, but such a program offers substantial rewards for the investment.

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grade levels offering specific classroom strategies.

Journals

In addition to texts and anthologies on teaching writing, a number of journals focus especially on composition, some generally and some specifically.

Composition and Teaching.

Practical application of theory to high school and college classrooms. Published annually; subscriptions: individuals, \$5.00 for three years; institutions, \$8.00 for three years. Business Manager, Composition and Teaching, Dept. of English, Goucher College, Towson, MD 21204.

College Composition and Communication.

Theory and practice of composition and teaching composition on all college levels. Four issues per school year; subscription: \$8.00 per year. NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Freshman English News.

Teaching of writing and related topics: rhetoric, linguistics, etc. Three issues yearly, \$2.00 per year. Gary Tate, Editor, Dept. of English, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129.

Journal of Basic Writing.

Thematic issues on basic writing, i.e., vocabulary, revision, correction, error. Four issues per academic year; individuals, \$5.00 per year, institutions, \$7.50. Journal of Basic Writing, Instructional Resource Center, 535 E. 80th St., NY, NY 10021

WLA Newsletter.

WLA is Writing as a Liberating Activity; the newsletter tries to "expand the range of instructional options" open to writing teachers, middle school through college. WLA Newsletter, English Dept. Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

The Writing Center Journal.

New bi-annual publication, first issue on the function and scope of writing centers; will deal with aspects of individualized instruction. Subscription, \$5.00 per year, payable to Stephen North, Department of English, SUNY-ALbany, Albany, NY 12222.

The Writing Lab Newsletter.

Programs and procedures in writing labs and language skills centers. Donation of \$3.00 requested. Payable to Muriel Harris, Editor, Writing Lab Newsletter, Dept. of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

WPA: Writing Program Administration.

Three issues per academic year; all articles directed at the administration of writing programs. Individuals, \$10.00 per year, institutions, \$20.00. Joseph Comprone, Treasurer, WPA, English Dept., University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40208.