

A Comprehensive Literacy Program: The English Composition Board

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Readers of forum, those of us charged with translating the abstract concept of literacy into specific programs and practices, will find no prescriptions for doing so in this issue of the newsletter. One assumption that pervades all the essays collected here is that there are no ready made programs for teaching reading and writing. Each one must be designed by those who would teach for those who would learn particular subjects in a particular setting.

Does this assumption mean that educators who would develop programs and practices for teaching literacy cannot learn from one another? No. It does not. But it does mean that each academic institution must develop programs suitable to its own academic setting; just as teachers must develop practices for teaching literacy which address the needs of their students and the subjects they teach.

Because I believe that descriptions of programs and practices developed by teachers of literacy can contribute to our common sense and may serve as metaphors--if not models--that inform the programs and practices of other teachers of literacy, I wish to offer the following description of the English Composition Board at The University of Michigan--the program out of which forum emerged--as an example of one faculty's efforts to teach its students literacy both generally and specifically.

Michigan's comprehensive literacy program was developed in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts in response to a specific need identified in testimony given in 1973 and 1974 at hearings of the Graduation Requirements Commission. During this internal review of the College's graduation requirements--the first

such review since the 1940's--dissatisfaction was expressed by students and faculty alike with the quality of students' literacy both upon entering and leaving the College. Faculty could no longer assign the quantity of reading material to students that it once did; students who had watched television an average of 6¹/₂ hours a day, but were unpracticed in reading, could not complete it. Faculty could no longer assign the themes and papers it once did; students who had learned to keep #2 pencils inside the lines and to reach out and touch distant grandparents by telephone were unpracticed in writing and could not compose complex, sustained discourse.

Responding to the observations and recommendations of the Graduation Requirements Commission, the Dean of the College consulted with Jay Robinson, Chairman of The Department of English, whose essay "The Social Context of Literacy," bespeaks his concern with the teaching of reading and writing. Robinson directed the Dean to Daniel Fader, architect of a program for teaching literacy, widely used in schools throughout this country and in the United Kingdom (see Fader, Hooked on Books). The Dean asked Professor Fader to serve as the chairman of the English Composition Board (ECB) and to develop a new writing requirement for the College. Fader and Robinson together were to spend the next two years soliciting the advice and enlisting the support of faculty throughout the College who were sympathetic to the theory of a comprehensive literacy program that fostered the systematic teaching of reading and writing in all disciplines. Among those colleagues was Thomas Dunn, Chairman of the Department of Chemistry, who writes persuasively about the importance of teaching writing in the

sciences in the essay he co-authors with Rueter in this issue of forum. Dunn's conviction that teaching reading and writing in the sciences is important to the well-being of all of us reflects the conviction of scholars across the disciplines at Michigan with whom Fader and Robinson conferred during 1976 and 1977.¹

In March, 1977, confident of the support of the majority of his colleagues in the College, Fader proposed an English Composition Board and a new graduation requirement in composition to the faculty. He proposed that students fulfill the requirement by completing:

one course offered for credit in writing about any subject by any unit in the College, and identified by the instructor in writing that it offers,

and two other courses offered for certification in writing by any unit in the College, and identified by the assistance in writing that they offer.

¹In the English Department Professors Fader and Robinson consulted with colleagues who shared their interest in literacy and learning—Richard Bailey, later to design and direct research for the ECB; Michael Clark, later to direct the design of the ECB's assessment instrument; and Bernard Van't Hul, later to design and direct a new Introductory Composition program for the College. In other disciplines they consulted with the following faculty members who later joined them to become the first English Composition Board—Peter Clarke, Chairman, Department of Communications; Thomas Dunn, Chairman, Department of Chemistry; Harriet Mills, Professor of Far Eastern Language and Literature; and Wilbert McKeachie, Director of the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning and Professor of Psychology.

In all courses frequent practice in writing was to be required, and the ECB was to approve each as a course in writing.

In a vote of 59 (in favor)--62 (opposed), the proposal was defeated. Following the March, 1977 defeat of what was a proposal for the teaching of writing by faculty in the context of their own subject area classes, Fader and Robinson resumed their meetings with faculty in all disciplines in the College as they turned their attention to four concerns and desires that their colleagues expressed about the new program:

That it should be based upon faculty assessment of all students' writing when they enter the College;

That it should require a composition course taught by the Department of English;

That the English Composition Board should reach out to the faculties of secondary schools and community colleges in the state for the purpose of improving pre-university instruction in writing;

That the Board should conduct or sponsor an extensive research effort to determine the success of all parts of its program.

In January, 1978, a revised proposal calling for an even more comprehensive program than the March, 1977 proposal was placed before the faculty. The following description of the proposal for the English Composition Board and its work testifies to the intention of its designers that the teaching of writing at Michigan be related to the teaching of reading in every unit in the College and that the

administration of the program be thoroughly inter-disciplinary:

THE BOARD

- A. The English Composition Board shall be composed of six faculty members, two from the Department of English and four from other departments or programs within the College. One member of the Board from the Department of English shall be the department chairman.
- B. The Board shall be an agent of the College faculty, responsible to every unit in the College but the responsibility of none. Its budget shall be provided by the Dean and its chairman appointed by the Dean for a three-year term. The chairman's work for the ECB shall be considered half of his or her teaching responsibility.
- C. The Board shall be responsible for offering immediate intensive instruction in English composition to all students who may present themselves or may be recommended by their instructors as needful of special help.
- D. The Board's tutorial work shall be accomplished by both faculty members and graduate student teaching assistants (GSTA's) who have special interest and competence in teaching English composition. The ECB shall pay an appropriate portion of the salaries of both its faculty members and GSTA's; the Board shall supervise and train where necessary the GSTA's who teach for it.
- E. The Board shall provide assistance and guidance in the transaction of teaching composition to faculty members or GSTA's who may request such help in planning or offering courses which carry with them potential credit or certification in English composition. The Board shall accept responsibility from the College Curriculum Committee for approving the writing component of such courses offered by any unit in the College.

The following description of the composition requirement to be administered by the Board testifies to the faculty's insistence that instruction in writing at the introductory level be the responsibility of trained composition teachers and that advanced instruction in writing be the responsibility of faculty in the disciplines:

THE REQUIREMENT

- A. All students entering the College for the first time must compose an essay before registering for their classes. According to competence demonstrated in this writing sample, students shall be placed in one of three categories:
1. Tutorial: A two-to-four credit tutorial, offered by the ECB, which must be taken in the first semester after matriculation; the tutorial course precedes the Introductory Composition course taught in the Department of English.
 2. Introductory Composition: A four credit course, taught in the Department of English, which must be taken in one of the first two semesters after matriculation.
 3. Exempted: No introductory composition requirement to fulfill before the upper-level writing course or program.
- B. A writing course or program must be completed by all students, usually in their area of concentration, after their sophomore year.

As the English Composition Board began to implement the new writing requirement, it assumed responsibility for developing and administering two types of activities which were requested by the faculty but which were not part of the writing requirement. First, the Board incorporated into its program a Writing Workshop which had been initiated in the Department of English to provide the support of experienced composition teachers to all under-

graduate students in the College at any stage of a writing task. Second, the Board prepared to offer in-service seminars and conferences on theory and practice in the teaching of writing to teachers of pre-university students who might enroll in The University of Michigan.

In effect the ECB took shape as a seven-part program, with six parts of the program within the College and one part beyond its confines. The six responsibilities within the College are the administration of an entrance essay required of all incoming undergraduates; tutorial instruction required of all students who demonstrate on the entrance essay that they need such assistance; Introductory Composition required of most students to make them more proficient writers; writing workshop support available to every student; junior/senior writing courses offered and required primarily in students' areas of concentration; and research into the effectiveness of all parts of the program.

The seventh part of the program includes five types of activities relating the teaching of writing in secondary schools and community colleges to the writing program at the University: writing conferences, intended primarily to inform pre-university teachers of the ECB's program of instruction and of its willingness to engage in outreach projects; one-day and two-day seminars conducted in secondary schools, community colleges, and universities throughout the state of Michigan and beyond, designed to familiarize faculties with the College's writing program and to discuss with teachers the current state of theory and practice in the art of teaching writing at all levels; writing workshops, held at The University of Michigan, designed to provide teachers with three days of intensive work in the teaching of writing; extended curriculum and staff-development projects undertaken as models with a few school districts which requested such service; and publication of forum, to provide teachers of writing a meeting place for mutual instruction and dialogue.

A description of the English Composition Board's work in fulfillment of the seven parts of its program illustrates how the faculty of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts has translated its concern for the quality of students' literacy into its undergraduate curriculum.

Assessment

Led in its work by Professor Michael Clark, Department of English, the English Composition Board designed an assessment program which requires all students who newly enter the College (4700 in the summer of 1981) to write entrance essays for one hour during their orientation visit to the University.² These essays not only require students to demonstrate their mastery of writing skills which the faculty values, but they also signal the importance that the College places upon writing. The essay stimuli require students to copy two initial sentences which determine the topic, tone, style, and thesis for an argument about an issue with which they are likely to be very familiar. Students are evaluated for their ability to sustain the position they choose to argue as well as the register and type of writing dictated by the assessment stimuli.

Two experienced composition teachers--faculty members who have undergone extensive training in holistic reading--evaluate each essay based upon criteria determined both by faculty expectations of student writing and by student essays which were examined during experimental administration of the writing assessment. If two readers fail to agree upon the quality of the essay, a third reader resolves the disagreement. Based upon evaluation of their essays, students are placed into several types of tutorial classes or Introductory Composition, or exempted from taking an entrance-level writing course.

²Michael Clark's essay "Evaluating Writing in an Academic Setting," (p.170) describes this assessment in depth.

Introductory-Level Instruction in Composition

Those students whose writing skills will not serve them effectively in the College are required to enroll in tutorial writing classes. In these classes, whose format was designed by Frances Zorn, Tutorial and Workshop Director of the ECB, no more than 16 students receive concentrated instruction in writing from experienced, full time composition teachers. Tutorial classes meet together for four hours each week and students in those classes meet individually with their teachers for at least one half-hour a week; at the end of seven weeks, those tutorial students who demonstrate sufficient growth as writers in a post-test essay move on to an introductory composition course or exempt any further introductory-level instruction; those who continue to require tutorial instruction must enroll in another tutorial section.

Students may fulfill the introductory composition requirement by completing one of several courses. Most students elect to take Introductory Composition, taught in the English Department primarily by Graduate Student Teaching Assistants (GSTA's) and designed substantially by Bernard Van't Hul, the first Director of Introductory Composition after the new composition requirement was adopted. This course is designed to give students experience in writing for a variety of audiences, purposes, and situations in a wide range of content areas. Students may also fulfill the requirement by completing Shakespeare--also taught in the Department of English; Great Books, taught within the Honors Program; College Thinking designed by Jack Meiland, Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Director of the Honors Program, and taught as a University Course; or a Freshman Seminar taught in the Residential College by faculty in a variety of disciplines and based in any subject approved by the College.

Research

Reporting on research into the program (sponsored by the Ford Foundation and The

University of Michigan), Richard W. Bailey, Professor of English and Director of Research for the English Composition Board, demonstrates the effectiveness of the entrance essay as an indicator of students' ability to succeed in College:

It is...possible to evaluate the content validity of the ECB writing assessment as reflected in the achievement of particular groups of students and through study of changes in writing skills as shown in pre- and post-tests. A comparison of grade point averages between the first and third semesters of study at the University reveals that:

1. Students who are judged to be better writers achieved higher GPAs in their first semester of study and retained their relative ranking when compared to others in third semester GPA.
2. For the entire group of students, the correlation between assessment scores and grade point average is at the same level as that of the aptitude tests designed by the Educational Testing Service. For the students judged by ECB raters to be skilled writers, however, the correlation between the writing test and achieved grade point is higher than that between the SAT verbal aptitude score and grade point. This statistical connection supports observations derived from study of writing samples themselves: Writing ability is more closely connected with grades than is the ability to achieve high scores on aptitude tests (Bailey, "This Teaching," p. 5).

Professor Bailey's research also demonstrates the effectiveness of the College's writing program at the introductory-level:

Analysis of...writing samples shows that those students who were regarded as skilled writers on admission to the University maintained their relative rank through the first two years of college work. Students who

received instruction through ECB tutorials, however, make the greatest absolute gains in writing skills. (Although the "best writers" did perform less well on subsequent assessments, as figures in the table indicate, differences among the three scores for them result from the statistical phenomenon of "regression toward the mean").

Summer 1978 Score	December 1978 Score	December 1979 Score
	Best Writers	
1.38	1.49	1.60
	Average Writers	
2.84	2.42	1.69
	Poorest Writers	
4.75	3.19	2.81

N = 117.

These numerical results are confirmed by examination of the writing samples themselves. Writers who were judged to be deficient on admission improved their writing in those aspects most highly valued by faculty opinion: organization, scope, amplitude, and coherence. Editorial skills, including punctuation and spelling, also improved in these impromptu essays at least in the relative number of errors, but continued mistakes on this level have the effect of depressing scores in a way that somewhat obscures the actual improvement in writing ability. With these errors removed, the "poorest writers" performed at an even more sophisticated level than is suggested by their December 1979 scores (Bailey, "This Teaching," pp. 14,19).

Junior/Senior Instruction in Composition

Beginning in September, 1981, members of the class of 1983, the first class re-

quired to complete the new writing program at Michigan, enrolled in junior/senior courses taught in all disciplines and approved by the ECB to fulfill the upper-division writing requirement. In anticipation of the September, 1981 date, 27 different departments in the College had developed 151 such courses during the preceding three years. Faculty at Michigan found their students need for practice in reading and writing too pressing to postpone the development of courses designed to teach the literacy required for effective learning and communication in their disciplines.

The ECB provides assistance in course development and seminars in the teaching of composition to all faculty and GSTA's who teach junior/senior level writing courses since September, 1978. This assistance and these seminars are designed to emphasize the heuristic value of writing as a tool of learning, to provide participants with information about composition theory and research, and to assist instructors in the disciplines as they create courses which address the communicative requirements for literacy in their various fields. In keeping with the assumption of the Michigan program that experts in the disciplines are those best able to teach the conventions by which the language of their disciplines operates, all junior/senior level writing courses are taught by professorial members of the departments who are usually assisted by GSTA's funded and trained by the ECB.

Because both the conventions of discourse and the demands for reading and writing differ in the various disciplines, the ECB has assisted faculty in the development of a variety of course designs. In the following excerpt from his essay "Writing in the Disciplines at The University of Michigan," (forum, Winter, 1981), John Reiff, Coordinator of Junior/Senior Writing, describes models for courses developed in different departments:

- (1) Some departments offer courses whose content is writing within the discipline. Professor Robbins

Burling of the Anthropology Department, for instance, teaches a course in which students develop principles of criticism by examining published anthropological writing, both good and bad. They then write on anthropological topics of their own choosing and critique each other's writing. In the Chemistry Department's upper-level course, Chemical Literature and Scientific Writing, students study examples of superior organization and argument in scientific writing—especially in chemical literature—and attempt to structure their own writing on those examples.

(2) Some departments satisfy the requirement with courses which focus on content but require considerable writing. The History Department, for example, offers its Senior Colloquia—small seminars required of all majors and dealing with topics such as the Indo-china War or the History of Science—as the vehicles by which it will satisfy the requirement. Students in these Colloquia read extensively and confer with faculty members and teaching assistants at several stages in the writing of each of several papers.

(3) Some departments offer courses which have not required much writing in the past, but have been restructured to do so now. The Mathematics Department, for example, is changing its course Topics in Mathematics to one which poses problems that students solve through a series of papers.

(4) Offering courses in which writing plays a less prominent role, one department requires students to choose any two to complete the writing program. During the second term of their sophomore year, biology students must take a course which satisfies one-half of the writing requirement; they elect another designated course to complete the requirement during their junior or senior years.

(5) And some departments ask students to fulfill the writing requirement outside specific courses. The Geology Department has established a requirement which apportions student writings among different branches of the discipline. Acceptable writings include papers prepared for courses, and reports prepared for outside employers, as well as proposals requesting outside agencies to fund research projects (Reiff, pp. 75-76).

Writing Workshop

Use of The Writing Workshop indicates that it provides significant support to student writers throughout their undergraduate work in the College. In his research summary, Bailey reports that the workshop was staffed for more than 1600 hours in the 1980-81 academic year:

During that time, 1,157 students made 1,909 visits to the Workshop (or 1.65 times per student); if only those students making more than one visit are counted, the average number of multiple visits is 3 per student, supporting the claim that the Writing Workshop is an important center for sustained instruction in writing. Many of the students who visit the Workshop are former tutorial students who seek additional help from familiar faculty. In 1980-81, however, about one-third of the visits were made by juniors and seniors who, in virtually all cases, had no prior experience with the ECB but learned of the help available at the Workshop through faculty referrals, posters and advertising, or word-of-mouth from others who had been helped (Bailey, "This Teaching," pp. 12-13).

Outreach

Paralleling its program in the College, the ECB faculty and members of the Department of English--funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The University of Michigan, and private donors--have vigorously fulfilled the Board's promise to the faculty to reach

out to improve writing instruction in schools and colleges that send students to the University. In May, 1978, the Board launched this effort by inviting teachers and administrators from every high school, community college, and four-year college in Michigan and Northern Ohio to Ann Arbor to participate in discussion of the College's new writing program and to consider the Board's offer to provide seminars in the teaching of writing to the faculties of schools that might request them. About 250 schools sent 550 representatives to this conference.

The following December (1978), 350 teachers and administrators who had attended the May Conference and expressed interest in the outreach program were invited to a second conference to advise the Board not only about its proposed seminars for teachers of writing, but also about the shape its internal program should take in relation to instruction students had already received; and to hear various speakers describe the state of the teaching of English at that time.

Following these initial planning conferences, the ECB has conducted a total of 272 in-service seminars in secondary schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. When held in secondary schools (200 seminars), these meetings usually consist of the morning spent discussing writing across the curriculum with a school's entire faculty by a two-person ECB team, and the afternoon spent in an intensive writing workshop with the English teachers. In June, 1979, and June, 1980, in Ann Arbor, the Board offered two intensive three-day workshops in the teaching of writing for 300 teachers from throughout Michigan.

Because schools, colleges, and universities across the United States have asked the ECB to conduct or participate in seminars and conferences on the teaching of writing, the outreach program has been expanded beyond Michigan's boundaries. More than forty institutions including The University of Arizona, Bucknell University, Howard University, Lehigh

University, The University of Nebraska (Lincoln), Ohio University, Southern University at New Orleans, The University of Texas (Austin), The University of Utah, The University of Western Carolina, and The University of Wisconsin (Stevens Point), have participated in this aspect of the English Composition Board's program.

ECB SPONSORED SEMINARS ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING - January 1979-May 1982

	Michigan	Outside Michigan
Secondary Schools	196	4
Community Colleges	10	13
Colleges and Universities	<u>15</u>	<u>34</u>
Total	221	+ 51 = 272

In June, 1981, funded by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Board was able to strengthen and extend its outreach program by offering a three-day Conference on Literacy in the 1980's.

The Conference was preceded by one three-day Workshop and followed by another. The first was for 175 teachers invited from sixteen states and the District of Columbia; the second, for 175 Michigan teachers who had attended either Writing Workshop '79 or '80 or one of the 215 ECB Seminars on the teaching of writing held in Michigan's schools from January 1979 through May 1981. The overlapping structure of this event, Workshop I → Conference ← Workshop II, provided teachers of writing in Michigan and elsewhere with the opportunity to benefit from one another as well as from twenty representatives of the vocations, the professions, and education who delivered papers at Literacy in the 1980's.³

³The papers delivered at this Conference will appear in 1983: Literacy for Life: The Demand for Reading and Writing. Richard W. Bailey and Robin Melanie Fosheim, Eds. (NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983).

Among the Conference speakers were those who commented on issues raised in this issue of fforum: the impact of television and computerized print upon literacy; the problems inherent in the proliferation of specialized languages such as those in science or government which exclude many from their messages; and the significant differences between spoken and written language and their effects upon inquiry and learning themselves.

Through conferences such as Literacy in the 1980's, workshops and seminars it has been able to conduct for teachers of writing, and the publication of fforum, The English Composition Board has asked its colleagues in elementary schools, secondary schools, colleges, and universities to think about the teaching of literacy--as the faculty at Michigan has--in terms of the issues addressed in this newsletter. Members of the Board have also encouraged their colleagues to join them in the challenging enterprise of teaching literacy today. On their behalf, Daniel Fader has argued that complex as the teaching of literacy is in our age, it is within our reach and well worth our effort if we make a commitment to teaching it in every classroom at every level of instruction.

Just as periods of time for reading can be set aside daily in one class or throughout the school to provide models of adults and children reading in front of one another so can periods of activity in every subject be devoted regularly to the practice and

discussion of writing. For the reluctant or inexperienced writer, the surrounding presence of the activity of writing in class after class is powerful persuasion to the act itself. To resist so much pressure so broadly applied is a heroic act of which few people are capable--especially young people, for whom peer pressure is least resistable of all. Furthermore, the use of writing in any curriculum as a means to the end of comprehending all subjects is persuasive of itself in the struggle to invest writing with the importance it possess.... Finally, Writing Across the Curriculum offers a means for investing a young person's voice with an importance it may no longer possess in home or classroom. Homes with familial hours dominated by television and school with all hours afflicted by large classes are unkind environments for nurturing the individual voice [emphasis mine]. The sense that one has something to say and someone to say it to, is a sense dulled by silence in the home and hordes in the classroom. That same sense, so basic to the belief that communication is worth the effort, is sharpened and expanded by the experience of writing at every opportunity. Inviting continuous, coherent participation in the process of communication...provides both student and process with an importance that nothing else in the curriculum can promise (fforum, Vol. II, No. 2 (Winter, 1981), pp. 54, 91).