Evaluating the Effectiveness of Writing in Content Area Courses

Speakers: Donna Perry, Katarina Edinger, Sharon Hanks, John Peterman, Gunvar Satra, Marcia Schlofmitz, William Paterson College, N. J.

Introducer/Recorder: Judith Johnston, Rider College, New Jersey

Sharon Hanks (Biology Department) and John Peterman (Philosophy Department) began the workshop with a five-minute writing exercise on the topic, "What does it mean for writing to be effective in your content area?" Participants' responses, as volunteered orally and written on a blackboard, revealed a common set of general criteria: effective writing is clear, organized, correct, complete, creative, effective for the intended audience, cohesive, expresses significant subject-related thought, contains support for the significant idea, explains the significance of the facts, expresses a personal voice, and translates numbers into words (quantitative analysis). Both participants and presenters represented a range of content areas, including science and technology as well as the humanities. Throughout the workshop, questions from participants and reports from the presenters made the basic assumption that student writing assists in the process of learning, in all content areas.

Assessing the effectiveness of writing-across-the-curriculum programs focused, in this workshop, on two questions: How did students perceive the effectiveness of writing within their courses? How effective are writing-across-the-curriculum programs?

Eight years ago, the English Department at William Paterson College began a "writing as process" workshop for teachers during the summer. Over the years, seventy faculty have taken an intensive four-day course (9 a.m. - 5 p.m.) in May, with no remuneration. Faculty from all schools and from most departments within the college have participated in these courses. Out of their experience, faculty at William Paterson College have published *On Writing Well: A Faculty Guidebook for Improving Student Writing in All Disciplines* (1985).

Donna Perry (English Department), Director of the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Project, explained that assessment has been part of their program from the beginning, because they felt that assessment was useful in developing the program. They sent out an anonymous questionnaire to faculty in the humanities and sciences, to discover how much and what kind of writing assignments teachers were already making in their courses. They discovered that faculty were using journals, essay exams (in-class and take-home), lab reports, reviews, and short and long papers. They also asked faculty for anonymous indications of interest in writing-across-the-curriculum workshops. After giving a profile of the 8,500 students at her college, Perry explained the student questionnaire they used to assess students' attitudinal change. Next, Perry explained that assessment of the writing program not only satisfied the terms of the grant, it demonstrated to college administrators the value of the program (and led to internal funding), it proved to other faculty that the writing program was working, and it gave those faculty already involved some useful guidelines for improving the program.

Perry recommended "Writing Round-tables," informal discussions held three times a semester during which faculty, staff, and students met to talk about writing. These roundtables gave high visibility to the writing-across-the-curriculum program at low cost. Especially successful was a roundtable organized to allow students to speak out on writing-across-the-curriculum. In addition, the program sponsored two or three formal presentations each semester, with keynote speakers. Assessment of the program included counting the number of people who attended the writing roundtables and the formal lectures, as well as interviewing faculty and students, distributing faculty and student questionnaires, and counting the number of telephone inquiries about the writing program.

Gunvar Satra (History Department) explained the design of their student questionnaire. She stressed that the questionnaire they used was the outcome of a team effort, with different disciplines represented. Using the University of Minnesota questionnaire as a model, they modified it with questions submitted by faculty colleagues and with a six-point evaluative scale (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). The questionnaire had four parts: the first applied to all disciplines, the second gave students a chance to write responses to open-ended questions, the third

addressed questions in specific disciplines, and the fourth addressed questions about specific assignments.

Katarina Edinger (English Department) handed out a summary sheet of the results, which she then discussed. Based on first and second year student responses in required general education courses, students gave a highly positive evaluation of the writing. The wording of one question provoked a response that contradicted other responses: most students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the assertion, "I enjoy writing more now than I did at the beginning of the semester." With the audience participating, a discussion of this item led to revised wording and also to a recognition that students exposed to writing learn that it is hard work and that few students admit enjoying work.

Marcia Schlofmitz (Computer Science Department) assessed the value of journal-writing in her Computer Science course, allowing students to reflect in their journals on the problems they are having with the subject matter. She assessed the student journals on their thoughtfulness, and she stressed the importance of allowing students to keep parts of their journals private and to choose which pages they show the instructor at the end of the semester. Acknowledging that she used journals as part of the learning process, Schlofmitz noted that she did not use a red pencil on her students' journals. She required a certain quantity of entries and that the entries be related to subjects discussed in class.

Gunvar Satra discussed the problems of assessing journal-writing, including the overwhelming amount of work for the instructor. She also graded the journals on quantity of pages, but added the regularity of entries throughout the semester. She set a maximum number of points that a student might earn through journal-writing. And she asked the students to grade themselves on their journals. She read their journals at the end of the semester and discovered only a few cases of total disparity between her assessment and the students' own assessment of their writing. Perry then noted that at the beginning, the project was organized by departments within each discipline because they assumed that the writing skills varied greatly across the disciplines. However, they discovered in the course of the eight-year project that writing in different disciplines had common standards of excellence. The areas of agreement were reflected in the descriptions of effective writing given by participants at the beginning of this workshop.◊