



# **When Consensus Fails: How Faculty Writing Seminars Limit the Possibility of Multiple Discourses in a College Community**

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This case study describes how faculty members at Grinnell College, a small, highly selective undergraduate liberal arts college, create and maintain what in many ways is an ideal Writing Across the Curriculum program. Curricular elements of this program have been in place for more than twenty years: the tutorial, where Grinnell students focus on writing intensively in a one-semester course taught by members of the faculty from all disciplines; designated writing courses with limited enrollments of twenty students focused on improving writing skill; and required writing in most courses in many departments.<sup>1</sup> In addition to emphasizing writing in its curriculum, the college also devotes significant resources to support the faculty's teaching of writing. The college staffs its writing lab with five full-time professional teachers of writing; it offers faculty writing workshops in the summer; and faculty members occasionally focus on and often discuss writing in colloquia and workshops. Clearly, Grinnell College devotes an enviable amount of resources to its writing program.

Since its beginning, the writing program, although organized by the dean and the head of the Writing Lab, has been controlled by the faculty. At Grinnell, where faculty control over the curriculum is valued in all areas, the loose structure of the writing program allows faculty members freedom to teach in the way they want. This freedom gives them ownership of the program. Although we believe that faculty ownership of curriculum is a desirable characteristic of liberal arts colleges, our study suggests that faculty ownership of the writing program at Grinnell may constrain faculty members from examining complicating or alternative views of the way writing can function in a liberal arts curriculum.

A site where this constraint is particularly evident is the faculty writing seminar. In the faculty writing seminar, new faculty members learn techniques for and encounter assumptions about the teaching of writing at Grinnell. These faculty writing seminars are of crucial importance as a way of passing on beliefs about writing and learning within the

college because there the faculty formally and consciously constructs the college's view of teaching writing. In our case study, we investigated how the discussions in the faculty writing seminars both create and communicate the ways in which faculty will teach and assess writing. Discussions in these seminars emphasized a narrow notion about what good writing is; a drive for consensus caused discussion to veer away from conflicting approaches to academic discourse.

### **Setting and Participants**

The two researchers approach this study from different perspectives. Judy, a veteran of 20 years of tutoring Grinnell students in the Writing Lab, is a former high school English teacher. Jean, assistant professor of education at Grinnell and also a former high school English teacher, specializes in the assessment of writing and preparing college students to teach at the secondary level. In order to investigate this writing program, we built upon several strands of research, including an archival search, interviews with several key architects of the tutorial and with current faculty, and our own experiences teaching writing and tutoring at the college. Most important, we each participated in and observed a faculty writing seminar during the summer of 1996.

The two seminars in which we participated are representative of the organization and procedure in most faculty writing seminars at Grinnell. First, each seminar included a mixture of people from different departments, different divisions, and with different amounts of experience in teaching. Second, the leaders of the seminars were not from the English department; of the three seminars held during the summer of 1996, two leaders were from the history department and one was from the art department.<sup>2</sup> Third, the procedure followed in both was for each participant to submit two papers, one which the participant judged to be successful and the other which the participant judged to be unsuccessful. All participants read and discussed all the papers. These procedures reflect the way most of the faculty writing seminars have been organized and run for more than twenty years. Our participation in these seminars allowed us to record and reflect on the seminar discussions as they affected us as teachers of writing and as faculty.

We entered these seminars with well-developed beliefs about how writing should be taught and assessed. Both of us are familiar with and supportive of WAC approaches to the teaching of writing. For example, Herrington suggests that teachers of writing must recognize that knowledge is always communally created, that truths are partial and unstable, and that students use writing to produce knowledge in particular contexts and for particular audiences (119). Similarly, McClelland stresses that

learning is dialogic, that we have to talk with the students, to determine with them, in relation to each other and to the course material, what good writing is (407). However, most of the new faculty participating in the Grinnell faculty writing seminars are not familiar with research on teaching writing or with composition studies.

Taking participant observer positions in these seminars, we participated in the discussions and activities, and we also observed how the process worked. After discussing our experiences, reading our field notes and the other seminar members' summaries of the experience, we concluded that the strongest theme emerging in these seminars was the drive for consensus. The emphasis on consensus prevalent in the faculty writing seminars diminished faculty members' opportunity to grapple with notions discussed in composition studies that may complicate and challenge the dominant view of teaching writing at Grinnell. We are aware that what we describe in this paper does not reflect every person's experience in these seminars; in fact, we suspect that every one who participated would describe his or her experience differently. Although we make no claims to having captured the experience for every member, we do think that the common patterns apparent in our observations have important implications for faculty at our institution.

### **Problem: A Drive for Consensus in the Faculty Writing Seminars**

We saw a strong drive for consensus in these seminars. We believe this drive for consensus helped seminar participants achieve comfort. The seminars provide a good way for new faculty to increase their level of confidence about teaching writing. In both seminars, participants expressed uncertainty and frustration about matters connected with the teaching of writing, and expressed gratitude about finding their frustrations shared or having ideas suggested for dealing with difficulties. Not only in the two seminars in which we participated but also in our interviews with faculty members who have participated in seminars in other years, we found that faculty members truly appreciate the opportunity both to talk to others outside of their disciplines and to talk about pedagogy (Sullivan). However, a concern for consensus in these discussions can be damaging. In the seminars we attended, few alternative or complicating views were seriously discussed. Instead, members of the seminar sought to find a shared belief about what good writing is, to agree on the pre-eminence of academic writing, and to assent on the criteria for assessing quality in writing. Moreover, ideas that are a part of WAC conversations, such as the context of the writing situation, the dialogic nature of writing, or the issue of identity in authorial stances, were not considered in these seminars.

**Shared Beliefs about What Good Writing Is**

The Faculty Writing seminars emphasized the common aim these participants believe to be shared by teachers of writing across disciplines: the goal of helping students create a well-crafted academic argument. In support of this goal, the discussion focused on identifying good linear thinking as evidenced by clear logic in all disciplines. For example, when an instructor from the fine arts division read two papers that had been submitted for an upper-level biology course, he found that he had pinpointed the same difficulties as the biology professor had; she claimed that this showed “uniformity in what we’re looking for.” This drive for a common view of good writing was also clear in the discussion that occurred on the first day of Judy’s seminar when the facilitator asked whether differences in expectations among the disciplines might confuse students. The first response to the question, made by a science professor, suggested that in all disciplines, students are required to “make things clear”; she suggested that this common goal is more important than are differences. This focus on clarity as the principle that unifies the writing done in different disciplines was reiterated several more times throughout the seminar. In Jean’s seminar, the first day’s discussion focused on what beliefs the participants shared about good writing. One professor opined that even though the form of student writing might vary, in all disciplines the content was aimed at “making explicit the interpretation of evidence.” The summary of Jean’s seminar written by the seminar leader states that “most assignments call for inferences on the basis of evidence, and require from the student the same clarity of expression and rigorous logic, irrespective of discipline” (Grinnell College Report).

**Pre-eminence of the Academic Essay**

In pursuit of consensus about what good writing is, the seminars focused on only one kind of writing—the academic essay. In these seminars, the academic world is seen as a unified community which values only one type of discourse—the formal, argumentative, thesis-driven type of writing often referred to as “academic discourse.” Dipardo describes such academic writing as “decontextualized, depersonalized ‘expository’ prose written for the sole purpose of fulfilling a teacher’s expectations” (67). She points out that Western academia generally values exposition because that kind of writing conveys knowledge that is “verifiable, quantifiable, generalizable” (87). Because academia holds that exposition is superior to less linear, more personal, and less expository expression, it may exclude some students who come to the classroom able to convey powerful stories but lacking the ability to express their knowledge in the

“presumably more sophisticated and usually depersonalized world of exposition and argument” (66). As Dipardo says, an emphasis on academic prose may suppress the stories of students: such suppression means that their “outside cultures are kept outside” (86).

This emphasis on academic prose was reinforced throughout the seminars. One leader was careful to state on the first day of the seminar that there are other kinds of writing, but that academic discourse is the kind the writing the seminar would discuss. Such a position may be seen merely as a recognition that, in the limited time available to the seminar, one has to limit one’s sights. However, such a limitation is also a statement that the faculty writing seminars value academic discourse above other types of writing. This focus on the standard academic essay is seen as what unites us as a liberal arts faculty. In general, the process followed in the seminars, with each participant responsible for bringing both “successful” and “unsuccessful” examples of writing, supports the notion that we are all teaching the same paper and that what counts is the product.

Some dissenting voices to this view of commonalities were heard; for example, in Judy’s seminar, one professor who has taught composition at another college early in her career raised the question of whether argument is the same in all disciplines. She pointed out that she talks with her students not about argument but about persuasion. She has them read each other’s papers because she feels that they “develop questions better when they think about persuading someone.” So, although the seminars focused mainly on a search for consensus about evidence and logic, the participants in this seminar briefly talked about the similarity in the rhetorical aims we try to get students to achieve (see Kurlihoff for a discussion of why such a rhetorical focus is beneficial in faculty writing seminars).

### **Agreement about Assessing Writing**

Connected to the desire to iterate the common goal of writing in the liberal arts was the focus each of these seminars placed on grading. It is through grading that faculty communicate to students information about their attainment of the common goal. It was clear to both of us that the faculty members were somewhat uneasy about how their grading “compared” to that of others in the faculty and sought reassurance that they were noting the same errors as other, more experienced faculty. There was much conversation about grammar, about what faculty saw as their inability to “correct” grammar; this worry led to discussion about whether style is separable from content. The notion that good writing is grammatically correct made the participants uncomfortable, yet many seemed to return

to grammatical correctness as a standard by which faculty can grade. When one participant in Judy's seminar talked about how she writes comments not to assess whether something is good or bad but rather to show the students how one reader reacts to their prose, another participant moved the discussion directly to grades, asking her how she would grade using that system. Another participant said that he'd been "all over the farm" on how to grade: he'd been harsh, he'd been lenient, he'd judged by the product, he'd judged by the process, he'd evaluated the paper as a distinct entity, he'd taken into account what he knew about the student. He seemed to be asking for an acceptable way to grade. When this group of faculty discovered that they gave similar grades to sample papers, they felt reassured that they knew what they are doing.

From the requirement that faculty bring "successful" and "unsuccessful" graded papers to the seminar for purposes of comparison, and the discussion about the weaknesses of the unsuccessful papers, the discussion leaders, through the discussion of grades, worked to demonstrate how the participants shared a common standard of excellence. They saw this standard as the one on which faculty could grade students. In Jean's seminar, discussion about "grade inflation" and lower standards also fed into the drive to create a common standard of excellence with which to grade papers. One of the tenured faculty members explained that he told his students before a class that very few of them would earn A's because he reserved A's for "extraordinary work." He hoped this statement would motivate students to work hard and would also make it clear that he had high standards of performance. He explained that he was comparing his students not to one another but to an "absolute standard." Another junior faculty member explained his grading policy as using a curve. He aimed to have grades "distributed" on that curve to separate the truly excellent from the merely good. A participant asserted that we as professors are obligated to let a student know where he stands in comparison to others, that we do students no favors by "inflating their grades." As these comments reveal, Jean's group seemed to be in consensus about the need for high standards and high expectations, and many believed that grading helped produce student writing that met those standards and expectations.

Not all participants saw grading as a way of motivating students to perform to higher standards, however. In Jean's seminar, she raised the issue of whether students are motivated to improve by receiving a low grade. In Judy's seminar, a participant pointed out that in her comments on students' papers, she does not present herself as a judge writing evaluative comments; rather she tries to show her student how she is reading. Her comments explain to the student what she sees as she reads and how she reacts. That more readerly way of commenting, she believes, gives

her students a sense of audience, of a reader reading. This professor suggested that students may find it valuable for the professor, as a reader, to express her frustration with the student's failure to achieve the potential in a paper, to say "I see the paper that might have been here, and I wish I could have read that one"; again, this kind of comment would show the student someone responding as a reader rather than as a judge.

Despite these occasional comments, the seminars focused mainly on grades, including procedural issues connected to grading and the accompanying comments. Participants discussed the number, placement, and tone of comments. One said he wrote "a ton of comments" so students would "feel I was taking them seriously" and would therefore take themselves seriously. Some viewed comments as a way to justify the grade or document failure; others sought to establish a common relationship between marginal comments and the grade. One participant suggested that she grades the paper by judging it against an ideal of a paper. Two other participants suggested that they rank the papers against those of others in the class; one noted that his procedure of first reading all the papers afforded him the opportunity to get a sense of the range of quality of those papers. In Jean's seminar, most of the participants agreed that the comments accompanying the grade offered students a means of improving their writing, that is, approaching the ideal paper, on the next try. The comments were generally not seen as engaging the student in a dialogue about the student's ideas; instead, they were intended to provide students with directions, which, if followed, could improve the paper.

In both seminars, certain participants brought up the possibility of not grading, of not using the grade to exert the kind of power that they all saw it as having. When one participant mentioned Alfie Kohn's criticism of grades in the book *Punished by Rewards*, which several faculty members were reading in order to discuss it at a teaching seminar, others dismissed Kohn's notions as unhelpful and idealistic since in the real world professors are required to give grades. In both seminars, members discussed alternatives to grading only briefly—participants tended to see such suggestions as impractical and to dismiss them.

The seminars placed so much emphasis on grading, we believe, because only a few of the participants sought to question the underlying assumptions about grading practices. Most of the participants were comfortable assuming that they know what good writing is, and that their job is to communicate that vision to the students. Because faculty in these seminars are comfortable with a belief in an ideal text as an overlay for student texts, they use grades to guide the student to approach more closely this ideal text of the excellent persuasive argument or an objective and balanced analysis of an issue. The summary of one seminar written

by its leader shows a congratulatory attitude about the agreement he believed was demonstrated in the seminar: “the greatest degree of accord surrounded our grading of the sample papers; in most cases our grades varied by no more than a half-grade or so, suggesting that even if we do not agree on exactly how to teach good writing, we recognize it when we see it” (Grinnell College Report). This statement reveals the belief that the agreement came from the existence of this ideal text and our ability to recognize it; it does not allow for the possibility that our agreement might arise from young faculty member’s desire to show that they have the same tough standards as the more senior members of the community. We believe it was a great comfort to participants to find that they “recognized” good writing when they saw it; but that sense of comfort came by downplaying the many excellent complicating questions faculty raised when discussing grading.

### **What Wasn’t Discussed: The Importance of Context and the Dialogic Nature of Writing**

Because the seminars focused on how we share a common view of academic writing and reinforce a universal standard by grading, the seminars did not focus strongly on the contexts from which the individual students produce writing. In the seminars, participants were reluctant to discuss students as individuals, reluctant to approach writing from within a context that might reveal the subjectivity of grading. The participants seemed to want the text to speak for itself and stand by itself. For example, in discussing the paper of a learning disabled senior whose text gave a personal and moving nine-page account of her reaction to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, participants focused less on what the student said and more on whether the text met the assigned length of fifteen pages. They expressed some disbelief when they heard that the professor who assigned the paper had given it a high grade despite its length. Similarly, in his summary one leader emphasized the faculty’s ethical responsibility to lead students to produce more perfect academic discourse: “several participants noted that they did not see it as a help to disadvantaged students to neglect helping them improve their writing” (Grinnell College Report). This remark reveals the writer’s assumption that teaching students writing means “helping them improve,” that is, making their writing conform to the standard template envisioned by these professors. Such a view does not make room to value the individual perspectives of the students; it assumes that what is needed is correction, which implies a method of teaching that leads students away from their own ideas and ways of writing toward the common goal of academic discourse.



Just as the seminars emphasized a standard paper rather than writing that emerges from different contexts, the seminars emphasized writing as a product of an individual mind, not as the result of a dialogic process. The focus on evidence and thesis and logic all indicate that the faculty see writing primarily as a way of demonstrating mastery of knowledge. They did not focus on writing as a collaborative activity that produces knowledge or that results from dialogue with several readers. One participant did bring up the changes in ways of thinking and communicating that are being produced by such technological advances as the World Wide Web—its non-linearity, its similarity to the brain in its multi-leveled organizational pattern, the increase in collaboration it encourages, the flexibility in organization it allows. He even questioned whether writing an individual analytical paper is central to a student's education any more. He discussed how in most situations outside the academy people work together to solve complex problems, but in college the problems we give to students to solve in analytical papers are simplified so that an individual can solve them. The possibilities suggested by this participant's challenge were not seriously considered in the conversation that followed his challenge; instead, participants worked to assimilate these ideas into the dominant view, saying that Web pages had to be well organized and that this organization was the same as that of academic papers.

### **Beyond Common Ground: Discovering the Value of Conflict**

These seminars, with their focus on commonalities, on grading, on discussing writing without reference to context, and on writing as an individual act, offer a view of knowledge that differs from that suggested in WAC discourse. As McLeod suggests, faculty in advanced writing seminars can move beyond concern with mere technical details of writing to develop different approaches to writing by exploring and critiquing varied authorial identities (82). We suggest that students too may benefit from exploring the objective, neutral identity most often assumed in academic writing, from recognizing how contexts affect writing, from writing in dialogue with others, and from working collaboratively.

The vision of writing offered by the Grinnell seminars, which differs markedly from this WAC view, is closely tied to Grinnell's definition of itself as a liberal arts institution. The Grinnell College Catalog says that the value of a liberal arts education is its promotion of "critical and unprejudiced inquiry, free and open discussion of ideas, and the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself" (30). This definition implies some problematic assumptions. First, the notion that inquiry can be unprejudiced reveals the hope that the inquiry exists in a world unsullied by the biases of individuals. Second, those wishing to achieve "free and open discussion

of ideas” must at least consider that all participants in such a discussion may not be equally free but may be inequitably constrained and empowered by their genders, ethnicities, and social class. Finally, this definition implies that knowledge is something that can be captured, pursued, hunted, and finally conquered. The vision of the pursuit does not suggest a dialogic process which itself creates the knowledge; instead it posits an individual chase after an extant object. Such a view of education is probably fairly typical of selective liberal arts institutions, which attempt to present themselves as special places where inquiry unsullied by the mundane world is possible. Of course, this unitary vision is easier to maintain in an institution whose clientele come from one privileged group than in an institution whose clientele have varied experiences, diverse backgrounds, and different views of knowledge and its value.

By setting academic discourse as the only acceptable standard, the faculty at the college narrows the range of acceptable writing. We believe this narrowing has an effect on the college’s efforts to diversify its community, that is, its attempts to include people of different cultures and classes who may be unfamiliar with the assumptions of academic discourse. Students from diverse backgrounds often struggle with understanding the identities and discourses one must appropriate to be successful in academic settings. When students expose their lack of experience with academic discourse, our responses are determined by what we believe about writing and knowledge. As Glynda Hull points out in her essay “Seeing with a Different Lens: Thoughts on the Teaching of Writing,” because “we are all most at home in our own discourse communities, . . . we take our own language and literacy practices as natural and right and look askance at different ways of using words.” If we believe that the “standard forms and practices that we adhere to in order to produce what will be recognized as academic writing—that is—our ways of marshaling evidence and seeming like authorities and handling source texts and developing an argument . . . [are] right and obvious and second nature to anyone who has his wits about him” then we will respond to “non-academic” writing as deficient and “in error” and will give students advice about how to “fix” what they have written to make it adhere more closely to academic discourse. We will see it as our responsibility to explain to the student how such a response departs from the “conventions valued in schooling and the academy.” Hull suggests that our purpose should be instead to discover how the student’s writing adheres to the student’s logic and history, to find the coherence present in the piece in order to “see a student’s text and discourse anew” (403).

If the college were to value the WAC view of knowledge, the teaching of writing at the college might well change. Professors facing an increasingly diverse group of students would see students’ differing dis-

course abilities not as a problem but as an enrichment. If a faculty member used writing to help students to examine authorial identities, to share ideas, and to explore different contexts, that faculty member would necessarily raise the question of what the academy requires of students unfamiliar with middle-class notions of schooling. If a professor were to use writing in ways that value students' different discourse communities and backgrounds, that professor would create a welcoming and nurturing classroom community. In this more dialogic writing classroom, teachers would honor the richness and diversity of students' experiences, an act necessary if the college hopes to attract and retain a diverse group of students. That is, if the college were to expand the kinds of writing it considers acceptable, then the cultures that Dipardo says have been kept outside may be brought inside the academy, to the benefit of both the student and the academy.

To encourage such a reconsideration of the uses of writing, we suggest that faculty writing seminars explore how the academic community constructs the notion of the author of the academic essay as an unbiased, disinterested writer, able to balance competing claims through the use of linear logic. As a logical outgrowth of this discussion, faculty could explore how disciplines create and value knowledge, particularly through the academy's emphasis on the academic essay. Our suggestions do not imply that the academic essay has no place in the academy. Indeed, it may well be one useful mode for students to learn. But we see writing as a much more powerful tool than this one restricted mode allows. We would like the seminars to encourage professors to look beyond that one mode, to see writing as having more goals, more contexts, and more authorial voices than the one usual in academic discourse. By doing so, professors will communicate better to students of all types what is expected of them, and professors will come to appreciate what other goals writing can fulfill.

If professors adopt a less restricted approach to the teaching of writing, they can create a welcoming pedagogy for all students, not just those already familiar with or unfazed by academic discourse. Of course, such a pedagogy may allow more conflict to surface in the classroom as more points of view are expressed and explored through writing. Although some may dread this surfacing of conflict, many teachers are recognizing that, in order for diverse points of view to be honored and valued in the classroom, teachers must not necessarily seek consensus but must learn to welcome conflict (hooks, Pratt, Harris). Conflict in the classroom, among students of different backgrounds, classes, ethnic origins, and genders, can complicate and enrich the experience of learning about any subject.

In seeing writing at the college through what Hull calls “a different lens,” Grinnell faculty may consider more intentionally what kind of community Grinnell will be, for both faculty and students. If faculty were to see writing seminars as a place where conflict about goals and practices could be explored and honored rather than bypassed or ignored, the faculty might go beyond the drive for consensus. In doing so, they might see how a community that encourages diversity and conflict can exist in a liberal arts setting.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We reach this conclusion from examining the college's Writing Inventory. Since 1995, the college has published this document for the benefit of students registering for courses. Written by faculty members, it details the number and type of writing assignments a course will require during each semester.

<sup>2</sup> Originally the seminars were taught by professors of English; in 1974, the first year of the seminar, six seminars were offered, all of them taught by English faculty. Now the seminars are taught by members of many different disciplines: in recent years, leaders have come not only from the department of English but from departments of economics, philosophy and classics, sociology, mathematics, psychology, philosophy, theater, German, math and computer science, education, history, and art (Record of Participation).