

Agonistic Deliberations: A Writing Program Struggles to Be Born

The story we are about to tell is not progressive, but recursive; not some continuously upward arc trending towards an apotheosis of best institutional practice, but rather an ongoing search for a method that would make written practice part of our university's identity in a programmatic, clearly discernible way. While we will primarily focus on the cross-disciplinary discussions of the past three years or so, the "agonistic deliberations" have been going on for much longer, for more than thirty years now, and we believe it crucial to place what is happening now at Slippery Rock University in that broader historical context.

It was the summer of 1981 when two faculty members (one from the Department of English and another from Modern Languages) and an associate dean from the then College of Arts and Sciences attended an institute on Writing Across the Curriculum at Beaver College in Pennsylvania conducted by Elaine Maimon. Following some on-campus workshops, and attendance at a national WAC conference in 1983, our university's president approved in January 1984 a curricular requirement that students could not graduate until they had completed two courses designated as "writing intensive," in addition to the general education courses in first-year composition. The first of these so-called "writing intensive" courses were offered in the Spring term of 1985.

Slippery Rock's experience with WAC resembled that of many schools well into the '90s. Dedicated faculty participated in workshops and formed reading groups designed to help them

integrate writing into their day-to-day teaching of their subjects. An interest in “writing to learn” eventually evolved into a concern that learning to write within a discipline was integral to learning that discipline. The workshops and reading groups no doubt did a lot of pedagogical good, and there are still professors across campus who implement assignments and activities within their courses that were developed through the agency of those venues. But the program itself was deeply flawed in a way that the efforts of various individuals could not counter-balance, and by the mid- to late-nineties one accurate descriptor for writing-across-the-curriculum at Slippery Rock University would be “moribund.”

That flaw, present at the beginning of the program and never adequately addressed thereafter, was the lack of an administrative structure or a dedicated budget. There was no director position created and no entity empowered to determine which courses could be legitimately considered “writing intensive.” The original 1984 guidelines were vague and unenforceable. To qualify, a course had to feature a minimum of 2500 words of writing, although the form such writing could take, and its relationship to the learning and practice of the discipline being taught, was never monitored by anyone but the instructor her- or himself. Instructors were expected to obtain department approval of course plans before it was designated “writing intensive,” but a review of the program conducted in 1989 by a Writing Across the Curriculum Steering Committee found that such approval was seldom sought prior to an instructor simply asking for and receiving writing intensive designation for her or his course from the Academic Records office. A guideline had set recommended class sizes at 25 to 33 students, which the Steering Committee found were often exceeded. The Steering Committee itself had no curricular influence and was expected to serve in an advisory capacity, organizing

workshops, contributing to a state-wide WAC organization, and monitoring the university's program. Ineffectual complaining eventually became one of its primary activities, and by the mid-1990s it was no longer meeting at all.

That said, the writing-intensive course requirement remained in place until the Fall of 2009. In the meantime, learning assessment became the ascendant concern meant to unify the campus in the quest for instructional "excellence." (The sarcasm reflected by the scare quotes is itself only half-hearted, as many of us thought at the time that program assessment could be a possible way to revive interest in a rational, organized approach to the integration of writing into the university curriculum.) One of the eight university-wide learning outcomes developed was "Communication," which called for effective communication in writing, "using appropriate information sources, presentation formats, and technologies." Assessment had no impact on our initial WAC program, but is germane to the program now "struggling to be born." Since all departments are now required to establish learning outcomes for their programs' graduates, not just at the university's urging but also to attain accreditation from subject area professional organizations, and since effective communication invariably involves writing in a discipline, attending to how students can develop writing abilities specific to a field becomes unavoidable. Our struggles concerning the establishment of a campus-wide approach to writing instruction involves *how* programs should address writing instruction, rather than whether such instruction is needed. With recent cutbacks in required composition courses staffed by English faculty, most departments are now aware that the responsibility to develop writing abilities has shifted in their direction.

Those cutbacks are the result of another trend that has directly impacted the English department, the first-year writing curriculum, and even writing as a medium of learning in our introductory literature course. That trend was the constant and ever increasing financial pressure being placed on the Pennsylvania state system universities because of flat, and eventually declining, taxpayer support of public higher education. (The legislated level of funding for our system dropped 18% for the 2011-12 year and remains at the prior year's amount for 2012-13.) The retreat of public funding is, of course, a long-term national trend that needs no further exposition by us. However, the money squeeze is also a major contributor to our current thinking about writing program renewal that cannot be ignored.

For years following the turn of the century our English department held onto a “privileged” position within the university’s general education program. Three of the four courses that constituted the “Basic Requirements” block, courses that every undergraduate had to complete in order to receive a degree, were located in English—two sequenced composition courses (College Writing I and College Writing II) and an introductory literature course entitled Interpreting Literature. As those years passed the two-course composition sequence became a rarity across the state system and was increasingly viewed by our administration, faced with both rising enrollments and declining state funding, as a budget burden the university could not sustain. The English faculty was simultaneously confronted with class sizes—27 to 28 in the composition sections and a peak of 49 students in the literature sections—that were regarded as a direct threat to the academic integrity of the courses themselves.

In general, three-quarters of each faculty member's teaching load of a semester was devoted to the department's general education courses. (Slippery Rock's collective bargaining agreement does not allow for graduate teaching assistants and limits the percentage of adjuncts employed as instructors.) The commitment to those courses was a serious constraint on the energy faculty members could devote to their majors' advisement and to curricular renewal of the department's degree programs. An external evaluator who led a five-year program review of the department's offerings in early 2008 made the following observations:

Because of the sheer numbers in the Liberal Studies program, the department offerings are heavily encumbered with teaching the required two writing courses ... and the required literature course This leaves radically reduced time for faculty to concentrate on development of the majors. ... Because the ... faculty places such value on the development of critical thinking and writing skills, writing is an integral part of each of the required Liberal Studies classes. Because each class requires writing, professors must commit a substantial percentage of their out-of-class time to conferencing with students about ... their writing ... that seriously limits the amount of time available for other advising and/or program development efforts.

The evaluator went on to suggest that the department might eliminate one of the writing requirements and possibly shift "one of the writing classes to student majors." The latter suggestion did have some appeal to faculty members who recognized the futility in the second-semester writing course of preparing students for the forms of argument, rules of evidence, and style and documentation conventions expected within a broad variety of majors. The evaluator's

suggestion also appealed to administration, although one suspects that appeal was based on a broader set of motives.

Fearing that administration would take away tenure-track positions in the department, the majority of English faculty resisted these recommendations for two more years, until factors beyond the department's control made the loss of one of the composition courses a certainty. One factor was the looming loss of federal stimulus money that had supplemented university income from 2009 to 2011. Another was action by the state system's Board of Governors in the summer of 2010 to reduce the minimum number of credit hours devoted to general education programs to 42. Years before that same body, confronted by concerns about timely graduation rates and student tuition costs, had decided to limit the number of credit hours needed to graduate to 120. With faculty in major programs believing they needed to increase the number of discipline-specific courses to adequately prepare their graduates the pressure was clearly on to cut general education program requirements.

Following the Board of Governors' action, administration worked with our Liberal Studies Program Committee to modify general education at Slippery Rock by eliminating one first-year composition course from the Basic Requirements block. Consequently, the program now requires completion of 45 to 46 credit hours, down from 48 to 49 previously. The English department created a new College Writing course amalgamating learning goals from the two previous courses, which was first taught this past fall.

We have now come to a moment in our institution's history when the problem of integrating writing instruction into the university-wide curriculum has primarily been addressed

through subtraction. Students are no longer required to complete two “writing intensive” courses in order to graduate, nor are they required to complete two first-year composition courses. The inadequacies of those two strategies for strengthening students’ writing abilities were apparent to most. But what, exactly, will take their place? On the positive side, through systematic university-wide program assessment spanning the past 15 years or so, a significant majority of the university’s academic departments had incorporated learning outcomes regarding effective writing in their disciplines into their programs. A survey of departments seeking information about perceived needs for assistance regarding writing instruction, conducted in Spring, 2010 by a newly formed Writing Across the Curriculum committee, found that 18 of 23 responding departments had such requirements.

On the other hand, concerns about how to address writing instruction within individual disciplines appear to be high. Some departments believe they are adequately addressing such writing and are not particularly welcoming to any new activity regarding a university-wide program or to stepped-up assessment activity regarding writing. Other departments contain multiple faculty members apprehensive about helping their students develop writing abilities. When suggesting that writing courses could be shifted from English to major programs, the English department’s 2008 external evaluator asserted that “specific, sustained, and clearly articulated support for WAC ... will be needed. Someone with credibility and clout will need to be in charge of the WAC effort—planning support for faculty in content areas and possibly setting up workshops for students in addition to the drop-in Writing Center support.”

Over the past few years, a committee of faculty members from various departments, headed by a college dean, has attempted to develop a program for strengthening writing instruction and outcomes at Slippery Rock. We will next explore the dynamics of that process, how they have resulted in current guidelines for writing graduation requirements, and what the future of writing in the disciplines might look like at our university.