

INTERROGATING DISCIPLINARITY IN WAC/WID: AN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY


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DATASET

- Review of Upper Level Writing Requirement (ULWR) through interviews, focus groups, and surveys of students, faculty, and graduate student instructors (GSIs)
 - Corpus of ULWR syllabi from 1978-present
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METHODOLOGY

- Institutional Ethnography
 - “...how our most common practices emerge in relationship to the institutional locations that situate, compel, and organize them.”
(LaFrance and Nicholas 2012)
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DISCIPLINE IN WAC/WID

1. Scholarly communities/epistemological and knowledge-making units
2. Career path for scholars/producer of undergraduate researchers
3. Units of institutional organization, resource allocation, and acquisition/consolidation of influence





STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLINARITY

Melody Pugh






ULWR GOALS

Benefits students by enabling them to “understand the central concepts, approaches, materials and written conventions of their chosen major.” (SCW Website)

...“to teach students to recognize and master the writing conventions of their chosen discipline.”



STUDENT DATASET

Data Set

- 12 Individual Interviews
- 1022 Student Survey Responses (60% response rate)
- Focus Groups (13 Students)

Course Selection

- More than 50% take as Seniors
- Nearly 50% taking outside major
- More than 20% have multiple majors





REASONS FOR SELECTING ULWR COURSES

- Select a course that sounds interesting and fits ideal schedule.
- Select course with a respected faculty member (regardless of discipline)
- Select course that can offer particular professional benefits and/or desired approaches to inquiry, analysis, and synthesis.





REASONS FOR SELECTING ULWR COURSES

- Select a course that sounds interesting and fits ideal schedule.
- “Cause the thing is that you know that you have to meet that requirement, and so you sort of intentionally look up courses that will meet that requirements. Then you just choose one to take that you find interesting.”





REASONS FOR SELECTING ULWR COURSES

- Select course with a respected faculty member (regardless of discipline)

“Having taken courses with the professor, I knew him to be pretty challenging. And that was one of his upsides is that I’ve really grown while taking his courses, and in my writing.”





REASONS FOR SELECTING ULWR COURSES

- Select course that can offer particular professional benefits and/or desired approaches to inquiry, analysis, and synthesis.





PERSPECTIVES ON DISCIPLINARY CONVENTIONS

“In your experience, what does it mean to write like a member of this academic field or discipline?”

General Responses

“Being analytical, clear, concise, and offering strong evidence.” (Economics)



UNDERGRADUATES AND DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Meta-Genre Aware

"Analysis of primary sources especially, and secondary sources as well to synthesize new arguments and theories about the past is what is key." (History)

"It means to look at the research and then analyze a situation from an economic perspective. Looking at the impact on the economy and the major macroeconomic and microeconomic variables that relate to the situation." (Economics)

"Ability to grapple with complex scientific observations through the use of simplified scientific models and theories. To tell a story that promotes the interest of other scientists inside and outside of the field." (Ecology and Evolutionary Biology)





DESIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

- “Professional” as stylistic choice referring to polished, authoritative prose.
- “Professional” as a career-orientation





DESIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

“It would be cool to learn how to do other kinds of writing more career-based, looking at what kind of writing is great in a consulting career for biologists, policy kind of writing papers or something a little more persuasive, I think. In real life, I don’t only have to write scientific papers. I think that there should be a class that captures that maybe for biology majors. But I think it would be good to have a more well rounded type of writing portfolio, because I certainly don’t and I—I mean, maybe that would be detrimental, I don’t know, so we’ll see. I’d say it’s been really relevant, because I think the majority of writing with the biology degree will be scientific, but I also think there are other kinds of writing that I can’t really anticipate, but I think there will be. Communicating my biological opinion to a senator or something, I don’t think I’m going to have to give him a hypothesis.”





DESIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

“It’s just argumentative writing, critical thinking; really pouring yourself into an argument and addressing all the potential problems that you could find with it. That’s something I feel like I’m really—that I learned at Michigan that I didn’t necessarily do before. I don’t know if I learned it in philosophy classes or English classes, but—no, I think I actually learned it in my 225 class.”





FACULTY AND GSI PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLINARITY


Naomi Silver





ULWR Guidelines

The ULWR, which is generally completed within the student's major, aims to help LSA students recognize and master the writing conventions of their chosen discipline, so that, upon graduation, they are able to understand and communicate effectively the central concepts, approaches, and materials of their discipline. The program is based upon the assumption that the best way to master disciplinary knowledge is to express that knowledge in the form of clear and incisive writing.





Faculty Response

"I don't think that I would request or encourage changes to the current guidelines. I mean, I think that they're very well-chosen. I feel like they leave me enough room to kind of do what I want, while at the same time I think that they reinforce core values that I believe in. I don't have any issue with them"






But also...


"The issue is *how* to think about discipline."

The Guidelines should include "something about there being—that the writing instruction incorporate several different kinds of writing that are used in the discipline."





The requirement here is specifically writing in *your* discipline [...], right? Then it's really focusing on the five percent of students who end up going, applying to [my discipline's] graduate programs. It may be not the best, maybe it doesn't serve the other 95 percent so well. But the requirement is writing in your discipline, so I always struggle with really writing in my discipline, or should I think about that kid who might go off to law school or might become a high school teacher? They have very different writing requirements.






On the other hand...

“I agree. I mean, I don’t have any problem with that [writing in the discipline], but I think it’s not enough. They need to write like adults when they finish.”

“What I tell my students is that writing for a scientific journal is not all that different from writing for a newspaper.”

Students “have to develop [disciplinary] models that are in support of their argument, so they’re forced to go back and use the [discipline] in terms of support. But the writing is writing as a human being”





GSI Response

"I think they're probably better off learning just writing skills over specifically writing as a psychologist [...] I mean, if they were more mature in their writing abilities, then I would have gone to that aspect much more"

"I just didn't feel like it was very fruitful to go very far beyond that, as far [as] to specifically write in the sciences because it just felt like a really big victory to get good writing at all"





And also...

"There are some who are already advanced [...]. For them I would be able to hold them to a higher standard and applying like a theoretical framework..."





LOOKING TOWARD “NEW DISCIPLINARITY”

Anne Ruggles Gere





Do WAC Principles Endure?

“Writing is highly situated and tied to a field’s discourse and ways of knowing and therefore writing in the disciplines (WID) is most effectively guided by those with expertise in that discipline”
(Statement of WAC Principles and Practices)






What about the ULWR Requirements and Guidelines?

“To understand the central concepts appropriate materials and written conventions of their chosen majors”

“To teach students to recognize and master the written conventions of their chosen disciplines





How Do We Think about the Status of Disciplines?

- Current debates
- Interdisciplinarity or radical disciplinarity
- Departments as “convenient budgetary units”





The Alternative of New Disciplinarity

Marcovich, Anne & Terry Shinn. (2011). "Where Is Disciplinarity Going: Meeting on the Borderland." SOCIAL SCIENCE INFORMATION 50.3-4: 582-606.





Possibilities of New Disciplinarity

- avoids boundarylessness of interdisciplinarity
- avoids structural and organizational limitations of traditional disciplines
- offers boundaries and elasticity simultaneously





Possibilities for WAC/WID

- interrogate disciplines and disciplinarity
- identify various disciplinary activity systems
- consider metagenres identified by Michael Carter
- examine variability of disciplinary style identified by Andrea Olinger



Thanks!



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