



F-Y Comp, F-Y Seminars, and WAC: A Response

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According to Bob Connors, only in good times do we propose abolishing first-year composition, and in those good times defenders of the course call for reform. In bad times, such as war or depression or civil unrest, we assume, Connors says, the first-year writing course to be a good and necessary thing. The debate in this issue of *LLAD* about where writing should be taught is then predictable. And we should, I suppose, be grateful for the absence of a national emergency.

In “WAC and the First-Year Writing Course” David Chapman poses the question often asked by people who want to do away with the first-year composition requirement: “If all teachers are qualified to teach writing in their disciplinary specializations, then why shouldn’t they be teaching an introductory writing course?” The reply is of course that WAC programs do not assume that teachers are qualified to teach writing in their disciplinary specializations. Indeed WAC does not assume that most practitioners of a discipline can articulate the discourse conventions of that discipline, even while following those conventions in their own writing. Further, Chapman warns that we should not expect even the best writers among our colleagues in other disciplines to understand or be interested in the theoretical issues involved in writing. What WAC assumes (at least the way I’ve learned WAC from Art Young and the many workshop leaders who have visited Clemson over the last eight years) is that all teachers can use WAC techniques to improve their teaching.

But there is an important distinction between a writing course and a course that uses writing to help students learn a discipline. For example, I would not call the course at Cornell described by Nadine Weidman in “Gender Issues in Biology: An Approach to Teaching Writing” a writing course, but rather a course that uses writing. Nor would I call my own Introduction to Women’s Studies a writing course; it is instead a course that employs journals, research papers, freewrites, and discussion to teach a body of knowledge. The primary focus in Weidman’s course at Cornell, as in my women’s studies course, is on the reading; the writing is to help students learn and understand the course texts.

Nonetheless, as a writing teacher, I am delighted with the enthusiasm for writing and teaching that I see in “Gender Issues in Biology: An Approach to Teaching Writing.” It is clear as well that this instructor knows the subject that she is teaching. And, with only 13 students, she appears to have been able to give each of these first-year students a great deal of attention. Enthusiasm for teaching, knowledge of the subject, and time to devote to each student: these are the components of excellent teaching in any area. It is important, however, to recognize that in this account the writing is being assigned, read, and commented on by a graduate student, not by regular faculty.

And regular faculty—by which term, I mean permanent, tenured or tenure-track faculty—is, or should be, the target of WAC programs. The purpose of writing across the curriculum is for faculty across the university to share the responsibility for improving the writing of undergraduates, for faculty to give their students opportunities to write well and often, not only in general education courses but also in courses in the major. The thinking is that if students see that faculty across the curriculum value writing enough to include time for it in their courses, then students too will value writing. At the very least, if regular faculty use writing in their courses, then students will not graduate having fulfilled their major requirements by means of multiple-choice and true-false tests. The premise is that practice *qua* practice helps people compose better, a point Isocrates made in the fourth century BCE. Certainly it is better to have students writing across the curriculum than not, but the question of who is assigning and reading that writing is an issue that should not be ignored in any analysis of undergraduate writing.

In “WAC and the First-Year Writing Course” Chapman makes other points that should be underscored. First, a minority of WAC teachers, including some in English, believe that writing, even writing to learn, means correctness. (Correctness is of course necessary to good writing but certainly not sufficient. And, of course, definitions of correctness vary wildly.) A colleague here at Clemson, for example, continues to ask at every WAC workshop how to grade spelling or punctuation. As believers in bottom-up theories of language and learning, these faculty members rarely change their minds. In other words, despite our faith in WAC as a way to help students leave the university as effective writers, not all WAC teachers will teach writing as WAC proponents typically mean that term; some will use WAC labels instead to ride particular hobby horses about the conventions of print and script and the prestige dialect.

Second, even if teachers are using various kinds of writing assignments to teach, say, engineering or architecture, responding to this written work takes time and energy. Attrition among WAC instructors is real. A family problem, a book contract, administrative duties, a grant pro-

posal—all these can mean that a superior WAC teacher loses the WAC in his or her syllabus. It is easier, after all, to teach without all the writing. When it works, WAC helps ensure that students can write in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. But let us not romanticize: WAC, whether entirely voluntary or institutionalized in writing-intensive courses, has its own set of very real problems and will not therefore bring the Millennium.

The first-year seminar Lex Runciman describes in “Ending Composition as We Knew It” answers my complaint about the Cornell model—that is, that it is taught by graduate students instead of regular faculty. Where it has been tried, the first-year seminar has proven successful in keeping first-year students enrolled. Small classes of 15-18 students with the best teachers on campus, who are also, not surprisingly, the best scholars, would surely involve first-year students in the best the university has to offer. Again, enthusiasm, expertise, small classes, lots of written and oral engagement—what’s not to like? In the words of the old hymn, I am almost persuaded.

But this is not a viable, realistic alternative to the required first-year composition course, as Runciman implies when he says that Linfield’s Inquiry Seminar is a “local” solution. One reason that such a course is not widely generalizable is that the freshman seminar is too expensive for most universities. Few deans or provosts are willing to pull the brightest stars in physics or industrial engineering or art history out of senior-level classes or graduate seminars to have them teach an f-y seminar. And few of these stars would be willing to do so on a long term basis. It’s a lot cheaper to pay part-time or temporary faculty or graduate students to teach first-year students.

And it’s even cheaper when these teachers are given more students per section than they should have. At my university, we save the salary of one instructor for every student we add to the cap of first-year comp. On smaller campuses, like Linfield, where teaching is the main task and where offering a quality baccalaureate education to the few is the mission, the f-y seminar may be do-able. But at large universities where undergraduate teaching comes in a distant third behind research and graduate teaching and where the achievement of a few superior students masks a factory structure (teaching the highest number of undergraduates for the lowest cost), the f-y seminar will rarely even make it to the agenda.

In “Ending Composition as We Know It” Runciman argues that composition doesn’t work. He is right in that the typical one- or even two-semester requirement in the first year rarely succeeds in turning out sophisticated writers. And he is right that f-y comp is not a one-shot inoculation against lapses in correctness, poorly developed paragraphs, weak

theses, failure to supply enough evidence of the right kind, indiscernible structure, lack of audience awareness, or ignorance of genre requirements.

But f-y comp doesn't always *not* work, either. When taught by someone with an understanding of rhetoric, writing processes, and language, not only f-y writing courses but other writing courses as well can and do bring about improvement in student writing, as Rich Haswell has demonstrated in *Gaining Ground in College Writing*. In addition to practice, Isocrates also argued that direct instruction in the precepts of rhetoric increases the likelihood that the rhetor will be effective: "and the teacher, for his part, must so expound the principles of the art with the utmost possible exactness as to leave out nothing that can be taught" (49). Courses which emphasize "the principles of the art" can and do help young writers diagnose and repair problems in their writing, like those listed above. At their best, f-y courses demystify writing, supplying students with a toolbox of writing strategies and techniques that they can use for writing in a variety of other situations. When f-y courses do work, they teach students that they have something to say and can say it.

Unfortunately, f-y comp is not always at its best. As Joseph Harris explains: "I'm all for teaching writing to beginning undergraduates, but I worry that the present structure of the universally required course (a) provokes needless and not-useful resistance and resentment among students and faculty, and (b) virtually requires the exploitation of part-time faculty in order to staff myriad sections (at least in large universities like mine)." (And mine, too.) But the problem isn't just a moral one: the exploitation of workers by universities and colleges. WPAs and department heads often cannot find qualified people who will teach such a labor-intensive course for the available salary, and so we staff f-y comp with inexperienced graduate students and with too many unqualified teachers.

In addition to the problems of attitudes and staffing, f-y comp, as I have already said, typically has too many students per section. If we could reduce class size from the present 25, 26, even 28—the numbers I found two years ago at our peer institutions—to the 17 or 18 in first-year seminars or even to the 22 recommended by both NCTE and MLA, we would, I believe, see an immediate improvement in first-year comp courses. Peter Elbow has said that every child needs "a real audience for his written words—an audience that really listens and takes the interchange seriously" (184). I would argue that every student in a writing class, no matter the age, also deserves an interested, knowledgeable audience. But in these times when middle-class retirees have already seen to the education of their own children and university administrators refer to undergraduates as "consumers," public universities are unlikely to pay for the small classes necessary to give students this attention.

Some in composition and rhetoric argue that if the requirement were “a writing course” instead of “the first-year writing course,” then departments could offer an array of writing courses at various levels that would fulfill the requirement. Departments could thereby determine both class size and qualifications for teachers, and when the classes were full, they would close. Where this is in place, such as Worcester Polytechnic, it seems to work. I don’t know whether this plan is viable elsewhere, at institutions, for example, where the writing teacher is *not* John Trimbur. It is worth considering whether this solution would only shift the problem from the universities to community colleges and whether it succeeds generally in ameliorating the resistance to writing classes.

Before we abolish f-y comp, perhaps we could set a reasonable class size and offer only the number of sections that we can staff with qualified teachers. Whether this course is required is a secondary issue for me; its quality, now compromised, should be the priority. If we could actually offer excellence, would f-y comp then be so good that it will be preferable to f-y seminars?

I don’t want this either/or choice; I want both/and. Both a writing course or writing courses and other courses, preferably several, that use writing consciously and reflexively to teach particular general education classes as well as courses in the various majors. I wouldn’t even care which course were taught in the first-year: f-y seminar and the writing course later, or f-y comp with 18 students and WAC courses all over the place. As Cicero puts it in *De Oratore*:

A knowledge of very many matters must be grasped, without which oratory is but an empty and ridiculous swirl of verbiage: and the distinctive style has to be formed, not only by the choice of words, but also by the arrangement of the same; and all the mental emotions, with which nature has endowed the human race, are to be intimately understood, because it is in calming or kindling the feelings of the audience that the full power and science of oratory are to be brought into play. (202)

Putting all our eggs in the WAC or first-year seminar basket and giving up the writing course means the neglect of rhetoric, which is more than invention, arrangement, memory, style, and delivery, as important as those things are to good writing. Rhetoric includes not only attention to persuasive argument, to finding the best means of persuasion in any case, but, more important, a focus on civic discourse and the ethics of language use: the public language of the discourse community we all share as citizens of the republic and the ethical use of this language to create knowl-

edge and to negotiate our differences. Where else in the curriculum can we ensure that students will be asked not just to compose, but to compose within these contexts of issues?

What I want is both/and. Both WAC and writing courses. Both the f-y seminar and f-y comp. But I have read Berlin and Connors on the history of writing in American colleges and universities, and I have taught at four medium to large state universities in four different states. I don't think I'll get what I want. What I'll get is what we've always got: An underfunded, overcrowded course, inured in the hierarchical politics of the university, disparaged by administrators, never given the resources to achieve excellence—which somehow seems to satisfy the public.

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