

"Effective writing is central to the work of higher education. It follows, then, that the responsibility for writing should be vested in the disciplines where this work takes place and in the faculty who are the ultimate arbiters and authorities, latently if not manifestly, over what counts as effective writing in their respective fields. Accordingly, an expanded sense of faculty ownership of questions of writing and disciplinarity at all levels of the curriculum must be continuously cultivated."

Tomorrow's Professor Msg.#540 Writing and the Disciplines

Folks:

The article below is by Jonathan Monroe, professor of comparative literature, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and director of the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, Cornell University. It looks at the role of writing in the disciplines and how to make it more effective. It is from Peer Review, Fall 2003, Writing and the New Academy, Volume 6, Number 1. Copyright ? 2003, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

Rick Reis
reis@stanford.edu

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----- 2,114 words -----

Writing and the Disciplines

By Jonathan Monroe

The growing prominence and institutionalization of "writing across the curriculum" (WAC) and "writing in the disciplines" (WID) programs throughout the United States and abroad has occasioned considerable renewed reflection during the past decade. Although WAC and WID are sometimes used synonymously or interchangeably, and both terms usefully suggest the importance of writing in all fields, these two approaches have very different implications for the role of writing and writing instruction in higher education. While WAC emphasizes the commonality, portability, and communicability of writing practices, WID emphasizes disciplinary differences, diversity, and heterogeneity. That is, WID emphasizes what remains incommensurable and irreducible in writing practices both within academic fields and from one field to the next.

Taken together, the two terms honor the importance of writing and communicating effectively with audiences situated both within and beyond particular fields of academic specialization. "Writing across the curriculum" has played an important role in (re)establishing and expanding recognition of the importance of writing in all academic fields, beyond its traditional associations with English, rhetoric, and composition. WAC and WID have been mutually allied in calling attention to the importance of writing in all fields. Nonetheless, I want to argue here that "writing in the disciplines" is best understood not as interchangeable with "writing across the curriculum" but as an alternative orientation with far-reaching implications for the role of writing and writing instruction at all educational levels, from K-12 through higher education.

To the extent that it has remained an administrator-driven and administrator-identified movement, WAC has only partially realized its best aspirations. If the goal of WAC is to cultivate a sense of the importance of writing in all fields, WID is, in effect, WAC's proper realization. The success of WAC has depended on the often remarkable energy and investments of WAC directors. By contrast, WID suggests that primary responsibility for and ultimate authority over writing rests with individual faculty situated in particular fields. While the scope and coherence of the curriculum as a whole is necessarily a central concern of college and university administrators, individual disciplines remain the sites of the faculty's primary investments in research and teaching. As such, they are the vital link between an institution's vision of undergraduate and graduate education and the role writing plays, or ought to play, in the full realization of that vision.

Who Owns Writing?

Effective writing is central to the work of higher education. It follows, then, that the responsibility for writing should be vested in the disciplines where this work takes place and in the faculty who are the ultimate arbiters and authorities, latently if not manifestly, over what counts as effective writing in their respective fields. Accordingly, an expanded

sense of faculty ownership of questions of writing and disciplinarity at all levels of the curriculum must be continuously cultivated.

If faculty are truly to own writing, this ownership needs to be located and cultivated within the disciplinary investments of individual faculty--not as an add-on or a detour, but as integral to the kinds of research and teaching on which students' success in their respective disciplines necessarily depends. As interest in WID-based approaches, and academic writing more generally, continues to expand in the United States and abroad--e.g., through the recent creation of the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing, the disciplinary investments of individual faculty remain vital to any serious thinking about the role of writing in higher education. Where the most profound institutional changes have occurred, the involvement of higher-level administrators (associate dean or above) in redesigning and restructuring the role of writing in undergraduate education has been crucial. As the most effective of these administrators have understood, implementation of a WID-based approach depends first and foremost on ongoing campus-wide faculty commitment and dialogue. To cultivate a sustainable sense of ownership among faculty that will benefit both individual departments and the curriculum as a whole, colleges and universities need to support faculty where they live and work, at the heart of their interests, in the disciplines.

Begin at the Beginning

Regardless of where an institution is in examining and/or refining its writing requirements, nearly every college or university has some first-year writing requirement. If these requirements are to play a meaningful role in a student's college studies, then courses fulfilling these requirements ought not to be designed as general holding tanks for students not yet prepared to engage fully the intellectual work of the university. College-level work takes place within particular disciplines, and in all other areas of serious intellectual concern, students are not expected to wait until their sophomore year to immerse themselves in work at this level. The most philosophically consistent approach to teaching writing is thus to embed it from the outset as integrally as possible in the work of the disciplines. To do otherwise is to give students a false sense of security by suggesting they can master the diverse kinds of writing they will encounter in the wide range of courses a liberal education necessarily involves. A first-year writing requirement embedded in the disciplines signals that all writing takes place in particular contexts, for particular purposes and audiences.

The first message any writing requirement should convey to first-year students is that successful writing and communication--not only in the first year but throughout their undergraduate careers and after, whether within or beyond the academy--depends on the development of multiple literacies and a capacity for discursive mobility. In pretending to offer a more universal understanding of what good writing is, single course writing requirements do a disservice to students and faculty alike; they persuade students that acts of writing are anything other than situational and multiple. All meaningful acts of writing are unavoidably complex negotiations with particular contexts, purposes, and audiences. In higher education, these negotiations take place within particular disciplines. A coherent and vertically integrated approach to teaching writing will thus not defer the task of situating and attending to the work of writing within the disciplines until the sophomore year. It will, instead, begin at the beginning. This approach conveys the important message that, once they have begun college-level work in writing, students have also begun, in earnest, the work of the university. It conveys the message that, rather than a remedial or ancillary concern, writing is integral to the learning students will engage and pursue from the first semester of their first year through their senior years and beyond.

Local Matters

Writing and disciplinarity are inevitably local concerns, both for individual fields and for the institutions that house them. Accordingly, approaches to writing and writing instruction vary considerably--disciplinarily and institutionally--in response to local contexts already in place that determine what is possible and desirable as well as what might yet be imagined.

Upper-division, writing-intensive courses play a vital role in offering opportunities for undergraduates to continue to work with writing at progressively higher levels beyond the first year. Yet it has been a bedrock conviction at Cornell for almost forty years that it is important to lay the foundation for successful college-level writing in field-specific ways in the first year. Housed in the College of Arts and Sciences, and serving the university as a whole, Cornell's John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines (formerly the Knight Writing Program) annually administers more than three hundred First-Year Writing Seminars, as well as sixty discipline-specific, writing-intensive electives at the sophomore, junior, and senior levels. As the Knight Institute moves forward with its four-year study of student writing, now in its third year, the integral involvement of a wide range of fields remains vital to our understanding of writing at Cornell, and what it means to evaluate writing with a specificity that respects the values of our own local context. What we talk about when we talk about writing can only be determined with any effective legitimacy by those engaged in the work of higher education within their specific disciplinary locations. Similarly, the implementation of a successful, site-specific approach to writing and writing instruction is bound up with the disciplinary investments and curricular vision that are particular to each college and university.

Staffing

Since writing in higher education takes place within local disciplinary and institutional contexts, and since effective writing--as distinct from mere "writing up," to borrow Cornell physics professor David Mermin's useful distinction--involves acculturating students into the always provisional, historically situated knowledges and practices of particular fields, responsibility for writing at all levels of the curriculum properly belongs to the faculty hired to teach these fields.

In the case of research universities, this responsibility also extends to the graduate students who will become the future professoriate and are, thus, an integral part of the learning that takes place within a research university environment. Even the most sophisticated attempts to acculturate students into field-specific writing practices in non-discipline-specific courses are no substitute, in this respect, for the actual teaching investments of particular faculty and future faculty located in particular fields.

Against what has come to be called the "adjunctification" of writing instruction in higher education, Cornell has for the past four decades invested a significant and growing portion of its annual base budget in the College of Arts and Sciences to ensure that writing is understood as a central concern of all disciplines. In exchange for a total of roughly fifty First-Year Writing Seminars taught each year by tenure-stream faculty, some thirty participating departments are guaranteed support for graduate student instructors of First-Year Writing Seminars. These graduate student instructors' teaching is understood to be an equally integral part of a vertically integrated approach to writing and writing instruction as a shared enterprise at all levels of the curriculum. Through Institute-administered sophomore seminar courses and Writing in the Majors courses, the Institute offers expanded opportunities for an emphasis on writing to learn in upper-division courses that is philosophically consistent and continuous with the field-specific approach of Cornell's First-Year Writing Seminars. The sophomore seminar courses are taught by tenure-stream faculty; in the Writing in the Majors courses, tenure-stream faculty typically work with one or two carefully selected advanced graduate students from each field in which the particular course is offered.

A few highly selective, well-endowed research universities may find the establishment of a multi-disciplinary cadre of postdoctoral fellows to be a viable alternative or supplement to use of graduate students for writing instruction at the first-year level--a path Duke and Princeton have taken during the past several years. The effectiveness of graduate student teaching at Cornell over the past several decades, however, offers compelling evidence of the potential contributions of the future as well as the current professoriate to a sense of writing as integral to the work of all disciplines.

First-year students bring to their college-level work the assumptions and understandings about writing they have internalized from kindergarten and elementary school through high school. Students who have become accustomed to discipline-specific approaches to writing are likely to begin their undergraduate careers with a significant advantage. Students who have learned a one-size-fits-all approach will soon discover it does not fit the varied demands and diverse writing practices they need to be able to negotiate, not only across but within particular fields, to write effectively throughout their undergraduate careers and beyond. Unless first-year writing is to be the occasion of a vast unlearning (e.g. of the five-paragraph essay)--prelude to still more unlearning in upper-division courses--students will benefit from an approach that teaches the importance of field-specific writing practices at all levels of education, the sooner the better.

Conclusion

At the end of each semester, all first-year writing instructors at Cornell distribute a quantitative evaluation form. It asks students for feedback on their experience with virtually all levels of what we understand ourselves to be talking about when we talk about writing--from such nuts-and-bolts grammatical issues as the uses of active and passive voice, parallel structure, and subordination, to increasingly higher order concerns such as organization, thesis development, and the use of evidence. Both as a teacher of First-Year Writing Seminars in my home field of comparative literature and as director of the Knight Institute, I have always considered one question on this form to be singularly important: How "intellectually stimulated" were you by the course? This is arguably the most important question to ask--not only of a course that explicitly foregrounds writing in field-specific contexts, but of any course in the curriculum at whatever level. Unless writing is fully integrated into the intellectually stimulating work that is articulated in higher education through the disciplines, students will not do their best writing, and instructors will not be reading and responding to writing they understand to be an integral part of their higher educational mission.

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