

Key Features of an Interdisciplinary Approach to College Writing

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Abstract

The writing-across-the-curriculum movement has had great impact upon the design of university writing curricula. Due to its influence, universities address writing principles in both the freshman writing survey and in various content courses in which writing plays a central role. The following essay argues that writing instruction in the freshman survey and field-specific courses, such as history, biology, literature, etc. ought to share a common methodology— a set of assumptions and general strategies for training students to write as academics. The essay both names and defines the key features of such a methodology.

Key Words : Writing-across-the-curriculum. Writing pedagogy. Writing methodology. Writing as process. Writing for academic purposes (EAP). Critical thinking. Assessment.

Introduction

Since at least as far back as the 1980s, U.S. college writing instruction has been shaped by what is known as writing-across-the-curriculum. As Zinsser reported in his generalist's treatment of the craft of writing, writing-across-the-curriculum arose as an attempt to address the widespread problem of the failure of students to produce quality writing in their chosen areas of study (12-23). Requiring professors in disciplines such as economics and chemistry to instruct students about writing represented a departure from the practice of relying on English departments to prepare students for whatever writing tasks they may encounter in both college and beyond (14). Yet, while it is now routine for colleges and universities to use writing-across-the-curriculum

principles to determine many course goals, the freshman writing course, offered by such departments as English and communication, still represents the chief means by which college students receive most of their training as writers. The purpose of such a course is to serve as a complement to and preparation for any additional writing instruction students receive. The writing survey course hopefully increases the degree to which students are ready to take up writing pursuits in their chosen fields of study and it often serves as the only opportunity for students to consider the relationship between writing as a craft and other aspects of academic investigation. In this paper, after summarizing the influence writing-across-the-curriculum has had on general teaching methodology, I suggest what features a freshman writing survey course must have in order to provide students with effective preparation for writing within fields across-the-curriculum.

Adjusting Programs to Writing-across-the-Curriculum Principles

As a pedagogical approach, writing-across-the-curriculum holds that the following ideas are true: 1) The activity of writing affords students a means for learning both general critical thinking skills and the basic concepts of their chosen field of study (Zinsser 42-54; 79-233), and 2) the practitioner within a specific discipline (i.e. the teacher of chemistry, history, etc.) is uniquely equipped to teach students how to use writing to communicate what is germane to the field itself (12-23; 42-54). The second of these axioms might be stated another way: Educators should not assume that just because students write successfully about one discipline, that they will write just as successfully in another discipline without first receiving proper instruction. Such has been the impact of writing-across-the-curriculum as a practice that neither of these statements is now considered theoretically contentious, though much research continues to pinpoint the exact cognitive role writing and other communicative practices play in helping students grasp new concepts [see Emig (1977), Russell and Harms (2010), and Çavdar and Doe (2012)]. And, as one might expect, despite the widespread acknowledgement of these two ideas as givens, no consensus exists about how best to design and implement a writing-across-the-curriculum program within the

university. Design and implementation varies according to institutional and departmental needs, as well as other factors such as available funds for investment, staffing, etc. Most writers agree that while the underlying tenets of writing-across-the-curriculum as a general approach are sound, the design and application of actual programs sometimes fail.

Sipple offers an early account of the rigorous way in which Robert Morris College of Philadelphia attempted to centralize the management of a writing-across-the-curriculum program. More recently, Russell and Harms describe interrelated features of general writing courses and courses in the disciplines at Iowa State University. Other writers, such as Çavdar and Doe of Colorado State University as well as Olwell and Delph of Eastern Michigan University report on departmental efforts to address the writing needs of their students. When one views the wide array of approaches to curriculum design at major schools in the U.S., one notes that the administrative model described by Sipple is more the exception than the rule. Rarely does a university act as a central body in mandating faculty participation in pro seminars in which syllabi are composed according to strict across-the-curriculum guidelines. More often, schools designate certain courses as writing-intensive. While professors must assign a minimum number of pages of writing for the term, they are free to decide how best to handle material about writing concepts. But, as Olwell and Delph help point out (26-27), this lack of consistency among course offerings, often within a single department, can cause confusion. Students in a graduating group can leave a given department with uneven skill sets and grades that vary by more than one rubric, which can lead to students feeling they were treated unfairly. Barr and Tagg, writing in 1995, go so far as to claim that writing-across-the-curriculum “efforts” “have largely failed,” since across-the-curriculum concepts are usually sidelined by professors who attempt to cover a minimum range of discipline-based concepts, such as those relating to history or economics (19-20). Unfortunately, Barr and Tagg fail to support the cause-result relation of their claim with reference to any set of specific observations, so we must treat the claim itself as an over-generalization. Still, what we can safely claim is that when across-the-curriculum tenets are treated as second-priority topics

divorceable from the framework of a syllabus or when professors of various sections of a writing intensive course do not agree on what constitutes basic writing methodology, then it is likely that students are at risk of losing a dual opportunity: They may fail to use writing to develop both general critical thinking and discipline based skills.

A basic role, then, of the instructor of a general freshman writing course is to minimize student exposure to the above stated risk as much as possible. This is even more pressing for instructors who must proceed with their own syllabus design, with only very general guidelines concerning writing methodology provided by their home departments, as well as instructors who operate in a setting closed off from other disciplines and, who, therefore, cannot teach writing according to any firm knowledge of what, if any, writing instruction will follow later for the student. Below, I propose an outline of several features for a writing methodology that can impart to novice college students the skills needed to make the most of both their freshman writing experience as well as writing opportunities that arise in other academic contexts. At the very least, instructors of general writing courses might consider what role, if any, the following concepts ought to play in their own writing methodologies.

Interdisciplinarity

The first and most basic question we ought to ask about an approach to teaching freshman college writing concerns the course's relationship to other academic fields. As mentioned above, many major schools in the U.S. provide students with a general composition course in addition to field-based courses that are designated as writing intensive. We might safely assume that students will receive some reprise of basic writing principles in the latter, but we must also assume that students will stand to gain more from such classes if they understand the requirements posed by academic writing upon completing their freshman course.

One way to better prepare freshmen writers for future writing assignments is to make clear and explicit the commonalities shared between what they do as freshman writers and what they will be asked to do in their chosen majors.

Olwell and Delph's description of the extensive undertaking in curriculum re-design of Eastern Michigan University's History 300 "research and writing methods class" (21) underscores such a need. The committee overseeing the project initially set out to read all essays produced for all sections of the course in order to determine improved ways of teaching writing methods in the course (23). Their review showed that the writing sample broadly suffered from three major problems: the absence of a clearly stated thesis, hurried draft-work completed outside of the writing-as-process model, and a simplistic dependence on "facts" (24) at the expense of attempts at critical analysis (24-27). The students of the initial assessment failed to understand the role thesis invention and development plays in the writing process or chose to avoid thesis cultivation because of its inherent difficulty. The authors correctly understood that widespread neglect of thesis development among student work revealed the most about the students' weakness as writers. It showed they would need practice in recognizing what counts as academically relevant analysis within the context of historical scholarship. Only then could they move on to devising hypotheses of their own in preparation for the thesis project of the course (24). This led the committee to re-design History 300 so that it employed a writing-as-process model (24). In this way, students would receive credit for completing pre-writing activities as well as stages of their final project, such as a proposal, "annotated bibliography," and piecemeal draft work (25-28). As Çavdar and Doe note, such scaffolding allows students to develop "increasingly complex skill sets" (300).

We must believe it likely that an academic rehearsal in the freshman writing course increases student preparedness for writing intensive field-based courses. To believe otherwise is to cast doubt upon the basic role and value of the freshman writing survey. While teachers of freshman composition do not train students as writers specifically from the point of view of, say, professional historians, sociologists, chemists, etc., they can guide students through a model of critique and writing-as-process, one which illustrates the minimum requirements posed by academic writing, no matter the field in which it is undertaken. Freshman writing instructors, alone or together as a committee, are tasked with outlining what is the

academic model that best represents the features of critical analysis and writing shared across the disciplines. Without an approach to analysis and writing that is explicitly interdisciplinary, teachers of freshman writing put their students at risk of failing to develop basic skills of inquiry, critique, and communication. In addition, students, as writers, may later fail to make the most of opportunities to use writing to explore a specific discipline.

However, even when a promising model has been articulated, its successful application requires not merely proper instruction but successful effort made on the part of the student to discover its relevance to inquiry in other disciplines. Olwell and Delph prudently choose to assign fault neither to the training their students received as freshmen nor to the students themselves. Instead, they merely acknowledge the widespread absence of a basic skill:

In defense of our students, we must note that this lack of a thesis should not be taken as a sign of student ineptness or apathy. Even books on how to write a history paper offer little attention to this topic. In fact, it is assumed in our field that undergraduates know how to formulate a thesis, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. (24)

Obviously, there is little point for either the authors or the oversight committee of History 300 to swerve off course and inquire into the students' failure to appreciate the roles thesis and process play in academic writing. But if such a problem is chronic among students, year after year, this would likely stem from either a failure in earlier instruction, or just as likely, a tendency on the part of students to see their freshman writing experience as exceptional, a unique event, rather than prepping for later work. Even given an ideal situation in which an academically oriented writing program is applied uniformly to freshmen students, there is no guarantee that students will recognize how writing and inquiry across the disciplines coalesce around a shared paradigm of inquiry.

The Primacy of the Text

The academic rehearsal of the freshman writing survey course is organized around the text. By "text" we refer both to an object and rigorous process through which ideas are critiqued. An essential determiner of

this rigor is what we commonly refer to as college-level vocabulary and syntax, but it also entails the steps researchers take in posing questions, introducing a claim, and providing evidence for a claim in a logical way. Textual forms vary depending both on context and discipline, but we can define the text as inclusive of any document that might be used as a basis for further communication. For example, in this sense, in addition to essays and chapters, films, videos, photographs, advertisements, interview transcripts, lab reports and lectures with notes all possess textual attributes: they can be referred to as having prompted both observation and analysis on the part of the writer.

Before moving on to major writing projects, students ought to have mastered basic reading operations, such as locating a thesis and using summary and paraphrase to clarify an article or chapter's contribution to an academic discussion. Once students gain familiarity with the major ways texts are used as a basis for ordered critique, they should consider specific texts as writing models. The introductory writing course may be the only structured opportunity in college for students to reflect upon what constitutes effective verbal-and specifically written-communication. Making the most of this opportunity means using well-focused prompts to assess sentences and paragraphs written by both professionals and students. Students should be able to explain the intended role of each part of a text. And by the end of the course, they should be able to confidently state whether a portion of text succeeds or fails at, in the words of Janet Emig, "signal[-ing] without ambiguity the nature of conceptual relationships" (126). Ultimately, the freshman writing course provides students with an overview of the manner in which professional academics name and consider specific issues within a field, and the text is the key vehicle through which this is done. Given this, it is advisable for the writing instructor to guide students in exploring texts from more than one field. Such interdisciplinary activity can help demonstrate that the freshman course and specific disciplines share an underlying set of academic conventions.

Two Processes

In treating the introductory writing course as a staging ground for further academic work, it is important to cultivate student awareness of two major processes and the relationship each shares with the other. Doing so can be of immense help to students when they later take on writing projects in their chosen fields of study. According to Olwell and Delph, when the Department of History and Philosophy at Eastern Michigan University redesigned History 300, it did so “to insure that students were thinking critically about history and had developed a thesis out of their research before they began writing the first drafts of their papers” (24). The students of History 300, or any other college course, would hopefully attempt to complete a draft in stages. In doing so, they would give ample consideration to reframing structure and revising verbal composition according to the purposes of the assignment and the final thesis. Approaching writing in this way is commonly referred to as writing as process, but this process is only ever one set of stages within the larger process of an academic investigation.

So the task of the college writing instructor should involve situating writing tasks and projects within a specific context of academic inquiry, the very one that invests a chosen writing topic with significance. One of the major challenges faced by the writer is identifying the purpose according to which one should write, and for participants in an academic field, one writes to contribute to a discussion about an issue the field has recognized as worthy of investigation. While the writing instructor cannot and should not duplicate a field-specific course, he or she must amply illustrate why, when, and how academicians write. Olwell and Delph claim that many students in the redesigned version of History 300 were faced with a “crisis.” They struggled to grasp the nature of historical critique and the role the thesis ought to play in their investigations (25). Rather than re-cultivate a new way of conceiving historical scholarship, many students chose to “drop” the class (25). The model of inquiry Olwell and Delph describe is not unique in its general form and rigor to history: It is shared by all the major college disciplines, particularly those considered part of the humanities. And in order to prepare students as much as possible for future writing endeavors, instructors should

both contextualize assignments as part of academic investigations and treat the thesis essay as the exclusive tool for contributing ideas to an academic discussion.

Learning Tasks and Introspection

The purpose of the freshman writing course is to introduce students to the major conventions that order academic discourse. As previously stated, the instructor should place special emphasis on the relationship that binds a chosen topic to a specific field of inquiry. It is just as crucial that students set out to grasp the underlying purpose and set of values that motivate inquiry. The students need not embrace such a purpose and set of values, but as readers and, especially as writers, they need to identify what motivates a community of inquirers to pose problems, investigate them and share their results with one another.

Before students can appreciate such motivations, they often struggle to gain immediate access to the ideas of the first set of academic texts they encounter. For example, they may fail to locate and understand a text's thesis, key examples, analogies, illustrations as well as what signifies the text's contribution to a larger discussion. A key challenge for the instructor is to help students understand the role played by each major part of a text. The specific prompts used to help students understand texts and writing assignments will determine how prepared they will be to grasp a field-based project in terms of its academic schema. It is not enough, therefore, for instructors to offer general descriptions of assignment goals. The instructor must prompt the student to perform the very set of tasks that a fully initiated member of an academic field would perform. This often means asking the student to explicitly state the relationship between a text's controlling theme and supporting points (either verbal or visual). If they are unable to do this, the instructor can take a step back with the student and quiz them about the meanings, both explicit and implied, which are employed by the text's themes. In addition, especially for early assignments, this sort of atomizing of tasks might mean asking students to write an essay that explores one of two thesis statements provided by the instructor. Understanding only one

thesis may prompt them to wonder why they fail to understand the other. And comparing the writing requirements posed by each thesis may involve a more thorough review of concepts than the students would have otherwise performed. This sort of comparison exercise prompts students to engage in the first of many acts of self-assessment, which involves the act of positioning oneself in relation to other perspectives and in doing so recognizing one's "own biases" (Çavdar and Doe 302). Biases or predispositions may in fact lead to a failed attempt either to grasp basic concepts or produce writing that satisfies the requirements of a project. As numerous writers have pointed out, such a lack on the part of the student is actually the very fulcrum upon which productive introspection and learning rest (see Çavdar and Doe 300; Russell and Harms 230). For this reason, the instructor should produce written instructions for both minor and major assignments. Later, the instructor can meet with students at select stages to discuss the student's first attempts to complete an assignment. The instructor can use the written instructions as a way to prompt the student to offer a self-critique. Ultimately, the instructor must determine the sort of scaffolding needed to help students identify the micro tasks that lead to completion of a project of which the thesis essay is the capstone. Through sustained self-critique, the student names and performs such tasks independently, making his or her own efforts match those of the field's fully initiated members.

Conclusion

The influence of writing-across-the-curriculum has been far-reaching. It has made scholars in specific fields of study aware of the need to teach students about the role writing plays in academic investigations. But this influence has not led to field-based writing instruction replacing the freshman survey course. The latter is still the chief means by which college students are first exposed to conventions of academic inquiry and trained in basic academic writing techniques. Given this, the survey course ought to serve as the first stage of induction of the student into a specific academic discipline.

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