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ABSTRACT

Two instruments were used to discover current faculty practices and attitudes about student writing at a college that was about to begin a college-wide writing program. The attitude survey included a number of items about writing as a college-wide enterprise, relating instruction in writing to the goals of a liberal arts education, and concerning writing as a complex process that takes a lifetime to learn. The behavior survey asked teachers to tell what they did in their classes. Also, teachers were asked to grade a sample student essay as they would any paper in their courses. It was found that most faculty members saw composition instruction as the task of the entire college; English faculty members required more papers than others, although a majority of courses included writing assignments; and most faculty members commented on the content of student writing as well as on the form. (Both questionnaires are included.) (TJ)

MEASURING BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDE IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING AMONG FACULTIES IN VARIOUS DISCIPLINES

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Panel: Reports on Empirical Research in Composition

Moderator: Edward P. J. Corbett

MEASURING BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDE IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING AMONG FACULTIES IN VARIOUS DISCIPLINES[1]

Back in graduate school when I was learning to be a literary scholar, I did research, but it was usually not on composition and it certainly wasn't empirical. Now I stand before you at a meeting of the Modern Language Association to report on an empirical study of faculty attitudes toward writing. Ten years ago, a measure had something to do with iambic pentameter. Today, I am willingly implicated in measuring an attitude.

Since I am becoming an empiricist, I am interested in the etymology of the word. In the ancient world, the empirici were a sect of physicians who drew their rules of practice entirely from experience to the exclusion of philosolphical theory. In doing so they were opposed to the dogmatici, who have given their name to other tendencies. In the sixteenth century, according to the OED, we have the first written record of British physicians designated as empirics. Sometimes the reference meant that the doctor was one who relied solely on observation and experiment: he refrained from leeching, perhaps, because he observed that his patients rarely got better from the practice, even though medical authority approved bloodletting. Other times, however, the term empiric designated someone who was unlearned in medical theory and who relied on trial and error, not from a belief in the value of objective observation, but for a much simpler reason: he was a quack.

Those of us who teach composition have all, if we dare to admit it, been empirics in the lesser sense. Without a coherent theory or even a viable scholarly tradition, we have depended on trial and error in our classes. The reports of our activities have been more experiential than experimental, more anecdotal than replicable. Still, we have never been quacks.

[1] This research was supported in part by a program grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

And now we are turning to our colleagues who learned a different tradition in graduate school, and we are asking them to help us become empiricists in the more modern sense: practictioners of the experimental method. We are learning to use observation and experiment to search for knowledge about the teaching of writing. And we are proceeding with caution. Experimental psychologists define four stages in empirical research: to describe, to explain, to predict, to control. This paper on faculty attitudes toward writing is mainly descriptive.

There have been very few descriptions of the attitudes of college faculty toward writing, and those that do exist are frequently used to predict other points. John A. Daly (1976) has constructed a questionnaire which he has circulated to faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. That questionnaire deals mainly with feelings of writing apprehension among college faculty and relates to his earlier work, published in Research in the Teaching of English (1975).

George Klinger (1977) has done work more directly related to our own, although there are important differences. Klinger sent a hypothetical student essay to a randomly selected group of college teachers. He then rated them on their ability to detect errors in spelling, diction, grammar, punctuation, and other features. As we are about to report, we also used a student essay--but a real one--as part of our survey. Our focus was not on the teachers' ability or desire to catch errors. In our comments in that area we try to be descriptive and explanatory, without being judgmental.

Steven Zemelman's survey (1977) of faculty attitudes at Livingston College, Rutgers University, and Laurence Behrens' study (1978) of faculty attitudes at American University are perhaps most closely related to the present study. Zemelman conducted a series of extended interviews with eighteen faculty

members in the humanities and social sciences to find out what these teachers consciously know about students' writing and what concepts they use to analyse and encourage writing. Zemelman's interviews provide a thorough survey of the practices of his eighteen instructors.

Behrens surveys faculty perceptions of student literacy, attitudes toward types of errors and toward procedures for making assignments. Still, Behrens admits that his survey is a more accurate measure of what faculty members claim to think than of what they actually do.

Like Zemelman's study, the present one also includes a self-report of faculty practices. All parts of our survey, unlike Zemelman's, are done with paper and pencil rather than through interview. Besides the section on practices our survey includes two other parts: an attitude questionnaire and a sample student essay that faculty members were asked to respond to as they normally would to work submitted in their courses. Thus, our research into faculty behavior and attitudes in the teaching of writing involves a three-dimensional investigation: we asked faculty what they thought about writing and the teaching of writing; we asked them to tell us what they did in their classes; and then we asked them to show us how they responded to a real student essay.

All three types of faculty information (attitudes, practices, responses) were provided in December 1977, by sixty faculty and administrators at Beaver College, a liberal arts institution in suburban Philadelphia. Forty-seven faculty members and thirteen administrators participated in the survey. The full-time faculty at Beaver College totals only 60, so that we had 78% faculty response. We knew that the three-part survey would take at least forty-five minutes to complete, but we used a special incentive to insure that the questionnaires would be returned at approximately the same time from nearly everyone on the faculty. We offered each faculty member a simple lunch in the faculty dining room in return for a completed questionnaire. As a consequence, our subjects include faculty members from all departments at our liberal arts

college: ten in English; five in biology; five in education; five in psychology; four in sociology; three in history; three in fine arts; two in chemistry; two in foreign language; two in philosophy; two in math; two in music; one in business administration; one in religion; and two administrators whose duties always include some teaching.

Our sample is certainly representative of faculty attitudes at Beaver College, a liberal arts college which could be considered typical of many four-year, private institutions, with one important qualification. Three months before the collection of this data, Beaver College had been awarded a three-year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to establish a college-wide writing program. Fifteen faculty members had participated in a privately funded writing workshop during the previous January (1977), and most faculty members had attended a one-day conference to establish goals for the writing program. Without question, our data reflect the behavior and attitude of faculty members who are more aware than most about the teaching of writing. Even though we knew that a number of our subjects had already had their consciousness raised, we decided to proceed with our extensive survey. First of all, we believed that we could learn interesting things about the measurement of faculty attitudes even from a faculty that had already begun a process of conscious reassessment. Further, we had an additional purpose, not specifically relevant to the report we are presenting here. We were interested in collecting pre-test data on faculty attitudes at the beginning of the NEH program. We knew that the information collected in December 1977 was not really "base-line," but we hypothesized that the three-year NEH program would bring about enough significant change to make it worthwhile to develop an attitude and behavior survey before any further time had elapsed. When the NEH program concludes in 1980, we plan to use the instruments

described here to measure change in faculty attitude and behavior in the teaching of writing.

The attitude survey that you hold in your hands includes a number of items concerning writing as a college-wide enterprise. These items and several others were composed by the authors to gain specific information related to the objectives of the NEH writing program. Several items relate instruction in writing to the goals of a liberal arts education, and a number of items concern writing as a complex process that takes a lifetime to learn. We also reviewed existing questionnaires and found the most useful one to be the "Composition Opinionnaire," published by the National Council of Teachers of English. We asked two outside experts to complete the NCTE opinionnaire. We then culled that document for items on which they and we consistently indicated strong agreement or disagreement. After shaping 51 items into an appropriate format, we tested the resulting document on six additional experts--the people whom we had already invited to serve as future workshop leaders under the NEH program. Each expert completed the questionnaire independently. We then collated their responses and discarded the items on which they showed considerable disagreement. We believe that the remaining 41 items constitute an attitude survey which may be widely useful. Already, West Chester State College in Pennsylvania, an institution quite different from Beaver College, has used this instrument. We encourage you to use it for your own purposes, if you will just let us know that you are doing so.

If you do use the attitude survey, we would be particularly interested in comparing your results with ours at Beaver. In early December 1977, when the NEH program was only three months old, our entire faculty reported attitudes that we think are more sophisticated than those of faculty members

in general. For example, on item #5, "Providing instruction in writing is the exclusive concern of the English department," 100% of our experts had strongly disagreed; 92% of Beaver faculty members in all departments either strongly disagreed or disagreed. Clearly, our faculty already believed that it was wrong to dump all writing problems on the English department.

In fact, we have some evidence that on the issue of writing as a college-wide concern the Beaver College faculty members at the beginning of our program felt even more strongly than the experts had felt. On item #22, "Every faculty member at a liberal arts college should be able to help students to learn to write within the context of his own discipline," 98% of the faculty members agreed or strongly agreed, with 43% strongly agreeing. One hundred percent of our experts agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, but only 33% strongly agreed.

Beaver College faculty members also demonstrated a remarkable consensus on the teaching practices that might improve writing college-wide. On item #8, "Students should be encouraged to write and rewrite drafts before submitting a final paper," 100% of our experts agreed or strongly agreed, while 89% of our cross-disciplinary faculty agreed or strongly agreed before they had had an opportunity to study with any of these experts.

This pre-test data on the Beaver College faculty provides some empirical evidence for one of my favorite maxims: faculty commitment to a program always must precede the funding of the program.

Consequently, when we collect our post-test data in December 1980, we do not expect to see much change on some of the key items in the attitude survey. But we do expect to see change in faculty members' reports on their practices in teaching writing. In the pre-test data 89% of faculty members report either agreement or strong agreement with item #8, "Students should be encouraged to write and rewrite drafts before submitting a final paper." An

even higher percentage of Beaver faculty, 94% disagree or strongly disagree with item #40, "Pre-writing and editing are not essential parts of the writing process." Clearly, our faculty members in all departments believe that writing should be taught as a process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. But what about their practices? On the second section of our survey, only 71% of our faculty members reported that in some of their courses they provide some preliminary feedback to students on papers still in process, while 29% report that they do not provide preliminary feedback. Furthermore, 71% report also that they always or sometimes require a rough draft (17% always), while 28% report that they never do. Faculty attitudes are obviously not completely consistent with faculty practices. This finding is consonant with a summary of a number of studies (Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1971; Mausner, 1973), showing little or no relationship between attitudes and behavior.

In the attitude survey we did not see much difference between the beliefs of the English staff and the beliefs of the faculty as a whole. But we do see many interesting differences in practices. You will see that on Table I we asked instructors to break down their practices according to the courses that they were teaching in the current semester. We thought that this method of reporting might minimize the "fudge factor," since faculty members had to report present practices, not good intentions for the future, or vaguely remembered practices from the distant past.

The percentages on the hand-out indicate percentage of courses taught by members of the English department (in the first column) and by members of other departments (in the second column). It is important to note that English faculty as a rule teach one section of composition and two sections of literature each semester. Sometimes, we forget that English teachers frequently consider themselves to be "content" faculty in their upper-level courses. In

some upper-level English courses, faculty members may be just as jealous of time spent on writing as are their colleagues in other content courses. Consequently, we can see that at Beaver College in December 1977, papers were assigned in only 89% of courses taught by English faculty. (One English faculty member teaches introductory German, so that if we discount her course the percentage would be higher.) It was gratifying to see that papers were required in 74% of the college courses outside the English department. At least, at Beaver College we found no confirmation of the myth that students never have to write papers after they leave English courses. In 54% of Beaver College courses outside the English department, students will probably encounter essay exams, and in 49% of the courses an evaluation of the student's written expression will affect the overall evaluation of the answer. In 37% of the courses a student will be penalized for writing an answer in outline rather than paragraph form.

On the question of the teacher's role as the student is in the process of composing, we decided that it was more useful here to permit respondents to generalize about their practices in terms of always, sometimes, never. The percentages in Table II, therefore, refer to percentage of respondents. When they assign a major paper, 80% of the English faculty ask for a statement of topic, contrasted to 61% of the other faculty members; 30% of the English faculty always ask for a rough draft, while only 14% of the non-English faculty always do so. As might be expected, our data confirm that at least as of December 1977, the English department takes more pains with student writing than do faculty members in other departments.

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Panel: Reports on Empirical Research in Composition
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Table I

	English courses	Other courses
I require papers in ___ of my courses.	89%	74%
I comment on grammar, spelling, and organization as well as on mastery of concepts in papers in ___ of my courses.	89%	73%
I provide some preliminary feedback on papers while they are in the process of being written in ___ of my courses.	81%	52%
I use essay exam questions in ___ of my courses.	81%	54%
When I evaluate and grade essay exam questions, I give some consideration to the written expressions, as well as to the content in ___ of my courses.	81%	49%
I penalize students who merely outline their answers without writing their answers in paragraph form in ___ of my courses.	81%	37%

Table II

While students are working on a major paper, I require them to submit:	English Faculty			Other Faculty		
	always	sometimes	never	always	sometimes	never
a statement of topic	80%	20%	0%	61%	33%	5%
outline	20%	50%	30%	10%	69%	19%
first paragraph	30%	40%	30%	8%	23%	69%
rough draft	30%	60%	10%	14%	53%	33%

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At least, that is what we found from the self-report of practices. When we looked at written responses on the last part of our survey--the sample student essay--we found some other interesting differences and similarities between the response patterns of English and non-English faculty.

The essay, which is part of your hand-out, is a real essay written by a Beaver freshman as part of her placement testing before the start of fall classes. As you see in the directions to the faculty, they are asked to respond to the essay as they would respond to a piece of writing submitted in one of their classes. In this, as in any role-playing exercise, some will respond more conscientiously than usual and others will respond hurriedly. We think that these two tendencies average each other out and that the data we present here may be a fairly accurate reflection of the way that faculty members deal with the essay of a basic writer.

I think that we would all agree that the essay is poor. The student in question was one of only thirty Beaver freshmen who were placed in our Basic Writing course, which precedes our regular composition program. We selected an essay with many problems because of Zemelman's finding that faculty members often show more concern "with more successful and more advanced students, and less with those who need it most" (1977, p.232). We wanted to see what our liberal arts faculty would do with the work of this poor stranger to the conventions of academic discourse.

Barbara Nodine and I read through all the faculty comments on all of the essays. We then devised categories for patterns of response. We tried out these categories, revised them, and then verified our categories by scoring together.

Even in our preliminary scanning of the essays, one encouraging pattern was clear: nearly all of our faculty members in all departments wrote comments of some kind on the essay's phrase, Beaver College instructors were "diving in" (1976) to give serious consideration to the work of this basic writer. Thirty-eight percent of the full faculty wrote some type of positive or encouraging comment; 43% phrased some of their comments negatively. Thirteen percent of the faculty wrote both positive and negative comments. We categorized many comments as neutral.

Fifty-nine percent of the full faculty made at least one comment on the ideas in the paper. We used Paul Diederich's (1974) factor analysis as a guide to some of our categories. Thus, we categorized comments as related to ideas, wording, organization, and syntax. But faculty in English were much more likely to address themselves to the ideas in the paper than were the faculty members in other disciplines. Ninety percent of the English faculty responded to the ideas in the paper, while only 51% of the faculty outside English did so. This finding is significant because it calls into question the belief that English faculty are more interested in form than in content. According to our data, English faculty members are interested in both, even in the paper of a basic writer.

We found that 49% of the faculty commented on the wording of the essay: 60% of the English faculty versus 46% of the others. We also found that 43% of the faculty commented on organization (50% of the English faculty and 41% of the others.).

We also examined the tendency of faculty members to rewrite parts of this essay for the student. From the whole faculty, 55% did some rewriting, and we counted them even if they suggested only a single-word revision. Of the faculty

outside English 65% did some rewriting while only 20% of the English faculty did any at all. We believe that this difference in response is significant. It may be that the English faculty feel more adept at giving cues to [illegible] students themselves rewrite, while the faculty outside Engli[illegible] how to make something sound better but not how to get the student to make it sound better.

English faculty and non-English faculty show some interesting similarities and differences in terms of the number of circled errors in surface features: punctuation, syntax, and spelling. Barbara and I see 27 errors of this sort on this paper. Ninety percent of the English faculty circled errors with an average of 16.55 errors. Ninety-seven percent of other faculty members circled errors for a lower average 12.97; however, 13% circled only one, two, or three mistakes, and we interpret this circling of just a few errors to mean that these instructors were not intent upon finding errors. The English department faculty circled a range of from 10 to 26 errors, while the non-English faculty circled a range of from 1 to 29. Clearly, if an English department faculty member decided to circle errors at all, he did it with some degree of diligence. This finding may confirm my own belief that English department faculty members have a twitch in the wrist when they hold a red pen and cannot refrain from marking the errors that they see.

The tendency to circle errors also seems to be related to faculty members' attitudes about the importance of instruction in grammar. Specifically, we related tendency to circle errors in syntax, spelling, and punctuation to item #3 on the attitude survey, "The most important part of instruction in writing involves a review of standard grammar and rules for conforming to

conventional spelling." Thirteen faculty members had strong views on this issue, i.e., they indicated a one or a five. The faculty members who strongly agreed circled an average of 16.3 errors on the student essay, while the faculty members who strongly disagreed circled an average of only 8.1 errors. Here we see that the practices of faculty members who have strong feelings on this subject are consistent with their attitudes. When we looked at the fours, twos, and threes, those feelings were not so intense for we did not find this consistency.

Several faculty members who circled errors also wrote "Come to see me" or "Rewrite." In fact, 45% of the whole faculty gave advice of this sort. We cannot ascertain from the data whether the "See-me" injunction indicates that the instructor wants to confer with the student about rewriting the draft or whether the instructor wants to confer with the student about leaving the college. "See me" can be either an invitation or a threat.

We found that 17% of the faculty did offer clear, procedural advice, although the quality of that advice, in our view, seemed mixed. One faculty member, for example, told the student always to make an outline before writing anything. Our post-test data may give us a clearer view of ways to differentiate the quality of this procedural advice.

One thing is clear to us already: teachers scrawl important messages in the margins of students' papers. From these messages students learn about writing and about themselves as writers. Students receive these messages from all faculty members, not just from the teachers of their English courses. In fact, the message sent by the instructor who requires no writing may be the most powerful message of all. In that sense, at least, our colleagues in other fields are all writing teachers. In 1963, Albert Kitzhaber reported

that Dartmouth faculty members outside English departments were unwilling to assist in the teaching of writing, since it was simpler for them merely to put the blame on the English department. Our data indicate that faculty members who are not in English can develop much more positive attitudes. And our evidence is empirical. We have explained our procedures; we have presented operational definitions of our measuring devices; and we have attempted to observe without bias, although as a newcomer to this tradition, I must confess that at some points I was secretly rooting for the forces of light to defeat the forces of darkness. But knowledge itself is the only real light, and the more we know about what teachers think and do, the better chance we have to improve instruction in writing.

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BEAVER COLLEGE SURVEY OF FACULTY ATTITUDES ABOUT WRITING

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(Some items adapted from Composition Opinionnaire, National Council of Teachers of English)

DIRECTIONS: Please read each statement carefully and decide into which category you think the statement falls. There is no right or wrong answer. Please circle one number for each statement and do not leave any statement unmarked. The categories are as follows:

Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)

1. Since each instructor teaches the language of his/her discipline, to that extent we are all language teachers. 1 2 3 4 5

2. The way something is said changes what is said. To a very important extent, form and content are inseparable. 1 2 3 4 5

3. The most important part of instruction in writing involves a review of standard grammar and rules for conforming to conventional spelling. 1 2 3 4 5

4. Instruction in writing is instruction in the composing process. 1 2 3 4 5

5. Providing instruction in writing is the exclusive concern of the English department. 1 2 3 4 5

6. Writing cannot be used to teach concepts in the subject disciplines but only to test if concepts have been learned. 1 2 3 4 5

7. The ability to write is unimportant to most students in their future careers. 1 2 3 4 5

8. Students should be encouraged to write and rewrite drafts before submitting a final paper. 1 2 3 4 5

9. It is important for an instructor to give helpful feedback on a student's preliminary drafts for papers. 1 2 3 4 5

10. It is more important to give students a chance to write several drafts of a single paper than it is to require them to do several separate written projects. 1 2 3 4 5

11. Good writing is difficult for most people. 1 2 3 4 5

12. Most instructors, even in English, have some insecurities about their writing. 1 2 3 4 5

13. Instructors who have insecurities about their own writing can still help students to write better. 1 2 3 4 5

14. Most professional writers prepare several [illegible] ything they write. 1 2 3 4 5

15. An instructor should always require a formal outline as the first step in the writing process. 1 2 3 4 5

16. It is possible to use writing to find an idea before one uses writing to express that idea. 1 2 3 4 5

17. Students should be encouraged to brainstorm on paper and then to organize those ideas. 1 2 3 4 5

18. It is a bad idea to have a writing proficiency requirement for graduation. 1 2 3 4 5

19. It is a good idea for faculty to share their own writing with students. 1 2 3 4 5

20. Most skilled writers by the age of 21 are writing as clearly and effectively as they ever will. 1 2 3 4 5

21. Writing that is simple, clear, and concise is good writing in all disciplines. 1 2 3 4 5

22. Every faculty member at a liberal arts college should be able to help students to learn to write within the context of his own discipline. 1 2 3 4 5

23. A teacher should help a student to write a better paper by providing detailed instructions. 1 2 3 4 5

24. A faculty member should assign specific penalties for mechanical errors--for example, one point off for each error. 1 2 3 4 5

25. Grades are the most effective way of evaluating compositions. 1 2 3 4 5

26. There is significant research evidence to prove that drill in grammar and usage, apart from practice in composition, will improve student writing. 1 2 3 4 5

27. Television programs and films can be used effectively to provide topics for students' writing. 1 2 3 4 5

28. Little improvement in writing will be obtained by teaching students devices for strengthening the continuity of thought from one sentence to the next. 1 2 3 4 5

29. A good teacher should forbid students to begin sentences with and, or, for, or but. 1 2 3 4 5

30. In some compositions, it is appropriate for students to use the first person pronoun. 1 2 3 4 5

31. The instructor should [illegible] for every paper [illegible] write. 1 2 3 4 5

32. It is helpful to use trained undergraduate writing assistants to help read and comment on first drafts of student papers. 1 2 3 4 5

33. Writing conferences are important for students in all disciplines. 1 2 3 4 5

34. In some courses, writing conferences can be conducted by undergraduate writing assistants. 1 2 3 4 5

35. Students who speak freely and fluently are always good writers. 1 2 3 4 5

36. Standard written English is a conventional code that can be learned by speakers of all dialects. 1 2 3 4 5

37. It is necessary to correct students' speech before they can learn to write better. 1 2 3 4 5

38. It is too time-consuming for teachers of diverse disciplines to work together on the teaching of writing. 1 2 3 4 5

39. Correct and effective writing should be required of all students before graduation from college. 1 2 3 4 5

40. Pre-writing and editing are not essential parts of the writing process. 1 2 3 4 5

41. If students still make errors in grammar and spelling after a composition course, they have not received adequate instruction in writing. 1 2 3 4 5