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AUTHOR Raimes, Ann
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ABSTRACT

A semester-long faculty seminar at Hunter College involved teachers from 14 disciplines in weekly meetings regarding writing in the subject areas. Although the teachers read literature on writing and heard from outside writing experts, they spent most of the time working together on designing and criticizing writing assignments for their classes and on examining students' papers. Among the learnings of the teachers were that fundamental writing skills do not vary across disciplines and that students gain understanding of a subject through writing about it. The group eventually wrote a report including recommendations for writing across the curriculum, for types of writing assignments, for course changes, and for a college-wide committee to monitor writing requirements and college-wide policies on the amount of writing expected in different types of courses. Among the insights gained by the English teachers who moderated the seminar were that writing teachers should move students from personal to academic writing as soon as possible and should choose writing topics based on key concepts in other disciplines, that the teaching of the basics of acceptable writing belongs in basic writing courses or in tutorial centers, and that writing teachers must assign writing topics that enable students to write to learn at the same time that they are learning to write. (GT)

WRITING AND LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:

THE EXPERIENCE OF A FACULTY SEMINAR

A paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, April 1979 by

Ann Raimes

Hunter College

City University of New York

WRITING AND LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: THE EXPERIENCE OF A FACULTY SEMINAR

The idea of writing across the curriculum is not new. It has been talked about extensively at conferences like MLA, NCTE, and CCCC, it is being written about in journals, funding agencies are pouring money into it, and schools are getting large grants to institutionalize what was once taken for granted: that students are expected to write in college courses, and to write well. We hear of large schools, such as the University of Iowa, offering more than twenty courses in advanced expository writing; we hear of other large schools, such as the University of Michigan, setting up a freshman composition course followed by a sophomore-year course within a subject area, though still taught by English faculty. Other schools get their whole faculty together for a few weeks while they examine their own writing process and the literature in the field, and then set up interdisciplinary courses and team-teaching. This can be done when the campus is small and rural and when the total number of students in the school is lower than the number in some schools' developmental writing programs. It is at the schools where the writing problems are most severe that it is hardest to get the faculty involved. Why? The students are generally more underprepared than ever before, the colleges are beset by financial crises and questions of survival, teaching loads are up, class size is up, enrollment in specialized courses is shrinking. When a university suddenly closes down and does not pay its faculty for two weeks, student literacy is not the hottest issue on campus.

There is much, I am sure, that those from institutions like the City University of New York will find familiar in that list of obstacles. To think of subject area faculty eagerly attending summer institutes or two-week workshops to examine the problem of literacy across the curriculum would seem like a fantasy. Yet all complain about the way students write in their courses. What is needed is a local, grassroots movement, a slow relentless pounding away at the issues involved, getting a few faculty outside the English department to begin thinking about writing and learning and coaching their colleagues, and getting a few English faculty to discover the problems these teachers face.

We began a movement like this at Hunter College, a branch of the City University of New York, with a faculty seminar backed not just by the English department but by the administration as a whole, particularly by the Provost and the Dean of Humanities and Arts. This support was crucial, stamping the ~~venture~~ project from the outset as college-wide. The interdisciplinary seminar was planned as a whole semester's venture, with National Endowment for the Humanities grant-funded released time for participating faculty members. We rejected the models used by other schools of seminars held during the summer or intersession or over weekends. In such seminars the members, deprived of the laboratory of the classroom, resort to writing themselves and examining their own products and processes. We did not want to confront the problem of students' writing indirectly by simulation and substitution. We had the real thing right there. So we planned a weekly two-hour meeting throughout a semester, so that we could move from the classroom to the seminar and back again. Faculty members who could not really see what

writing had to do with them or with their particular discipline (wasn't that the job of the English department?) were supported in their efforts to assign writing and to see what their students learned from the assignment.

The two of us from the English department who moderated the seminar, Charles Persky and myself, knew that one required course in expository writing was far from a guarantee of felicitous prose forever. We knew about student writers' plateaus and apparent

regressions as they confront new vocabulary and concepts in their elective courses. But we decided not to lecture on what we knew. Instead, we organized the seminar so that teachers would confront what they meant by "remedial," by "good writing," and by "poor thinking," all in the context of their own students' papers. We did include some of the standard activities of seminars, though. We read a great deal of literature on writing (many articles, a general bibliography, and an annotated bibliography from a search of the ERIC data base were distributed), and we had two sessions devoted to hearing from outside experts: Professors Sharon Pianko and Robert Parker from Rutgers and Jerome Tognoli from C.W. Post College. We spent most of our time, however, exploring Hunter College writing and the issues it raised within the disciplines represented in the seminar: Music, Nursing, Educational Foundations, Curriculum and Teaching, Black and Puerto Rican Studies, Mathematics, Art History, Philosophy, Biology, Romance Languages, Health Sciences, Home Economics, Classics, and English.

So rather than listening to lectures or examining our own composing processes, we worked together on what are usually solitary activities. We designed writing assignments for our classes, criticized each other's assignments, and examined and evaluated students' papers. We were able to see how an early short writing sample might predict our students' writing ability in later longer papers. And even though we probably started out with as widely divergent views on writing as the range of disciplines we came from, when we looked together at what our students were writing for us

we began to see some recurring underlying principles and common goals. We saw that the fundamental writing skills did not vary from one subject to another. Across the curriculum it was necessary for our students to use correct grammar and syntax, to express and illustrate ideas clearly, to marshal arguments, and to provide evidence. Only in more advanced courses would they need skills specific to the disciplines. We saw also that a grasp of the fundamental skills could fluctuate ; what appeared to be in control at the end of the required course in composition could become tenuous as the student concentrated on the terminology and conceptual basis of a new subject.

Our seminar should have been called "Writing in the Subject Areas" rather than "Teaching Writing in the Subject Areas." Most members could admit to writing being within the province of their course; it was the "teaching" that bothered them. They felt they simply could not justify using class time to teach writing. Even if they had time for it, they didn't know how to teach organization, style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. They could perhaps correct these things, but not teach them.

We did all see a value, however, in assigning plenty of writing to our students. The main value is that students develop a richer understanding of their subject if they write about it than if they don't. One participant said that she could have saved time in her classes by assigning writing on topics she had been lecturing about. We agreed generally that only continual grappling on paper with the concepts of a discipline ensures the grasp of those concepts.

These agreements did not come immediately. It was not easy for seventeen teachers from fourteen different disciplines to reach a consensus. As moderators of the seminar, Charles Persky and I trod an uneasy tightrope between neutral chairing and teacher training. It took a long time for us as a group to work out all the difficulties that arise when faculty members of a large urban school, meeting each other and engaging intellectually with each other for the first time, are expected to work together productively. What was encouraging was that in spite of the difficulties, a consensus of recommendations did emerge, which derived solely from an examination of the problem: student writing.

We reported our findings to the college administration and faculty, recommending the use of writing as a learning tool across the curriculum, with short, ungraded writing samples early in the semester, more shorter papers, with revision, in place of one term paper, clearer course prerequisites, new courses or syllabus changes to accommodate the specific writing needs of particular disciplines, a committee structure throughout the college to establish and monitor writing requirements, and "publicly-stated, college-wide policies on the amount of writing normally expected in different types of courses."

That report (available in full from me at the Writing Center, Hunter College, 695 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10021) is now being discussed in college departments and committees. As a result, some

individual faculty members are already beginning to give more writing assignments, integrated into the structure of their courses, and seminar members are not only proposing new courses in writing within their subjects but are raising the whole issue of writing in the discipline at their department meetings.

The report of findings and recommendations does not, however, tell the full picture of what went on in the seminar. Little surfaces there of the bewilderment, confusion, even hostility aired in the early sessions. As seminar members discovered deficiencies not only in their own students' writing but in their own phrasing of assignments and directions for writing, and as they came to realize that answers to problems were there to be discovered in the data before them provided by their students and would not be provided by experts, those of us primarily concerned with English and with the teaching of writing made discoveries, too. If writing and learning were intimately related in subject courses, then they were in writing courses as well.

As a teacher of remedial writing courses, I came away from the seminar with some valuable insights into my own classroom activities and assignments. From seeing the topics assigned to my students in other courses and the criteria used for evaluating their writing, I perceived more clearly than ever the necessity for writing teachers to make the move from personal writing to academic writing as soon as possible. Students need practice in objective, logical reasoning. Academic writing is what college courses demand, and writing courses

should include it directly and not by analogy and implication. We cannot trust that once students learn to write a lively personal essay they will move into a political science paper with ease.

The modes of discourse—definition, comparison and contrast and the like—once they are removed from the artificiality of composition textbooks (in which students are asked to describe a room, to explain how to find a date, to define a hippie, and to compare and contrast college students and high school students) take on new meaning for students asked to define "optimal wellness" in a Nursing course or to compare "the circulation of fluids in higher plants and in higher animals" in a Biology class. As these modes are so obviously a feature of academic writing, and as some particularly seem to recur in writing for specific disciplines, why do we writing teachers and textbooks constantly remove the topics from academe? We should not leave it to the students to jump unaided the large gap between the definition of "success" in a one-hour essay in a writing class and the definition of "democracy" as a key concept in a political science paper. The academic setting we are in can surely help us find topics for our students.

Take spatial description with details, for example. This is a mode frequently assigned in writing classes and texts, usually close to the beginning of the course so that students can produce "personal" writing describing familiar settings. But detailed description of a visual form is asked for constantly in art history courses. When our students describe a painting in their writing course, they are thus not only learning to write description; their writing will help them think and learn about a work of art. If we writing teachers choose not to derive topics

from our own subject matter in English—that is, literature— we can turn for inspiration to the most common modes of discourse demanded in other disciplines: process description in biology, problem-solution in the social sciences, definition in political science, for example. We can then devise topics related to those disciplines, topics that might at least introduce students to some basic terminology and concepts of the subjects. Students who deal in their writing courses with themes, concepts, and organizing schema essential to disciplines they will later study gain something far more valuable than they do from a rapid survey of their opinions on crime, TV, and drugs.

As well as being aware of the specific modes of discourse associated with academic subjects, we writing teachers should also be aware of the technical terms and the specialized use of everyday words in different disciplines. A student who varies set with group in order to avoid repetition in a mathematics paper has made a mistake. We also cannot make pronouncements about desirable sentence length and sentence structure across the board. What we might accept or teach as a "good" sentence in one discipline ("The tradition of French painting, of space, sensuality, beauty, and lyricism has been violated and denied by Picasso ") might well be unacceptable in mathematics, which demands that a list be complete and inclusive. Again, a student who has been introduced to sentence embedding as a desirable stylistic device might, as Biology professor Ezra Shahn pointed out to our seminar, write, "The Hershey-

Case experiment, which used radioactive isotopes of phosphorus and sulfur to distinguish between DNA and protein, showed DNA was the genetic material." But in an essay which is simply to describe the experiment, all that is unnesessary. "The Hershey-Case experiemnt showed DNA was the genetic material" does not throw away information that needs to be more fully explicated.

Generally, though, while each discipline begins to reveal its "voice" by its most frequently-used modes of discourse, its vocabulary and its ~~[illegible]~~ even common sentence structures, nevertheless, syntax and grammar do cross all boundaries, and subject-area teachers are rightly concerned about them. But they are also right to feel they cannot devote class time to dealing with these basics. When they tell students that grammar, spelling, and sentence structure "don't count," they are simply acknowledging their reluctance to teach or even to correct basic writing. And when they classify structural errors like missing -ed endings as spelling errors, their reluctance is understandable, based as it is on insufficient training and classroom practice. The basics of writing acceptably—grammar, punctuation, mechanics, idiomatic usage, and sentence structure—belong in basic writing classes or in a tutorial center with trained tutors.

The clearest lesson that I took away with me from the seminar was the reinforcement of the notion that my students must always be writing to learn at the same time as they are learning to write. Choosing and assigning topics therefore takes on prime importance. Remedial students especially need to make use of every opportunity to "catch up," so in our writing classes, where they do a great

deal of writing, we can provide opportunities for them to learn not only about writing—the topic sentence, the embedded sentence, the transition and all that—but also about the subjects they are writing about. Subject area teachers continually criticize students' writing as too subjective and autobiographical. The students, they say, have not read and assimilated enough information, they have not grasped the basic concepts, they have not had enough practice with writing logically, clearly, and objectively. Writing, involving the hand, eye, and brain, provides unique strategies for learning. But the hackneyed old topics (react to this picture, reminisce about your childhood, describe a happy experience, explain how to stay sober at a party, grades, marijuana, divorce, abortion: we have all seen them and probably assigned them) to be dispatched in one or two hours give the students little chance to learn about anything except how difficult writing is. Giving assignments involves a skillful interweaving of readings, visual stimuli, class discussion, group discussion, prewriting, background information, and the giving of directions. The preparation of writing classes per se gives way to the preparation of assignments. One question I will always begin by asking now is not just "What will my students learn about writing from this assignment?" but "What will my students learn about the subject matter of this topic and how valuable is the subject matter for them?" The extension of writing across the curriculum must not neglect the extension of the curriculum into writing courses.

Ann Raimes
Hunter College, City University of New York