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AUTHOR Lowthian, Carol P.; Mingle, James R.
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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the practical applications of content area writing, and programs using writing assignments in all areas of the college curriculum, this serial issue has three sections. The theme article, "Writing across the Curriculum," discusses the writing across the curriculum movement, and examines ways two colleges have incorporated writing into their general education requirements and their upper level requirements. In this same context, it also describes comprehensive institution-wide programs, faculty development, and some of the problems inherent in implementing such writing programs. A second article, "An Upper-Division Writing Course," by Robbins Burling, describes the background and implementation of an upper-division writing course in anthropology. Thirdly, an interdisciplinary syllabus for a composition course is included in the report. (HTH)

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# Writing Across the Curriculum

"Writing across the curriculum" is a phrase which describes a movement in undergraduate colleges and universities to increase the use of writing assignments — both formal and informal — in all disciplinary areas. In institutions with such programs, all faculty — not just the English composition faculty — share responsibility for improving the writing abilities of the students. More important, writing in such programs is viewed as central to the learning process in all fields. As American educator James Moffett expressed it, "Discourse does not just convey thought . . ., it also forges it."

At the same time that composition is being recognized by scholars and educators as an important tool in the learning process, colleges are aware that little writing is being done by students. In a recently published study by the National Council of Teachers of English, Arthur Applebee of Stanford University notes that high school students are rarely required to write more than a paragraph and much of their time is focused on learning narrow mechanical skills. After the college freshman composition course has been completed, many undergraduates may do very little writing, and the quality of the writing is rarely evaluated.

A recently completed evaluation conducted by the State University System of Florida concluded that even within the freshman composition courses, the frequency of writing assignments was not enough to provide adequate development of skills. Florida public higher education institutions are now considering several ways to increase this component of the undergraduate curriculum.

Through a variety of curriculum changes and faculty development programs, institutions around the country are seeking new ways to use writing in the learning process and, at the same time, increase the technical competence of undergraduate writers.

## Incorporating Writing in the General Education Requirement

At Western Carolina University in North Carolina, improvement of the writing skills of undergraduates has been an integral part of a larger effort to improve the overall quality of instruction and the image of the institution. This has been accomplished in part through reform of the general education requirement. To qualify as meeting this requirement, courses include specific objectives to develop seven basic skills — written communication, oral communication, scientific method, critical and analytic thinking, logical reasoning, reference and resource skills, and consideration of values. An academic affairs committee reviews the proposals of faculty seeking to have their courses qualify as general education courses; and a monitoring committee provides periodical review to insure that the skill objectives are being met.

Western Carolina has also instituted a writing lab which is open to every student. It is staffed by a faculty coordinator, graduate assistants, and student tutors. A student is assigned to the lab if written work, *in any course*, fails to meet acceptable standards. Lab work is also required of any student with a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score under 350 on the verbal section, or any student who fails the institution's English proficiency exam.

## Adding Upper Division Requirements

The approach of the University of Michigan is comparable to Western Carolina's; however, Michigan has focused its attention on developing writing courses in the junior and senior years. In 1974, the institution created the English Composition Board which now has responsibility for a greatly expanded composition program for undergraduate students. All Michigan undergraduates undergo an initial evaluation of their writing and, on the basis of the evaluation, are: 1) referred to a writing lab and a 2- or 4-credit tutorial course; 2) required to take the one-semester course in composition; or 3) exempted from the requirement.

To implement writing across the curriculum, the English Composition Board has assisted the various academic disciplines in the undergraduate programs in developing at least one upper-level course that is primarily a writing course. This course — in the student's major or related field — is a requirement for graduation and is taken in the junior or senior year (see pp. 4 and 5).

# An Interdisciplinary Syllabus for a Composition Course

Beginning in 1978, the Univeristy of Tampa (Florida) began to revise its composition courses to reflect the concepts behind the writing across the curriculum movement. Mary Jane Schenck, director of the freshman composition program, says: "We made a deliberate choice to broaden the scope of these courses for two reasons. We wanted the students to recognize that good writing exists in all disciplines and that good writing will be required of students in all disciplines."

**Univeristy of Tampa Syllabus for English 101**

**Objectives.** The English faculty's primary goal for English 101 is to help students develop the ability to grasp, integrate, and transmit thought in clear, articulate prose. Our purpose is to emphasize the *process* of writing. We want the students to do at least some writing during class time, bring complete drafts to class, read and respond to each other's work, listen to or read the comments of the instructors and *then* rework the draft into another more polished assignment. We want to open up all stages of the composing process for discussion, so that students can receive help early on in the process and can benefit from objective, but nonpunitive, criticism.

Another important feature of the new English 101 is its emphasis on collaborative learning through peer critiques of drafts. These are not exercises in proofreading to find spelling or grammatical errors. The students are asked to talk about another student's paper by describing what it says and how it says it. As a foundation for their writing, our intent is to stimulate the students' intellectual growth and to hone their critical judgment. Toward that end we use reading material on important topics from a broad range of disciplines.

**The Reading Assignments.** The topic for English 101 is *Our Future: What Will Determine It?* During the first part of the course, we read selections on forces which will influence human society — population growth, nuclear proliferation, unpredictable technology, and changing economic systems. Then, we look at fictional representations of the disorientation caused by these forces and consider the options proposed.

***Required texts are:***

| | |
|---|---|
| Durrenmatt, Frederick | *The Visit* |
| Garlan, Distan, Pike | *Star Sight* |
| Heilbroner, Robert L. | *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* |
| LeGuin, Ursula | *The Word for World is Forest* |
| Maimon, Elaine, et al. | *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* |
| Thomas, Lewis | *The Medusa and the Snail* |
| Willis, Hulon | *A Brief Handbook of English* |

***Supplemental Readings are:***

| | |
|---|---|
| Saul Bellow | *Mr. Sammler's Planet* |
| Albert Camus | *The Stranger* |
| Edward Cornish | *The Study of the Future* |
| William Golding | *Lord of the Flies* |
| Robert L. Heilbroner | *The Future as History* |
| Henrik Ibsen | *Four Great Plays by Ibsen* |
| Ursula LeGuin | *The New Atlantis* |
| Stanislaw Lem | *The Cyberiad* |
| Konrad Lorenz | *On Agression* |
| Abraham H. Maslow | *Toward a Psychology of Being* |
| Marshall McLuhan | *Understanding Media* |
| Carl Sagan | *The Dragons of Eden* |
| B. F. Skinner | *Beyond Freedom and Dignity; Walden Two* |
| Lewis Thomas | *The Lives of a Cell* |
| Kurt Vonnegut | *Welcome to the Monkey House* |

## OUR FUTURE: WHAT WILL DETERMINE IT? Social Forces and Their Impact on Mankind

**Unit 1: Reading Assignments**
- Hjortsberg: "Gray Matters," in *Star Sight*
- Thomas: "On Cloning a Human Being," in *Medusa and the Snail*
- Durrenmatt: *The Visit*
- *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, Chapter 1 and Chapter 3

**In-Class Work**
- Discussion of reading assignments
- Work on drafting
- Film: "The Visit"

**Writing Handed In**
- Draft of short essay

**Unit 2: Reading Assignments**
- Heilbroner "Introduction," "The External Challenges," in *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*

**In-Class Work**
- Discussion of Heilbroner
- Work on summarizing
- Work on writing strategies from Chapter 2, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*
- Peer review

**Writing Handed In**
- Final draft of summary — Graded Assignment

## Alternative Strategies for Coping With the Future

**Unit 4: Reading Assignments**
- "The Prometheans," in *Star Sight*
- Skinner selections
- "Panacea or Path to Hell"
- Thomas: "To Err is Human," "The Wonderful Mistake," "The Hazards of Science," in *Medusa and the Snail*
- *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, Chapter 3

**In-Class Work**
- Discussion of readings
- Work with Chapter 3, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*
- Work on drafting
- Work on preparation for essay exams
- Peer review

**Writing Handed In**
- Draft of paper

**Unit 5: Reading Assignments**
- "The Proteans" in *Star Sight*
- Rinehart "Dice Man"
- Anais Nin "Collages"
- Heilbroner "The Political Dimension and Human Nature," in *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*
- *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, Chapter 7

**In-Class Work**
- Discussion of readings
- Work on drafting
- Peer review
- Film "Rhinoceros"

**Writing Handed In**
- Final draft of paper — Graded Assignment

A similar focus exists at Towson State College in Maryland. In addition to the English composition course, students are required to take one additional writing course in their major. To qualify, course proposals are reviewed according to set criteria by a faculty curriculum committee. Students in these courses typically complete five or six writing assignments and then are graded on both the writing and the content.

Thomas Dunn, chairman of the Chemistry Department at the University of Michigan, believes strongly that students in the sciences must be able to write well, and for this reason has supported the development of an upper-level writing course in his department. Professor Dunn observes:

> If science and scientists have erred in the past . . . that error is poor communication with the community of enlightened and "enlightenable" people at large. To my mind, this gap in communication can be bridged only by excellence in writing. Other media, such as television and film, can certainly help us, but their ephemeral nature makes them unlikely, in the long run, to satisfy an introspective and discriminating public. As compelling as they often are, they are capable of merely scratching the surface of scientific understanding. In my view, therefore, whereas scientific concepts and ideas may indeed be nonverbal in their creation and growth, transmission and broad communication of them is, and will remain in the foreseeable future, dependent upon precise verbal expression.

### Developing Course Clusters

One way of stressing the importance of writing in all discipline areas is to develop clusters of courses with instructors working closely together to find a common theme. In 1978, a three-course cluster was developed at Beaver College (Pennsylvania) consisting of: 1) European History since 1815, 2) British Literary Tradition since 1800, and 3) Human Evolution. Students in all three courses read Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The three instructors work together on writing assignments, team members attend each other's classes, and the faculty member from English serves as a writing consultant to the team.

In 1981, the University of Texas at El Paso experimented with establishing similar linkages between specially designed freshman composition sections and subject matter courses, including history, music, political science, sociology, philosophy, and religion. There were problems, however. A free-choice registration procedure and inadequate counseling inhibited registration for appropriately paired courses. The English faculty is now considering changes which would designate composition courses for particular majors.

**The problems of writing are campus-wide and not the responsibility of just the English Department.**

The University of Tampa has taken a different approach by significantly revising the content of the English composition course itself. Reading and writing assignments now reflect a more interdisciplinary scope so that students can be exposed to quality writing in fields outside of English. Required texts include such works as *The Medusa and the Snail* (Lewis Thomas) and *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (Robert Heilbroner). The text for the course, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* by Elaine Maimon and others from Beaver College, exposes students to the writing requirements in various disciplines, including the natural sciences (see Box, p. 2).

### Comprehensive Institution-Wide Programs

Seven years ago, the faculty of Ferrum College in Virginia concluded that writing should be an integral part of the entire curriculum. The result has been a comprehensive program of faculty development and curriculum requirements that include a writing component. In 1981, 96 of the 101 full- and part-time faculty at Ferrum College assigned papers or essay tests and evaluated them on their total merit, both in substance and expression. In addition to a formal agreement that requires a minimum writing component in all courses, the institution has developed: 1) a composition center which provides assistance to students with writing problems; 2) a comprehensive evaluation, administered during the junior year, of each student's ability to write an analytic essay; and 3) an ongoing program of faculty workshops.

Elaine Maimon, faculty member at Beaver College and a national leader of the writing across the curriculum movement, has spearheaded a number of changes at her own institution which also reflect a comprehensive approach.

The Beaver College model does not focus on or speak about remediation. It speaks about a higher literacy — about using writing as an essential element in the learning process in all disciplines. This is the fundamental concept. Remediation may be necessary, but the goal is to teach writing as a thinking process and problem-solving method.

After a placement exam, the freshmen are directed to either a regular English course or a for-credit basic course designed to raise skills. Both of these courses use a cross-disciplinary reading list and assignments are coordinated with other freshmen classes. Students read and write from a number of different perspectives. The process of rough draft, revised draft, and final copy is stressed. Peer review is used. There is a writing center available to all, and some lab staff make themselves available for late-night assistance, which has proved very popular.

At the junior and senior levels, several courses may be clustered together around a theme and writing assignments are based on the

*(continued on page 6)*

# An Upper-Division Writing Course

**Robbins Burling**
**Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan**

*In the fall term of 1977, and again in the fall of 1978, I presided over a writing course intended for juniors and seniors in anthropology. I offer these notes* about my experiences in the hope that they may be of interest to others who are planning comparable courses.*

## Background

Several principles underlay the organization of my upper-class writing course in anthropology. First, it was focused specifically on writing rather than on a particular topic in anthropology. I was not obliged to cover any special substantive area so we were free to spend class time discussing exposition. We did use anthropological examples, but these ranged as widely over the field as did the students' interests.

Second, earlier experience with my own writing convinced me that the secret of writing — if there is one — lies in *re*-writing: in fussing with words, in trying varied combinations, in producing second, third, and fourth drafts.

Third, I stressed, from the start, that my concern would be with the craft of organizing words in clear, logical and, if possible, graceful ways, and that I was not yearning for creativity. I wanted, instead, to focus on the more mundane, but far more manageable, craft of getting one's ideas across. Creativity can find an outlet only after some skill with the craft has first been achieved.

Finally, and most important, I wanted to help the students to help each other. I believed that I would accomplish more by encouraging students to help each other than by simply showing a handful of isolated individuals how to attend more carefully to their own problems. I decided, therefore, to turn my course into a class in mutual criticism. It is this aspect of the course that has been most successful and it is this aspect that I will stress.

*Dr. Burling's notes have been edited to fit space limitations.

## Mutual Criticism

My own most effective lessons in composition came not from English teachers but from friends and colleagues with whom I exchanged papers. Thus, I began with the premise that the earlier students could start to help each other, the more quickly they would be able to help themselves. The process of giving thoughtful criticisms of another's work is closely related to the problems with one's own writing.

Asking the students to help each other was also, admittedly, a way of solving another problem. I had often heard teachers of writing talk about how terribly time-consuming a writing course could be. I hoped to look carefully at my students' writing, but I also recognized the limits on my own time. By asking all students to share the task of critical reading with me, each student would get more help than I could ever give alone.

Turning the class into a course in mutual criticism solved still another problem. From the start, I had serious qualms about grading someone else's writing. Writing is terribly personal. Tastes differ. I have no qualms about offering suggestions to a student about his or her writing. I am quite willing to state my likes and dislikes so long as I do not, thereby, confer a grade.

I announced, at the beginning, that the course grade would depend upon how helpful they had been to their classmates rather than upon the quality of their own writing. Immediately the threat of judgment was removed from my own criticisms. I could express myself freely without implying a grading or a ranking. In their own writing, students were free to experiment without worrying about a grade, but they also knew that whatever they wrote would receive searching criticism. Reciprocally they knew they would have to grapple with the writing of others and to ask themselves, repeatedly, not only how to improve their own writing, but how to help their classmates. I have looked at student papers only after they have first been read and commented upon by another student. In this way, I have looked simultaneously at one student's writing and at another student's criticisms.

## Getting Started

I spent the first three sessions of the term (we met just once each week) in preparation for an exchange of papers.

The first week I brought a half dozen samples of published anthropological writing to class, some that I liked and some that I did not. I asked students to read the samples and to rank them according to their judgment of writing style. I put rankings on the board, including my own, and we spent the next hour discussing the basis of our varying judgments. We were beginning to ask ourselves what makes some writing seem more appealing than other writing. During that first class session I also brought the successive drafts of a piece of my own writing. I showed them how radically I had reworked my first terrible draft, and how I had then modified it again for a third, and then a fourth, draft.

I also gave them copies of two pages from a poorly written book. I had written in the margins and at the end of these pages the kinds of comments that I might have offered had it been a student paper. This, I suggested, was the kind of help needed by any writer, experienced

or inexperienced. It is the kind of help that I would except them to give each other.

I gave them two assignments for the second class. First they were asked to rewrite a passage that I gave them. They were told to rework this passage with care so as to make it clearer and more readable. Second, they were to search through the anthropological literature for two samples of writing — one that they felt was particularly good, the other that they found particularly bad.

The students made copies of these assignments to pass around to the class, and we spent the second meeting discussing what they had brought. We had a particularly joyous time comparing notes on the passage that we had rewritten. We found that the same problems in the original passage had bothered many of us, but we also saw that a problem could usually be solved in many different ways.

For the third class, at last, students wrote something of their own. I did not want them to get hung up on worrying about what topic to choose, so I offered them a list of topics that I felt would be possible, but I also told them that if they didn't like my topics they could write on something of their own choosing. Since no one has yet chosen one of my topics, I must conclude that finding a topic is not a problem for juniors and seniors. I said no more about length than "a few pages" and "whatever seems reasonable in the available time."

They brought their first papers to the third class and we arranged a round-robin in which each student gave his paper to the next student in the circle. Each student was to look at, think about, and offer suggestions to his classmate and then pass the paper on to me in time for me to look over the whole batch and return the papers the following week. This became the pattern for the rest of the term.

I spent a good deal of time in those first three weeks trying to make my attitude about mutual criticism clear. It was supposed to be forthright but never destructive. The critic had to have the courage to be wrong. If he agonized over every criticism, frightened of making a bad suggestion, he would never say anything at all. At the same time, the writer had to have the openness to consider all suggestions while having the courage to reject those that had no merit. Knowing that the writer is free to reject a suggestion should leave the critic free to offer a tentative opinion, even when less than certain of himself.

### The Rest of the Term

Class time has been spent in several ways. We have discussed samples of published writing that one of us had brought to class. We have discussed the differences between oral and written English. When commas seemed to be used a bit too imaginatively, I have taken 10 minutes to explain a few conventions about commas. I have also experimented with exercises designed to tap their intuitions about language. I once passed out a sample of writing from which the paragraph breaks had been removed and, somewhat to their surprise, the students found that they agreed quite closely about where the breaks should go. These exercises helped a bit to increase the students' awareness of the inner constraints upon writing, but I would not depend on them too much, and most of our class time has been spent discussing their own papers.

I have tried to encourage discussion of specific points by occasionally rewriting a student paper and offering both the student's version and my own to the class. We have then spread out the versions and considered the alternatives: Why did I change this word? What are the pros and cons of that phrasing? We get into detailed discussion of particular points: whether this word or that word works better in a particular sentence; whether it would be better to break this sentence into two shorter sentences or to leave it alone; whether the two sentences toward the bottom might better be moved to an earlier spot on the page; whether the logical relationship between two sentences might be made more apparent by adding a clarifying phrase; and, over and over again, whether anything at all would be lost by cutting out a few words here and there.

Rewriting a student's paper has its risks. The first time I tried it, I chose a paper that was already reasonably sound and a student who seemed to be reasonably tough. I did my best to let the class know that I had selected a paper that was good enough to be worth the effort of rewriting, for I did not want to hold anyone's writing up to ridicule. At the same time, however, I did not want to encourage anonymity. I wanted the writer to be able to defend himself, to argue with my suggestions. So far as I can judge, my experiments in rewriting have been well received. It is surely more illuminating to see how someone has struggled to reword and to reorganize than to be left with a few vague comments in the margins like "awkward," and since students can always find flaws in my version too, they get the idea that each draft is simply a trial, one step along the way, not something to be left inviolate.

I like to believe that in the course of the term I can see the students gaining some confidence in their writing. Their phrasing seems a bit more solid, their organization a bit tighter. But I see no revolution in their writing and I cannot be entirely confident that a blind examination of their first and last papers would confirm their progress. I even suspect it is too much to hope for unambiguous evidence of better writing in a single term. What I hope, instead, is that students will have begun to think seriously, and in productive ways, about the craft of writing. I would like them to feel that they can continue to work at their writing in the years to come, that they will have learned that there is lots of work but no mystery to good writing. No one learns to write in a single term. If we can help students begin to understand how they can work toward learning to write, that is probably enough. ■

(continued from page 3)

theme. "All college instructors are responsible for teaching apprentices how scholars behave in their discipline," says Maimon.

### Faculty Development

Faculty support is essential for writing across the curriculum programs and most institutions have preceded implementation with a series of workshops to describe the techniques and objectives of the program. The success of the programs depends upon persuading faculty not merely to assign more term papers, but to make writing an integral part of their curriculum. In these workshops, faculty can share ideas on method. Elaine Maimon notes that:

> Many of these ideas seem so obvious once they are stated that it is amazing that they are not practiced more widely. Even in a large lecture class, for example, the professor can leave five or ten minutes near the end of the period for students to write a summary of the main points covered during that hour. Then one or two students can be asked to read their summaries to the class . . . . Since writing requires the active involvement of instructor and students in the learning process of each discipline, students cannot passively watch lecturers perform like figures on a television screen.

According to Maimon, for curriculum change to take place, faculty must engage in a scholarly dialogue about the theoretical and philosophical place of writing in all disciplines. This is not one department "fixing it" for another department, or outsiders "fixing it" for a college or university. To initiate this exchange, Beaver used outside consultants with outstanding credentials. One evaluator said the program succeeded in large part because the consultants were well-known and well-esteemed.

Spelman College, in Atlanta, has also placed heavy emphasis on faculty development. Seminars, workshops, and retreat weekends have been used to get the message across. Since the faculty is small, release time during the year is not possible; rather, summer institutes are encouraged.

Spelman is steadily instituting what is termed a "College-Wide Writing Program." Dr. Jacqueline Jones Royster, chairperson of the Committee on the Improvement of Communication Skills, notes that after an initial outlay to attend workshops, this is not an expensive program to maintain. The program has resulted in more writing by students, especially in such fields as the natural sciences.

She also believes that there now is greater awareness among faculty that the problems of writing are campus-wide and not the responsibility of just the English department. Royster says the exciting part is, "So many people are doing so many little things to encourage students to do something a little better."

This year a Spelman in-house publication spotlighted individual faculty and the techniques they were using. Sharing effective practices is helpful, yet occurs all too infrequently. Generally, faculty know about the publications and research of their associates, but rarely are they aware of innovative classroom methods. The Spelman committee has also issued a "Guidelines for Written Assignments" which is being used by the faculty and students throughout the college.

**By writing, we learn what we cannot learn any other way . . . . Hand, eye, and brain interact to construct meaning.**

### School-College Writing Projects

In 1981, the SREB Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools called upon states to forge closer links between their colleges and the elementary and secondary schools. One way to accomplish this goal is through in-service training programs aimed at both college faculty and classroom teachers. With help from the National Endowment for the Humanities, numerous such programs have been created around the country. Many of these have been modeled after the Bay Area Writing Project established in Berkeley, California in 1974. Thousands of college faculty and elementary and secondary school teachers have been through these programs, which have as their goal to make teachers not only better instructors of writing but to train them as teachers of other teachers. The philosophy of these writing projects is closely linked to the aims of writing across the curriculum programs. The writing projects encourage teachers to have students read and critique each other's work, to emphasize editing and class discussion of written assignments, and to place a higher priority on developing organization and analysis than on grammar and spelling.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has also funded a summer institute at Beaver College to develop an understanding of writing across the curriculum. Participants came in teams — two from a college or university and one from a secondary school in the same area. This team approach fosters communication between schools and colleges and promotes the development of coordinated writing programs.

In Baltimore, the writing project is organized as the Baltimore Area Coalition for Writing Across the Curriculum (BACWAC). Begun in the fall of 1980, the organization encompasses 25 school districts, including community colleges and senior institutions. Originally funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the program is working toward becoming self-supporting through membership and workshop fees. The Baltimore area coalition held its first semester-long institute for 17 faculty leaders in the spring of 1981. While similar to other writing projects, the Baltimore program is less expensive because participants can commute

to the training sessions. Upon completion of the seminar, faculty are expected to return to their institutions to be leaders in the long-range plans for writing across the curriculum in each system or on each campus, and to help lead future faculty workshops.

**Faculty are not motivated to teach writing courses . . . . Spending hours grading papers is not the way toward tenure.**

Another major goal of the project is to use the common concern for student writing skills to build on cooperation and resource sharing within the Baltimore area and to coordinate college-level writing programs with those in the lower schools. This focus on a geographical area, which seems particularly well-suited to Baltimore, means that those students who stay in the area have a school experience from kindergarten through college stressing written thought and literacy.

While these writing projects have received widespread support, their continuation is threatened by federal cutbacks. The Virginia Writing Project, which has reached 7,000 teachers through seven university institutes, will be terminated unless the state can make up for the $210,000 cut in federal funding. Programs in the future will likely have to be self-sufficient in order to survive.

### Problems of Implementation

In *The Development of Writing Abilities*, James Britton says,

> Many teachers entertain the belief that an English teacher has only to teach pupils "to write" and the skill they learn will be effective in any lesson and in any kind of writing task. As a result, a learning process properly the responsibility of teachers of all subjects is left to the English teacher alone, and the inevitable failures are blamed upon him.

The problems in implementing a comprehensive writing program are clearly connected to the reasons students stopped writing in school in the first place. These have to do with method, class size, and the departmental system.

High schools, colleges, and universities have been compartmentalized by subject area. The English department taught reading of literature and writing about literature using a variety of rhetorical models. Other departments taught only the content — the content of history, political science, biology. As testing technology developed and machine-graded tests were used, as classes in content areas became bigger with large lecture sections, the quantity of writing assignments declined and evaluation of the quality of writing decreased drastically. An instructor in history would assign a paper, and then comment on the information contained or obvious mechanical errors, but rarely on the style. More important, the teacher did not work with the student on logical development of the paper.

Introducing a comprehensive writing program suggests rearranging responsibilities, changing the nature of a professor's workload and the nature of his or her teaching.

There are a number of faculty- or administratively-related problems in implementing a successful and long-term comprehensive writing program.

1. Before a writing program can be implemented, faculty must be trained to use writing as a mode of learning.
2. Large class size and heavy service and research commitments often keep faculty from having the time to work with students on individual papers before they are submitted for a grade.
3. Faculty are not motivated to teach writing courses because they are not rewarded for it. Spending hours grading papers is not the way toward tenure. In practice, decisions on promotion, tenure, and merit pay frequently tend to be weighted toward research and publication.
4. These programs have been costly to develop, and often have depended on federal funding or private foundation money.

While these are formidable problems to implementation, many institutions have found solutions. Consistent administrative support is an important element of success; and prestigious faculty committees to oversee the programs aid greatly in their implementation. Writing across the curriculum programs imply a new orientation for an institution — one which stresses teaching over research, and rewards its faculty members on this basis. A series of ongoing faculty development activities is essential for effective implementation — to provide the intellectual base for the writing approach and the necessary cross-disciplinary interchange, as well as specific techniques.

**Graduates should be able to think and solve problems . . . writing is a key process in developing that skill.**

### Conclusion

In many institutions, the undergraduate curriculum is undergoing what may be called a composition renaissance. In addition to the expansion of composition programs, there is growing involvement of disciplines other than English in using writing as a learning tool. Janet Emig of Rutgers University asserts that writing represents a unique mode of learning. By writing, we learn what we cannot learn any other way. Writing involves physical action (hand), depicting an image (eye), and symbolizing (brain). Hand, eye, and brain interact to construct meaning. This is,

according to learning theorists, a powerful combination.

For college faculty in all disciplines, writing assignments can be used to improve the teaching of their own subject matter. By assigning writing projects and then working with students at every point in the drafting process to define aim and audience, the result, many scholars believe, will be both improved writing and improved mastery of content.

Whether the emphasis on writing is a temporary phenomenon or one signaling more fundamental changes remains to be seen. It will be difficult to measure the effects of these programs on student performance until a longer history of assessment has transpired. But institutions conducting these programs have found that student behavior has already begun to change. Incidents of plagiarism have decreased, the use of the library has increased, and, as faculty have become more involved in assisting students with writing, the connections between individual students and faculty and between the disciplines have been strengthened.

In observing the Beaver College program, one expert noted that the consequences on that institution had been no less than the "conceptual reunification of the college." Faculty find themselves discussing with their peers the process of learning. They are also looking at the components of general education and are asking what a literate educated person should be able to do with a baccalaureate degree. The answer which is emerging is that, above all, graduates should be able to think and solve problems — and writing is a key process in developing that skill.

This edition of *Regional Spotlight* was prepared by Carol P. Lowthian, Assistant Professor of English of Devry Institute of Technology (Atlanta), and James R. Mingle, SREB Research Associate.

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