ED 336 739   CS 212 970

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TITLE   Can Writing Programs Change the University? Change
              from the Margins.
PUB DATE   22 Mar 91
NOTE   7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
              Conference on College Composition and Communication
              (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE   Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.)
              (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   College Faculty; Educational Change; Higher
              Education; Instructional Improvement; *Teacher
              Attitudes; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing
              Assignments; *Writing Improvement

ABSTRACT
        A writing across the curriculum coordinator considers
it part of her job to help faculty assist students to write better.
She reminds faculty that she is available to do workshops for
teaching assistants, to help design sequenced assignments, and to
meet with students to set up effective peer response groups. A
sociology professor sought her out already in mid-quarter to help his
200 students with an assignment to write a 10-page socio-political
autobiography. Convincing the professor of the assignment's inherent
difficulties was not easy, just as it was not easy to convince a
teacher of Russian literature that a "handout" did not exist that
would help her students make their writing more readable. Many
faculty members cannot or will not talk about writing with students
because in the highly competitive world of publish or perish they
perhaps have a professional interest in keeping their own struggles
secret. Others do not engage in such conversations because they have
always written easily--the rhetorics of their disciplines are not
problematic to them. One way to get teachers to discuss writing with
their students is to get students to ask for what they need. In other
words, teach the students strategies for initiating, shaping, and
focusing responses to their papers, so that they can get out of
readers what they need to know to become better writers. (PRA)

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Part of my job as Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum is to help faculty develop ways to assist students to write better. I drum up business by sending out friendly reminders at the beginning of each quarter that I'm available to help design sequenced assignments, as well as learning logs and reading notebooks, to do workshops for teaching assistants (who read the majority of papers at my university) and to meet with students to set up effective peer response groups. And I've been known to sort of badger people, in the mailroom, waiting in line for coffee, or when we pass in the hall. "How're students doing in your class?" I'll ask. "How's the writing?" Whatever the answer, I usually make a suggestion or two, and we say so long. Some take the bait, but most don't.

One of this year's catches was a Sociology professor. I had spoken to him in the middle of the summer because I knew he was teaching Sociology 1 for the first time. I had some ideas about sequencing assignments that came out of conversations with teaching assistants for that course the previous year. However, he didn't get in touch with me until mid-quarter. He wanted me to speak to his class of around 200 students. "I can give you about 20 minutes," he said. "I want them to know that *I* take writing seriously."

"What sort of thing did you have in mind?" I asked.

And he pulled out a William Safire column--"You know, careful use of language, clear sentences, stuff like this."

Hiding my discouragement, I asked about the assignment. He wanted students to write a ten page socio-political autobiography, "something" as he described it "to get them to use the analytical concepts of the course to reflect upon their own lives, to get them to see how their values, behaviors, and political beliefs are shaped by social forces, aren't just innate or the results of individual choices."

"In 10 pages?" I asked.

"It's no big deal," he said. "They've got a midterm and a final. I just want to give them a chance to apply the concepts."

I remembered what those teaching assistants had said a year ago, how risky it was for students and how much work they had had to do in conferences and revising drafts. Perhaps if I could get him into a discussion of examples, he might begin to understand the difficulties students would have with the assignment, so I asked, "Has anyone ever written such a thing?"

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"Well, I've put my book on reserve in the Library--a collection of biographies I wrote a couple of years ago."

"Were you among them?" I asked. "Is your autobiography there?"

"No."

"Well, has any sociologist ever done one of themselves?"

"Yes." And he named someone I recognized as one of the "big" people in Sociology.

"How old was he when he wrote it?"

"Over 50."

"Ah." I let silence hang in the room a while. Then I said, "Why don't you give me the assignment, let me look it over, and I'll get back to you about what I think might be most useful to do in 20 minutes."

He picked up a two page handout and held it out to me. But as I reached for it, he pulled it back. "I'm almost embarrassed to let you see it," he said. "When I wrote it, I didn't think a *writing* teacher would see it."

I just sat there, and after a moment he offered it to me again. "But," he said, fingering his Safire clipping, "don't you think good writing is good thinking? Doesn't any of this [holding up the clipping] count for anything?"

"Yes it does," I said, "but I think your students are going to need some other kinds of help long before they get to that. You're asking students to do a lot here and their tendency will be to get mired in narrative. Perhaps I can help them to focus and to decide what questions to pose in order to do what you have asked: to analyze their own lives as a sociologist would."

"But I know how busy you are," he said, "and I don't want to put you to any trouble."

What I wanted to do was go in for the kill ard say, "You yourself have said that in your own field only people over 50 have actually risked making such analyses public. You're asking students--most of whom are freshpersons--to write about themselves when they have barely grasped the concepts and may find the questions intrusive, disturbing, and embarrassingly self-revealing. They may even suspect a hidden, demeaning agenda--'Before you poor souls believed the narratives you told yourselves were your lives and that your ways of understanding were sufficient. But really, you are just a piece of clay in a big social machine'."

Instead I said, "What I'm suggesting is that their problems as writers are not ones William Safire talks about and that their problems will come as a result of the social constraints and demands of the situation. Really, all I'm doing is a sociological analysis of your assignment."

David Bartholomae notes: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion..." ("Inventing the University" 134). "But what," my colleague Don

Rothman asked in a faculty discussion of Bartholomae's article, "if the university they are inventing is dysfunctional?" And, from the point of view of teaching writers, this faculty member is dysfunctional.

I have come across many faculty and teaching assistants like him, and have some speculations about the resistances and inabilities they have to engage students in writing. Shaugnessy talks about the "messiness" of writing: I think faculty know that writing is messy, but that they avoid getting involved in the student's messiness. Thus they perpetuate the notion that papers, like Athene, spring full-blown from the head of their creators.

Some faculty, too, are embarrased about their own writing. We could blame faulty English teachers, those who gave them the truncated models for writing that still persist and that they project out onto all of us. "Can you give me a handout," a teacher of Russian literature asked me last year, "something that I can give to students to clean up their writing." She did not want to get into a conversation about what she found wrong with students' writing (I was perfectly willing to listen to her and then make up a handout from her ideas). And she was really miffed with me for not simply handing over what she thought I was withholding--some sort of magic list of maxims that would help every student make their writing more readable.

Faculty cannot or will not talk about writing in fruitful ways perhaps because in the highly competitive world of publish or perish, they have a professional interest in keeping their own struggles secret.

I suspect that others do not engage in such conversations because they were the "good" students--they have always written fairly easily, learned the "acceptable gestures and commonplaces" (Bartholomae) of academic discourses, probably from diningroom table conversations--the hidden privileges of class. And, for a variety of other reasons, the rhetorics of their disciplines are not problematic to them. They have rarely questioned how they go about doing what they are doing, had to make it strange, to see it through a learner's eyes. Or if they did, that time may mark a moment of shame, better forgotten than used to develop one's self as a teacher. Consequently, they do not know how to engage students in conversations about writing. I'm reminded here of a colleague teaching in a required freshmen core course designed to introduce students to university-level reading and writing. When we were all encouraged to hold conferences with each student to return the first essay, he said, "I know you all think that's a good idea, but for me those conferences are awful. All I can do is read my comments to them. The student sits there; I read the comments. It's depressing--like a post-mortem."

My dark scenarios may suggest that the only way we can change faculty behavior is to offer them years of therapy--an unlikely prospect. But one of the things people on the margins learn to do is to go around the mountain if it is too high.

For me, going around the mountain has meant training tutors and teaching assistants, people who are less invested in keeping the confusion, the messiness hidden and who are committed to developing purposeful, engaged writers.

A third way occurred to me this year: What if I could get students to ask for what they need? Could students be taught the strategies for initiating, shaping, and focusing responses to their

papers, so that they could get out of readers what they needed to become better writers?

To do this was to extend what I had been doing in freshmen composition courses for years, make it explicit, and tell students to use these same strategies when they met with faculty or t.a.s. It is an extension of both my writing group directions and coversheets--information that students give to me whenever they turn in a paper. I ask students: "What questions do you need to know the answers to to know whether or not you have achieved your purposes in this paper?" Whenever students go into writing groups, they go with three questions. Whenever students put papers in the library for other students to read and respond to, they attach a sheet with three questions. What if, whenever they went into a conference with faculty, they went in with three, fairly focused questions? What if, whenever a student turned in a paper, she asked the eader--very politely--to respond to three questions?

To get students to ask good questions, I demonstrate the value of Peter Elbow's questions from *Writing With Power* in a workshop and also apply those questions to works we read.

I also recommend that if in doubt, the writer can always ask, "What is my purpose? Did I fulfill my purpose? What works? What doesn't?" They love to ask things like, "After reading my paper, how do you feel about Antigone now?"

I tell them not to ask questions that can be answered yes or no. And give them examples. If you want to know if your writing flowed, don't ask "Did it flow?" Ask: "What kind of journey did I take you on?" Or: "Did you have to leap any place in my paper? Where? Please note those places."

Then, of course, there's the common sense question: if you worked hard on a particular part, or if you are still unsure about a part, you can ask something quite specific: "What do you think I'm trying to say in paragraph 4?? Why is this point important?"

With these questioning strategies, students could go a long way towards eliciting more than those truncated end comments they get on their papers: *Nice work, Jennifer. Keep it up!* Or a comment I once got on a paper: *This seems to me like a penultimate effort. Nevertheless, you did manage to start a few hares worth pursuing.* And conferences with faculty would become more than post-mortems.

We have something to learn from recent self-help books that assist people to talk with their doctors: Go in with a list of questions! But, as with doctors, there are issues of control and self-esteem here. Will faculty be willing to do the work these questions demand? Will faculty let students set at least part of the agenda? Some faculty, like some doctors, think that if they don't have control, they aren't accomplishing anything. But we all know those conferences when the student leaves seemingly full of confidence, though for us the conference has been somewhat of a blur. But that's ok: we aren't writing the paper. We don't have to be clear. But if one gets one's esteem from the clear articulation of ideas or clearly stated arguments, such conferences may seem empty, unsatisfactory.

Then there's the problem that the faculty who make up the assignments, like the Sociology professor I talked with, aren't the ones who are reading them. So again they avoid having to

examine the act of writing, the messiness and struggle that goes on. I have no illusions that I am going to change *this* division of labor and the ways it undermines purposeful writing, at least not in the research university. So it seems to me that at least one way to go is with students.

Two narratives or models of change occurred to me as I wrote this essay. One came from an African American colleague who does community organizing. He often describes his work as "termite brigade activity." Like termites, writing faculty, writing assistants, teaching assistants, and students can quietly, out of sight, chomp away at the structure, disgesting and remaking it into something very different, until one day the old buildings fall down, revealing beautiful, fairy-like, graceful creations.

The other "model" comes from the buffalo hunt in "Dances With Wolves." In the film the Lakota don't try to capture the whole herd. Instead, warriors position themselves at places along the route they know the animals are following, and by yelling or waving, try to cut off first one, then another of the blindly galloping herd, driving them towards a waiting warrior. In this scenario, the buffalos are faculty stampeding across the academic plain. Students, writing faculty, writing assistants, and teaching assistants station themselves at strategic points. A student on the left, for instance, with her evocative writer's questions, distracts the faculty's normal reading just enough that he breaks stride, turns, and runs to me or one of my colleagues for help. This doesn't have the look of efficient change, but it's the best idea I've had this year-- and it doesn't require more money or a dean's approval.

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