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In Search of a Proper Role for First-Year Composition in the Two-Year Open-Enrollment College

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Abstract

The search for a common model of instruction in first-year composition began in the 1960s when composition first began to separate from literature in college English departments. Because writing is essentially a methods course with no standard curriculum as one might find in physics or economics, a

common model has been elusive. A sign that consensus may be developing came in 2011 when an alliance of three professional organizations published its "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing." Its recommendations consist of departures from some of the discipline's long-cherished practices. Many of these recommendations appeared in scholarly articles more than three decades ago.

Introduction

Ever since composition studies began to separate from literature to establish itself as its own discipline, beginning in the 1960s (Lauer, 2006; McLemee, 2003), composition scholars have sought to define the proper role of freshman or first-year composition (FYC) courses. The subject gets regular treatment in such journals as *Teaching in the Two-Year College, College English*, and *College Composition and Communication*. It is particularly important to open-enrollment community colleges, whose incoming students cover a wide range of preparedness for college writing, from clearly unprepared to adequate (Cox, 2009; Arum & Roksa, 2011). FYC instructors in open-enrollment community colleges have a difficult choice of whether to turn their classes into high school-level remedial lessons in basic grammar and sentence structure or demand that unprepared students catch up to college writing standards on their own.

Although the testing service ACT does not separately classify entering students by two-year and four-year schools, the latest annual survey found that 64% of the 1.9 million 2015 high school graduates were prepared for college writing ("Condition," 2015). In 2002, when ACT introduced the benchmarks, 67% met the English benchmark. Despite more than two generations searching for a common model of writing pedagogy, one that is widely accepted in the academy as the standard for improving student writing and for preparing students to write in other disciplines, researchers have failed to identify a common model. Raines (1990) surveyed 236 U.S. colleges in search of such a model, and she found none. Klausman (2013) did a follow-up study and also found no common model, noting that other scholars have conducted similar studies which produced the same result.

The subjective nature of writing assessment—to include the very question of what makes good college writing—may explain why crafting a model for instruction is no easier than herding cats (Sullivan, 2006). What is possible is a clear set of goals for the first-year writing course: what the course aims to accomplish in a universe of teaching styles and grading methods that is without limit. Rose (1981) starts with a treatise on what is wrong with college writing courses and the textbooks that steer them, finding these sources impose "rigid rules" that make "unqualified restrictive statements about the composing process or the written product" (p. 66). These "injunctions" do not govern how real writers, "mediocre to talented, write." (Rose 1981, p. 67). Rose (1981) ties these methods to the current-traditional paradigm, a term coined by Fogarty (1959). Why these methods, dominated by ancient, cast-in-stone rules, still prevail in the 21st century is a good question for researchers and even classroom teachers to consider.

How Composition Differs from Other Courses

First-year composition is essentially a methods course that has no proprietary topics other than writing itself. Unlike the sciences and humanities, FYC must borrow writing topics from other disciplines. While a course in macroeconomics or physics will follow a fairly predictable regimen, the subjects and methods of writing instruction are virtually limitless, even when, in the usual case, English departments set specific course objectives (Lagunoff, Venezia, Su, & Jaeger, 2010). The latitude of composition instructors to decide what to put into their syllabi, even within departments, may explain why common benchmarks are lacking across the discipline.

First-year composition, then, is whatever the professor says it is. Such a state of affairs opens the door to all kinds of interpretations, which further complicate the search for a model. Fish (2008) finds FYC should teach “grammar and rhetoric and nothing else” (p. 44). Greenbaum (2002) argues for feminist control of writing pedagogy as a “political act” (p. 52) that aims to make students “view themselves as agents for social change and attempt to redress social inequality outside the boundaries of the classroom” (p. 84). Bauer (1990) admits that she has trouble “leaving that other ‘f’ word, feminism, out of my classroom” (p. 385). Bizzell (2009) believes FYC must take on the role of combating racism, sexism and homophobia. Many other scholars support the Students’ Right to Their Own Language Resolution issued by the Conference on College Composition and Communications in 1974 (Barbier, 2003; Bauer, 1990; Greenbaum, 2003; Kinloch, 2005). The resolution says all dialects should be treated in college writing as equal to standard written English, and that any attempt to exclude any specific dialect “amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” (“Students,” 1974, p. 1).

Attempts to Standardize Assessment

Belanoff (1992) explains the difficulty of creating assessment benchmarks. Even if instructors all agreed on what they are testing, they have not been able to achieve consensus on whether specific papers meet those standards. In a session on writing assessment at a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference, participants studied sample student essays, offering widely varying opinions on the same paper from excellent to failure, A to F (Sullivan, 2006). One reader said the essay was “very well organized, and there are no spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors,” while another found it to contain “no original, sustained analysis or thought” (Sullivan,, 2006, p. 2). These comments suggest that the two readers looked at this particular essay from quite different viewpoints: one emphasizing mechanics, the other content.

Benchmarks for assessment and benchmarks for what should be taught in FYC are not the same, but each affects the other. It stands to reason that assessment will not be the same in a mechanics-emphasized course as in a content-emphasized course, as illustrated above. Sullivan (2006) believes the NCTE conference participants tried to first define college-level writing and found the task more difficult than anticipated, leaving them with a question: “If it is true that all politics are local, is it also true that standards related to college-level writing must be local, too?” (p. 1). The question illustrates another complication of how composition differs from almost every other course in the academy. Sullivan (2006) says composition

pedagogy indeed reflects local conditions:

> All kinds of local realities at individual campuses—related to enrollment, the institution's learning culture, and the makeup of the student body—shape the way we interact with our students and influence the way we conceive of and apply standards related to our students' work. Obviously, these variables complicate the process of working toward establishing any kind of shared standards for college-level writing. (pp. 14-15)

Fear of Second-Class Status

The complications do not end with problems of content and assessment. Embracing their own theories and literature, the new compositionists feared that FYC would become "a service" to other disciplines, "rather than a full-fledge discipline within the humanities" (McLemee, 2003, para. 1). Yet this is the goal of writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs: to improve writing so that students will "be less burdensome to people in other fields" (Boland, 2007, p. 35). WAC advocates argue that FYC coursework equips students to apply what they have learned in writing courses to what they will encounter elsewhere in their education (Blaauw-Hara, 2014).

Those who have taught freshman composition in the open-enrollment college attest that the transition is not easy for most students. Rose (1981) writes that, unlike in high school, college students must learn "the highly complex, non-neatly sequential nature of the composing process" (p. 67), which applies not just to English composition but to all academic fields (p. 72). Williams and McEnerney (n.d.) advise incoming students to the University of Chicago's Writing Program to look at writing in a whole new way from high school, beginning with learning how to make an argument supported by the evidence of their research. For some, this will be an entirely new experience. Indeed, high school and college writing are so different that predicting who will succeed in college writing is difficult, if not impossible (Hjortshoj, 2009).

Transfer Theory and Writing Across the Curriculum

Transfer theory holds that first-year composition prepares students on two levels to write in other disciplines (Blaauw-Hara, 2014). The lower level drills in the basics of grammar and mechanics that are common to all writing (Blaauw-Hara, 2014). The higher level deals with the development of writing style and good writing habits, the traits that allow a student to learn what he or she knows and does not know by writing (Curtis & Cowell, 2014; Zinsser, 1988). Blaauw-Hara (2014) argues writing teachers should teach on both levels because both are "rhetorical patterns" that "would support students as they move to other disciplines" (p. 357).

Ahrenhoerster (2006) tracked 57 students post-FYC to learn if first-year composition improved their writing—a test of transfer theory. He and a colleague analyzed 115 essays from history and communications courses by evaluating their writing, on a Likert scale, in six categories that had been taught in their

freshman composition courses. In all six categories, students who took two semesters of FYC produced higher-scored writing than those who took only one semester (Ahrenhoerster, 2006). The least improvement occurred in the two lower-level categories, grammar and sentence structure; the greatest improvement was in documentation and the use of sources. Ahrenhoerster (2006) concluded that a second semester of freshman composition produced tangible results in improved writing.

Moving Parts of the Current-Traditional Paradigm

Despite lingering opposition to transfer theory (Cox, 2009), there is a strong argument that FYC is the legitimate preparation for writing in other disciplines (Blaauw-Hara, 2014; Ahrenhoerster, 2006; Klausman, 2013). More open for debate is how to deliver the course. The debate is whether the current-traditional or another model should be used. Lauer (2004) notes that current-traditional continues to prevail today, as it did for most of the 20th century. Lauer (2004) finds current-traditional emphasizes product but not process, and is "focused on reading and discussing essays, completing exercises on style, and repeating drills on grammar" (p. 112). Textbooks in current use such as *Patterns for College Writing* (Kirszner & Mandell, 2011) and *75 Readings Plus* (Buscimi & Smith 2013) illustrate how current-traditional classifies types of writing for study, with separate instructional units on how to write narration, description, exemplification, process, cause and effect, compare and contrast, and argumentation. Large community college systems, such as California's, with 2.1 million students in 113 colleges, continue to provide huge markets for textbooks on the order of *Patterns* and *75 Readings*. In the report on learning outcomes and comparability of composition programs in California, study participants offer recommendations that mirror the current-traditional prescriptions: "Write an analytical or argumentative essay . . . use a variety of rhetorical strategies, which may include textual analysis, comparison/contrast, casual analysis, and argument" (Lagunoff et al., 2010, p. 16). In actual practice, most writers use a combination of essays types. These discourse categories, Rose (1981) argues, "are not useful in literary criticism and most certainly not in history, biology, psychology, etc." (p. 69). Instructing students to force their essays into a rigid category only confuses them and does not help them become better writers (Rose 1981).

Another assignment common to current-traditional is the personal narrative, writing that Beaufort (2012) says "is seldom encouraged outside of freshman writing and creative nonfiction classes" (para. 4). Rose (1983) raised this objection long ago, noting that in most disciplines the subject of writing comes from the course of study, including classroom lectures and reading assignments. In these disciplines Rose (1983) found no assignments on personal experiences or observations of "events like the architecture of campus buildings, to express a general opinion on something not studied closely, to reflect on self" (p. 111).

Learning by Writing

Writing is a system of inquiry that is common to all disciplines (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004). In a faculty development session on how instructors outside of English utilize writing. Curtis and Colwell (2014) explain how instructors in all fields can assign writing to assess learning. His regimen begins with free-writing one-

sentence summaries and advances to oral presentations by lab groups that the class then peer reviews. One assignment is a concept paper, a report of two or three paragraphs in which students explain what they know about a particular concept (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004). An example is a report on cell respiration, how cells metabolize nutrients to produce energy. Curtis and Colwell (2014) find that students develop a deeper understanding of such a difficult concept when they write about it, by revealing to themselves their level of understanding of the process—what they know and what they do not know. What makes the formative assignment effective, according to Curtis and Colwell (2014), is its connection with a summative unit exam. He considers writing the key to the learning, not just another ordeal for student and teacher to endure.

Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004) offer strategies for several disciplines. Their science suggestions appear to authenticate Curtis and Colwell's methods. For Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004), science students "can usually grasp general, abstract concepts more easily if they first attempt to explain concrete examples" (p. 43). Zinsser (1989) explains this power of writing as a learning tool in any course, including his most dreaded subject as a child, chemistry. By writing, he says, "a student can reason his way with words toward the solution of a problem and his teacher can watch him do it, or not do it" (p. 203).

Zinsser (1989) describes WAC goals without using the term. Some disciplines test a student's knowledge of content, not the process by which the student acquired the knowledge. Mathematics, the sciences and many other fields want to assess the process, how the learning takes place, not what students can memorize and parrot back on a test. The belief that writing is critical to understanding leads Zinsser to say that the practices and habits of good writing are applicable in every field, whether that field is mathematics or art or art history. Roberts (2006) believes that purposeful writing helps reveal the thought process to both student and teacher across the curriculum: "Because literature itself contains the subject material . . . of philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology and politics . . . learning to analyze literature and to write about it will also improve your capacity to deal with these and other disciplines" (p. 16). One may conclude that the need for good writing as a path to clear thinking goes beyond the classroom to include such types of writing as memos, lab reports, impact statements case studies, legal briefs, proposals, newspaper editorials and position papers (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj, 2004). The idea is that how one burrows into the meaning of a literary work can provide the foundation for making an argument in any field.

Writing as a Way of Knowing

If controversial topics like same-sex marriage and the death penalty are impediments to clear thinking about writing at the freshman level (Fish, 2008), instructors can assign topics on serious subjects that avoid current controversies. One way is to allow students to explain concepts, similar to the biology example discussed earlier, that are not topical. Sloane (2003) lets students write on current topics but not in a way that drags them into emotional responses to issues they are ill informed to argue. For an argumentation paper, with the usual mandates of library research and documentation, students may write, for example, about the Electoral College or campaign financing. In this scheme, students write about

important subjects but are not distracted by their biases. Without such distractions, students can concentrate on developing the craft of writing as a way of knowing.

On the Horizon: Growing Consensus

In 2011 the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project jointly published “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” a prescription that comes close to consensus. The position paper shifts the focus of writing instruction from organization and structure to creativity and the development of intellectual curiosity. “Framework” (2011) offers 10 pages of details with an emphasis on the habits required for college-level writing. It does not, however, rely solely on attitude but states the need for students to know the conventions of their writing genre and their audience, to be able to extract information, from multiple texts and other media, and to synthesize that information into their own texts. It says teachers can help their students learn how to “generate ideas and texts using a variety of processes and situate those ideas within different academic disciplines and contexts” (“Framework,” 2011, p. 8). Notably absent is a list of discourse categories, such as essays on narration, exemplification, and the like, nor any mention of the classroom as a forum for promoting social or political causes. The report has an implied central theme of preparing students to write in other academic fields and beyond, while eschewing some of the old practices such as the personal narrative and descriptions of campus architecture.

Conclusion

Because assessment of writing in all its limitless contexts is impossible to quantify like math and chemistry, scholars may well continue to search in vain for a common model. Rose (1981), who has written on writing pedagogy for more than three decades, has not shown much concern for this state of affairs in his own writing. Rather, Rose (1981) believes that no matter what the assignment, teachers can best help their struggling students by teaching the good habits of writing as a process and pay less attention to some of the rigid rules, especially those that border on the arbitrary, and that stifle creativity and thoughtful crafting. Textbooks, Rose (1981) argues, “reduce the complex, dynamic, non-linear process of composing to rules, stages, and operations that belie the richness of writing behavior, for writing is one process that cannot be dissected and directed in static print” (p. 69). Writing, Rose (1981) says, “is simply too complex and unwieldy a process to be taught from a textbook” (p. 70).

Finally, students need to learn something their instructors may not be able to teach them and which Crowley (2010) says they are unlikely to learn under the current-traditional model: writing as “a process of tentative starts and stops, wrong turns, successive drafts, and extensive revision over time” (p. 148). Unless their teachers also write for publication and can vividly explain these painful realities, student writers will have to learn this one on their own.

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