Designing a Corequisite First Year Writing Course with Student Retention in Mind

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Course Description

ENG 100, a three-credit, graded course is designed for students who are enrolled in ENG 110, our three-credit, single semester first year writing (FYW) course. Students in ENG 100 and 110 take six credits of FYW instruction during their first semester at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL). ENG 100 focuses on developing academic literacy skills such as describing, discussing, and reflecting on student reading, writing, and research habits and practices. Students participate in workshops, small group work, and peer review to practice writing as a collaborative activity and a recursive practice. The learning outcomes of ENG 100 are for students to:

- Describe, discuss, and reflect on their reading, writing, and research habits and practices;
- Identify specific skills and techniques for developing recursive and flexible writing processes;
- Evaluate and incorporate feedback from peers and instructors;
- Practice writing as a collaborative activity;
- Develop strategies for the various stages of the writing process, including invention, drafting, and revision;
- Develop proficiency in using information literacy resources.

This course has an enrollment cap of 15 students per section and is taught by instructors with a background in basic writing. It also features embedded writing interns who help to co-facilitate the course with additional workshops, office hours, and one-on-one peer writing consultations. This is a credit bearing course (three credit hours) and contributes to the 120 credit hour minimum required for graduation.

Institutional and Programmatic Context

UWL is a four-year comprehensive institution that serves approximately 10,500 students (9,000+ undergrad); it is also a predominantly white institution (PWI). The average ACT score for incoming students is 24.7, and 25% of these students graduated in the top 10% of their high school class. Because of its high admission standards, UWL occupies a somewhat privileged position in the UW System. In 2018, UWL was ranked the number one comprehensive campus in the UW System and is ranked among the top four among

regional universities in the Midwest. Second only to the flagship campus at Madison, UWL is consistently ranked highly by *US News and World Report*'s America's Best Colleges list.

The First Year Writing Program (FYWP) at UWL enrolls roughly 2,000 students per year. With few exceptions, all students at UWL must take a FYW course. FYW at UWL has student learning outcomes (SLOs) that are aligned with the most recent WPA Outcomes for First Year Composition (Council of Writing Program Administrators). Although all FYW instructors work with these same outcomes, they have a fair amount of autonomy over course design and assignments. All instructors (tenure-track; non-tenure track with 1-2 year contracts, and non-tenure track with semester-to-semester contracts) in the English Department teach FYW, although non-tenure track (NTT) instructors teach the majority of the sections.

There are currently three FYW courses at UWL: ENG 100 (3 cr.): College Writing Workshop, the corequisite course; ENG 110 (3 cr.): College Writing, the standard gateway FYW course; and ENG 112 (3 cr.): College Writing AP, a course designed for students who earned a score of 3 or 4 on their AP Literature and Composition or AP Language and Composition exams. Students who earn a 5 on either of these exams are exempt from the FYW requirement.

Creation of ENG 100

The fall of 2018 was a turning point in the FYWP and marked a substantial revision to our basic writing courses. Prior to the creation of ENG 100, our program offered ENG 050, a non-credit bearing, pass/fail remedial course that students placed into based solely on their Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT) scores. This course was historically non-credit bearing because of its status as a "remedial course" and because of the monies from the state that are attached to courses labeled as such.

Starting in the fall of 2018, however, the program eliminated ENG 050, mainstreamed all students into ENG 110, and transitioned to using ENG 100, a credit bearing, corequisite support course for students who needed additional help to be successful in ENG 110. Although there are a variety of models for support, we felt a move from a non-credit bearing prerequisite course to a corequisite sequence ensured that our population of students could be equal with their peers in credit-bearing classes and in time to graduation despite being flagged as unprepared for college based on their test scores. Ultimately, it was a small programmatic change made with long-term student retention in mind.

However, our decision to eliminate ENG 050 was fraught because, from a nuts and bolts perspective, the course worked. The vast majority of students who took ENG 050 were ultimately successful in ENG 110, but we knew that ENG 050 stigmatized students who placed into the class and that students

resented the course because it was pass/fail and non-credit-bearing. In the end, we wanted to retain the best of what ENG 050 offered, but to expand that work. Therefore, we designed ENG 100 with the following features:

- credit bearing (three credits)
- graded
- portfolio-based
- embedded peer writing tutors (carryover from ENG 050)
- an emphasis on low-stakes writing (carryover from ENG 050).

Concurrent to our decision to mainstream all UWL students into ENG 110 and to the creation of ENG 100 was the decision to overhaul our placement practices as well. For some students, the scores they earned on the Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT) were sufficient for us to confidently place them into ENG 100; for other students who were on the cusp, we required additional information. Inspired by the multiple-measures placement (MMP) system developed by Hassel and Giordano, we created a FYW placement system that would allow us to gather background information on student writing habits and experiences through a series of survey questions and a writing exercise. This information, in addition to ACT and WEPT scores, helped us to determine which students would benefit from a corequisite support course and which students would likely succeed in ENG 110 without additional support. And, while we were motivated to make the above changes in the name of accuracy, we were also motivated by a desire to place students fairly and ethically.

From the beginning, our desire to create ENG 100 coincided with our desire to improve our placement practices for students that do not neatly fit into ENG 110 without support. In teaching ENG 050 over the years, we noticed that it was not for a lack of understanding or writing skills that students were in ENG 050; it was more related to a lack of awareness or exposure to academic literacies. The reasons for this were abstract and difficult to pin down. Therefore, our goal was to design a robust placement system that would provide us with as much information as possible about students who might benefit from taking ENG 100 with ENG 110.

Additionally, we wanted to create a program that allowed students enrolled in ENG 100 to have a FYW experience that mirrored, as closely as possible, the experiences of students who did not need to take the corequisite course. With this parity of experiences in mind, we worked with our Office of Records and Registration to ensure that students in ENG 100 were purposefully enrolled in a variety of different sections of ENG 110 or could self-select which section of ENG 110 in which they would like to enroll. As a result, students may not have the same instructor for both ENG 110 and ENG 100, and they may or may not share an ENG 110 section with other students enrolled in ENG

100. However, because ENG 110 sections may be taught very differently, one of the main challenges facing ENG 100 instructors is designing a course that can adapt and respond to the needs of students in these sometimes very different sections. The pressure on ENG 100 is that it needs to be applicable to a wide variety of writing situations while not replicating the work taking place in ENG 110.

Ultimately, the exigency for ENG 100 has always been clear—we have students entering the university who need additional support in order to be successful in FYW. Because we were (luckily!) not facing an exigency associated with austere budget cuts or state-mandated changes to remedial education, we were able to create a campus-wide conversation that instead started with student success in mind. We know that the typical population of students who place into ENG 050/ENG 100 are the students we struggle to retain—students of color, first-generation students, multilingual learners, and students who for various reasons are less proficient in academic literacies. Therefore, this programmatic revision was also an opportunity for us to align our practices with our principles and to respond to calls from the field for WPAs and writing programs to consider how assessment practices and placement practices resist and/or reinscribe a one-size-fits-all model of higher education (Adler-Kassner; Inoue; Condon and Young; Inoue and Poe).

Despite our best efforts, however, the results of our new MMP and ENG 100 have been mixed. However, the process of developing this course has reinforced the interconnectedness of FYW with a variety of campus stakeholders including our Office of Multicultural Student Services, the Academic Support Institute, the Writing Center, and Student Support Services. The success of this class is largely contingent upon not only the cooperation of instructors within our FYWP, but also upon the support of these stakeholders in their coordination to ensure the success of these students at UWL. This cooperation was an opportunity for us to start and steer a conversation that considered best practices in localized, ethical placement.

Consultations with our Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning (OIRAP) and with the Office of Records and Registration provided us with data to support offering one or two sections of ENG 100 per semester. Because this student population is vulnerable in terms of retention from first to second year, these students needed writing support immediately (during their first semester) to ensure a good foundation of habits and practices before they take additional general education courses. We advocated for these students to be enrolled in ENG 100 and ENG 110 immediately in their first semester on campus. Before our adoption of ENG 100, students took ENG 050 anywhere from their first semester to their last; not surprisingly, a delay in taking ENG 050 (and then ENG 110 to satisfy the general education FYW

requirement) often put students behind their peers in credits toward graduation and in completion of general education coursework (because ENG 110 is a prerequisite for other general education courses). FYW serves as a foundational course for other writing-intensive general education courses, such as history, and early research in the development of ENG 100 indicated that students who do not take FYW early in their undergraduate career did not fare as well in other writing-intensive general education courses. Early struggles in general education predicted future issues in attrition and retention.

Although we are in the beginning stages of tracking these students' persistence in the university, our OIRAP was able to compare a small cohort of students (97) who passed through the original ENG 050 and ENG 110 sequence and a cohort of 38 who passed through the new ENG 100 and ENG 110 sequence. Between the two cohorts, there was no statistically significant difference found in persistence to the second term. However, when looking at the retention to the second year, 88% of the new cohort were retained, whereas 78% of the old cohort were—an increase of ten percentage points. Overall, UWL's retention rate to the second year is 86%, so it was encouraging to find that a cohort of students that typically includes an overrepresentation of underrepresented students aligned with the overall retention rate at UWL. Again, this is a noted observation of a small cohort, and many factors are at play in a student's persistence, but we are encouraged by this early data and we will continue to track students in subsequent cohorts moving forward.

Theoretical Rationale

Acknowledging and Fostering Academic Literacy

As we were overhauling our basic writing courses in the fall of 2018, our campus was simultaneously participating in the Re-Imagining the First Year Experience Initiative and experimenting with designing and implementing a required First Year Seminar (FYS); this seminar sought to develop students' academic literacy skills as they transitioned to the university. Concepts emphasized in FYS scholarship overlap nicely with initiatives of FYW courses and offer a unique opportunity for FYW instructors to consider how their courses contribute to retention (Crank, et al.). For example, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,* co-produced by the National Council of Teachers of English, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the National Writing Project (2011), offers eight "habits of mind" essential for academic success that look far beyond FYW courses: persistence, responsibility, metacognition, engagement, flexibility, openness, creativity, and curiosity. We wished for ENG 100 to become an opportunity for students to identify, understand, and practice these skills while navigating new and unfamiliar aca-

demic writing situations (in ENG 110) and communities at large (within the first year). As noted earlier, our goal for ENG 100 students was simple: success in ENG 110. But, because ENG 110 is a gateway course and as Garrett, Bridgewater, and Feinstein's scholarship shows that performance in "writing courses strongly predicts both graduation and success in the major" (107), ultimately, we were concerned about retention of ENG 100 students in the long term. In response to this concern, we considered High Impact Practices (Kuh) and kept course caps low (15) and utilized peer-embedded mentors. Much of the coursework in ENG 100 also followed this vein. For example, students frequently reflected on their writing choices and processes in low-stakes and collaborative situations and also collaborated on writing projects. A particularly revealing activity asked students to review the feedback they received from their FYW instructor and peers on a piece of writing from ENG 110. They brought this writing and feedback to class with them and watched Sommers' short video production *Beyond the Red Ink*. In small groups, led by the writing mentors, they discussed their interpretations of and reactions to instructor and peer feedback. Next, they reflected on the feedback and considered revision via informal writing. Students were then encouraged to explore their own ideas for revision while questioning and hypothesizing why they received the feedback they did. The assessment stakes were nearly nonexistent: If students simply completed the activity thoroughly and on time, they earned a pass. The role of feedback—why it is important, what it looks like, and how it happens—became more familiar to ENG 100 students, as did their ENG 110 instructors, who many students viewed as intimidating. In the small groups, students even collaboratively drafted questions to ask their ENG 110 instructors about their feedback, modeling the reciprocal relationship of feedback to the complex processes of writing. We witnessed how introducing students to academic discourses and practices like feedback helped them feel more capable and prepared for unfamiliar contexts.

Labor-Based Grading Contracts

Because our primary motivation for the course is student success, we wondered: How could we design a course that gives enrolled students the best possible framework for a positive and engaging transition into our writing program and the university? And, how might our assessment practices in this course be more ethical and equitable for students that are more likely to drop out? We wanted to be careful to create a learning environment that did not implicitly reinforce Standard American English, but instead focused on meeting students from marginalized populations where they were. It felt natural to turn to Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*: *Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Labor-based contracts

(LBC), because of their emphasis on student labor as a valuable entity, allowed us to shift the course's emphasis from writing performance to work and from product to process. To encourage this shift all student work submitted in ENG 100 earned a pass or no pass, and when a student earned a No Pass, they were able to reflect on their work, revise it as many times as they wished or needed, and resubmit it for a chance at a Pass.

Students were also able to choose how to demonstrate their learning in the course, be it drafting an informal journal entry, offering feedback to a classmate during workshop, or visiting the writing center. In turn, we hoped students considered ENG 100 a safe place to take risks, fail, innovate, and share their writing without fear of being corrected or chastised. Interestingly, because of its LBC system, ENG 100 directly and purposefully resisted high-stakes writing assessment practices students may have been concurrently experiencing in their ENG 110 class. We hoped ENG 100 would function as a liminal space alongside ENG 110, and it did. The classroom became a collaborative respite from the demands of university life, likely because of the low-stakes grading environment, emphasis on reflection for other courses, and insight into social cues and norms of university life from the writing mentors. But students noticed the tension between their ENG 100 and ENG 110 courses. The kinds of writing they were doing in these two paired courses and how these different kinds of writing were assessed were radically different. This tension fueled confusion among the ENG 100 students and, at times, frustration. It was difficult for this student population to decipher how writing and assessment at the university might look different depending on the discipline, course, instructor, or learning goals—even during their very first semester.

Reading in Composition

Although our FYW SLOs are drawn from the CWPA's most recent framework, our courses that emphasize rhetorical awareness and genre dexterity tend to gloss over the "critical reading" component of these outcomes. Reading—the what, and how, and why of reading instruction—in our FYW courses remains nebulous. Across the department, we often heard that teaching students how to "read better" or "do research" got short shrift in the curriculum. While we were sure that ENG 100 students were focusing on rhetorical concepts in their ENG 110 courses, we were not sure if they were exposed to instruction devoted specifically to reading. Anecdotally, we noticed patterns of distracted and limited reading capabilities among our own students. Our MMP process asked students to read a dense text (Allison Carr's "Failure is Not an Option" from *Bad Ideas About Writing*) and respond to it, integrating Carr's voice with their own; students who placed into ENG 100 often demonstrated limited

or incorrect understanding of the piece or superficially integrated Carr's voice into their response.

Heeding recent calls in the field of composition focused on the importance of reading instruction and practice within FYW courses and our own personal experiences, it was startlingly clear that reading—the activity of it—needed to take on a central role in the course. Just like ENG 100 emphasized reflecting on writing choices, we wanted students to have space and time to reflect on their reading in measured, practiced ways that encouraged them to engage in recursive thinking about their texts. Low-stakes, informal writing about reading is "designed not to measure the outcome of reading but to provide a means to think more fully about it" (Anson 25). This kind of writing about reading took on a central role in ENG 100 so students could establish a sense of agency over the texts they read.

To achieve this, we used Charles Bazerman's framing for knowing a text using his "conversational model" as a framework: accurate understanding, reacting, evaluating, and synthesizing. To do this, students responded to their ENG 110 course readings rhetorically, with an audience in mind. They were encouraged not only to summarize a reading, but also to reframe it in an accessible genre for a particular audience. Students gathered these activities and created a reading portfolio that demonstrated their engagement with a difficult text from their ENG 110 course. This text could be anything from a scholarly source to be integrated into their writing to a creative narrative—as long as it was difficult, dense, and incorporated into their ENG 110 course and writing projects in some way. The portfolio was a collection of low-stakes writing responses to these readings from ENG 110, each one scaffolded to rest on the concepts explored previously.

Critical Reflection and Discussion

Because of the embedded mentors and small class size, it became very apparent that ENG 100 was a safe liminal space for many students. The instructor and mentors led students to campus-wide resources both related to writing (the writing center; Student Support Services) and not related to writing (Testing & Counseling Center); and helped ground things like advising, registration, changing majors, and other academic moves that come with university life. The course took on the identity of a first year seminar in this respect, which set the groundwork for a classroom dynamic that encouraged trustworthy, honest collaboration from student to student, mentor to student, and instructor to student. We consider our LBC grading system to be influential in establishing this classroom dynamic.

Overall however, the autonomy of our FYWP presented problems for designing and instructing ENG 100. Students wanted applicability and

practicality in ENG 100; they expected the course to be like a study hall with experts on hand for Q&A. Because of the diverse variety of ENG 110 courses represented in ENG 100, we drew from the one similarity we knew all sections of ENG 110 did share—the course SLOs. And, as these SLOs focused on rhetorical awareness and dexterity, we designed ENG 100 to offer additional instruction for these concepts. Not surprisingly, then, it was difficult for ENG 100 students to discern just how focusing on concepts that we know to be fundamental to the field may influence their day-to-day actions of writing. We continuously struggled to give these students accurate messaging about how focusing on, for example, audience, might help them revise a current writing project. In turn, students questioned ENG 100 and its goals and objectives and contributed to lack of motivation or engagement in coursework.

This dissonance was particularly strong when we asked students to engage their reading skills. Students considered the reading portfolio, and the activities that asked them to reframe a text for an audience as "just more busywork." Much student writing about their readings echoed a genre familiar to them: a book report that offered a summary followed by an opinion or reflection on a reading's key points. Students had trouble understanding how their purposeful engagement with texts could translate to their writing; much less could they select a text that played a central role in their ENG 110 course. We can feel the conundrum here: based on students' lack of rhetorical awareness surrounding texts they were assigned in ENG 110, it is clear they could use additional instruction, but the reading portfolio itself was startlingly unfamiliar to them.

Creating and instructing a corequisite course can unintentionally reveal gaps and shortcomings in a FYWP at large, and designing this course helped us critically question assumptions we hold about our FYWP. Although we value autonomy and trust ourselves to embrace best practices in the field as we teach FYW, ENG 100 offered intimate glimpses into ENG 110 classrooms through the lens of a student. We questioned then: At what cost does instructor autonomy come? What might we be sacrificing by assuming that students in ENG 100 should have a nearly equivalent experience as those who are not in the course? We thought this to be the most ethical and transparent organizational set-up, but what would it look like if our corequisite course did not honor autonomy but instead embraced the creation of an isolated, specific cohort—for example, linking an entire ENG 110 and ENG 100 section together and co-teaching each? Students might lose the "authentic" ENG 110 experience, but what would they gain instead?

It seemed natural to ground ENG 100 within ENG 110 by designing assignments to take on the course's SLOs. But, repeatedly, we struggled to connect with students about their ENG 110 coursework. We incorrectly assumed that we would be able to tether ENG 100 coursework to ENG 110 with little

scaffolding or explanation. In the future, instructors will be careful to ground ENG 100 coursework in what students actually know instead of assuming that because they are concurrently enrolled in ENG 110, they know its purposes, goals, and are aware of why and how they may need additional instruction. To reconsider the reading portfolio assignment, for example, students could first examine and consider *how* they approach the various texts in their day to day lives differently, and think about why it might be critical to know how to read different kinds of texts in different ways. Then, perhaps, ENG 110 coursework as "text" is more effectively tethered to known experience. This could alleviate some tension between the pull to address global concerns at the localized level simultaneously, and do so in a way that for students, feels immediately applicable.

As instructors of writing, we are familiar with the amount of flexibility our pedagogy requires. Even so, designing a corequisite program is a master class in navigating unpredictability because it lies in so many aspects of the course, from the FYWP at large to the prior knowledge of individual students. The syllabus and assignment descriptions in the supplementary materials reflect the aspects discussed in this piece, but the daily work was just that—day-to-day, discussed and decided on in class. Hence the absence of a planned course schedule in the supplemental materials. We do hope to return to and modify the syllabus as it is presented, based on some of the revelations shared here.

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