AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF AN INTERDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAM

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ECCENTRIC TRAJECTORIES

In 1976, I was about to finish my Ph.D. in anthropology at Cornell, following research in India, and was looking for ways to support my family while I worked on publications and applied for jobs in the terrible market that George Gopen analyzes in this volume. Someone in my department suggested that I should apply to teach a Freshman Writing Seminar in anthropology, in a program I knew nothing about.

By conventional standards, I was an unlikely candidate to teach a writing course. Because I was supported by fellowships throughout my graduate work, I had never taught, beyond undergraduate teaching assistantships in physical and cultural anthropology, and I knew nothing about teaching writing. As a college freshman I had hated my required English composition class, where I wrote my weekly essays almost literally in my sleep, received a grade of C, and was relieved to learn that my second semester was waived on the strength of my SAT scores. In my meandering undergraduate career, I had majored in almost everything except English and chose only one class in the English department: an advanced course on Yeats, because I loved his poetry at the time and heard that the professor read it like an angel.

But writing was, nonetheless, extremely important to me, and like most of the teachers who became involved with Cornell's programs, I had my own ideas about the essential roles of writing in my own realm of expertise. What it means to write about other people and cultures had been an unresolved problem in my field since the beginnings of cultural anthropology (as a challenge to Eurocentric positivism) in the work of Boas, Malinowski, and their followers. In the 1970s, the rising influence of French sociology and social philosophy, including the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, complicated these arguments, as

did the interpretive, literary ethnography of Clifford Geertz. When I began to think about teaching a writing seminar, I recalled a discussion in India with the anthropological historian Bernard Cohen in which we agreed that anthropology was, in essence, "all about writing." With these issues in mind, and in preparation for a meeting with David Connor, then director of the Freshman Seminar Program, I developed a proposal to teach a writing seminar called Images of India. The premise of the course was that our conceptions of the subcontinent, as of other cultures and civilizations (including our own), were literary and social constructs—a view of writing that eventually became fashionable in composition theory. My students would read, discuss, and write about a variety of colonial, popular, academic, and indigenous representations of Indian society and culture. (For another perspective on writing seminars taught by individuals from other fields see Ross, this volume.)

My interview with Connor was surprisingly brief and congenial. He thought the course was a great idea and approved it on the spot, without much scrutiny or advice. Apart from a brief administrative meeting with new instructors, there was no advance training for the work. During the semester, I met each week for consultation with Nancy Kaplan—who directed the new, experimental writing center called The Writing Workshop—and one other novice teacher, a graduate student in English. In these meetings we talked informally about our assignments, students, and problems we were encountering, in ways that gave crucial support to my shaky confidence and teaching skills. My plans, list of readings, and expectations were, of course, unrealistic. This first attempt to teach writing was an embarrassing mess, and by the end of the term I had changed most of my original assignments.

But my students were cheerful, helpful, and forgiving, and although the experience was often terrifying, it was also thrilling and deeply meaningful to me to discover that writing was a powerful medium for introducing students to fundamental conceptual problems in social and cultural studies. By accident, I had found a vocation, in what was perhaps the only place at the time where a young scholar in the social sciences could reasonably entertain the possibility of becoming a professional writing teacher. At the end of the semester I applied for a job opening as an instructor in The Writing Workshop, teaching a tutorial-based writing course for anyone who needed help. This policy was so open that in my second year in the Workshop one of my tutorial "students" was the dean of one of the university colleges who, after years of academic and administrative writing, was running into stylistic obstacles in producing his memoirs. Also by accident, I had landed in a program that represented a radical departure from the traditional identities of writing teachers and their students. But these unconventional roles of writing and writing teachers made perfect sense to me,

as a teacher who had never felt that I was *in* the field of English and had never thought of writing *as* English. They also made sense in a university where people were inclined to believe, at least in principle, that writing could be taught and learned in any field, at any level, for a great variety of reasons.

When I taught my first Freshman Writing Seminar at Cornell, in 1977, this program had been quietly expanding, in directions largely unknown to composition specialists, for 10 years. In a section of his definitive history of *Writing in the Academic Disciplines* on "Curricular Models of Writing Across the Curriculum" (added to the second, 2002 edition), David Russell noted that the model of "freshman writing seminars" that became popular in the 1990s was "Pioneered at Cornell in the late 1970s . . ." (p. 315). More accurately, this was the period when leaders of the WAC movement became *aware* of developments at Cornell and when those of us who were involved with these developments began to notice that our work was relevant, from an oblique direction, to emerging issues in a larger professional community.

Russell does accurately locate the origins of the WAC movement in higher education in the mid-1970s, at institutions very different from Cornell: small liberal arts schools such as Carleton, Central, and Beaver Colleges. In a period of challenge to a wide range of traditions in American education, members of English departments at these colleges began to expand conceptions and roles of writing within the liberal arts curriculum, beyond the traditional confines of Freshman English courses taught by specialists in literary genres. As Russell observed, "Most WAC programs began with (and are still led by) composition teachers in English who reach out to like-minded colleagues in other disciplines" (2002, pp. 293–94)—teachers such as Elaine Maimon at Beaver College and Barbara Walvoord at Central College, soon joined by Art Young and Toby Fulwiler at Michigan Technological University. In the same period, these early advocates of WAC were also leaders in the development of Rhetoric and Composition as an academic profession and field of scholarship, distinct from that of Literary Studies. In 1976, the year I stumbled across the Freshman Writing Seminars program at Cornell, Barbara Walvoord led the first session devoted to WAC initiatives at the CCCC.

Russell's account of the origins of WAC establishes the central trajectories and dialectics of this movement in following decades: *from* English *to* other departments and disciplines, *through* the agency of composition specialists within the field of English (see also accounts by Schendel & Royer and Thaiss et al., this volume). In a 1991 *College English* review article, Charles Bazerman announced the end of the "first stage of WAC, driven by the missionary zeal of composition," and the beginning of a second stage, "based on a realistic assessment of the roles written language actually takes in disciplines and disciplinary

classrooms" (p. 209). Bazerman's account of this "second stage" characterized the emerging principles of WID: writing instruction rooted *in* diverse disciplines. When combined with the development of Rhetoric and Composition as an academic profession, the interdisciplinary principles of this second stage produced internal conflict within the field of English and identity crises among composition specialists. Because interdisciplinary writing programs were typically housed in departments of English, emerging arguments for "independent" writing programs meant, as an extension of the original trajectory of the WAC movement, independence *from* English (Blair, 1988). But independence from English to what and where, exactly? For composition specialists trained in English and related fields, in a profession identified with English in American education for a century, this question of professional, institutional identity remained dialectically unresolved. After so many decades of affiliation (and, for most composition specialists, subordination), how could these diverging components of English establish a new, equitable, and coherent synthesis? And what would it mean for these components to separate? In their introduction to *Field of Dreams*, published in 2002, Peggy O'Neill and Angela Crow still described the prospect of independence from English as a "divorce" from an enduring but untenable marriage, with comparable uncertainties about the challenges of building a new identity and finding a new home (p. 3).

This, at least, is my brief rendition of developments I followed in my effort to figure out what was going on in my new profession. After a university commission determined that our program was an independent administrative unit of the College of Arts and Sciences, in 1982, my colleagues and I became increasingly involved in an emerging community of teachers and administrators in interdisciplinary programs. Previously, like the Pocket children in *Great Expectations*, the growing family of Freshman Writing Seminars had "tumbled up" with little supervision, through the diverse, unruly interests and motivations of teachers like me. Because those of us who now held appointments in what soon became (with an endowment from the John S. Knight Foundation in 1986) the Knight Writing Program felt more directly responsible for the quality of instruction in *our* program, we developed faculty seminars, a training course for graduate instructors, and more explicit guidelines for writing seminars. Originally devoted to open tutorial instruction, the Writing Workshop gradually became a more conventional writing center, with small classes in developmental writing primarily for freshmen and a peer-tutoring program called the Walk-in Service. Prominent composition specialists from other schools (such as James Slevin, Art Young, David Bartholomae, and Nancy Sommers) came to Cornell to help us with these endeavors. In 1987, when other universities had begun to develop upper-level, "writing intensive" courses and requirements in the disciplines,

Harry Shaw (then Director of the Knight Writing Program) and I initiated a program called Writing in the Majors, primarily in the sciences and social sciences. Members of our staff began to give presentations about our work at professional conferences, including the WAC conferences that began in 1993 and that Cornell hosted in 1999. We began to hire staff members formally trained in Rhetoric and Composition, and some of us published articles and books in the field (similar practices are described in Thaiss et al. as well as Kearns & Turner, this volume).

In many ways, therefore, Cornell's writing program gradually joined the WAC and WID movements in composition and increasingly resembled a growing number of interdisciplinary programs across higher education, including many at large universities. In turn, "second stage" programs increasingly resembled ours. In her national survey of colleges and universities, in 1987, Susan McLeod (1989) reported that 38% of these schools had established some form of WAC program, and as the forms and premises of these initiatives diversified, Cornell's eccentricities no longer seemed very eccentric.

As I followed these developments in professional literature, conferences, and discussions with writing teachers at other schools, however, I often felt that they were about other teachers and programs, elsewhere, in a different time frame. Through the lens of Rhetoric and Composition, in the history of writing in the disciplines, one could argue that Cornell had skipped over the "first stage" of WAC altogether and initiated the "second stage." From my perspective within this program and institution, the unusual path that Cornell charted in 1966 wasn't the first or second stage of anything. Nor did it distribute expertise in writing instruction *from* English *to* other disciplines, *across* the curriculum. Instead, this program was based on the assumption that the diverse sources of expertise and authority over written language were *already* deeply rooted in academic disciplines.

In the beginning, this assumption was pedagogically naïve, as I discovered when I taught my first writing seminar. Although the conceptual ends of my course were thought through, the pedagogical means to those ends were not. More experienced teachers who joined the program also knew *what* they wanted students to learn about the roles of writing in their fields and *why* this knowledge was important, but most of them had never tried to teach these subjects to novice writers in a small, interactive seminar. As Chris Anson observed in his account of WAC "threshold concepts," in the collection of composition epistemologies *Naming What We Know,* most of this disciplinary expertise remains "tacit" knowledge, encrypted in disciplinary assumptions and practices (2015, p. 206).

Our later training courses, faculty workshops, and consultations therefore focused on ways of implementing this implicit knowledge as explicit teaching

practice. But these exchanges represented collaborative discovery for everyone, and I continued to cringe at suggestions that we were bringing the disciplinary expertise of composition to these other realms of inquiry and discourse. When a biologist in the program brought a beehive to her seminar on social insects and engaged students in "close reading" of the activity, as a basis for discussion and writing, she didn't get this idea from us or from Literary Studies. She was teaching them what she does, in a field in which the primary objects of inquiry are behavioral phenomena, not texts. In these collaborations, I always felt that we were reinventing writing instruction in forms I couldn't have previously imagined.

As I'll explain further, some of the dissonance I've felt resulted from the peculiar history and institutional environment of Cornell. Some of it resulted from my own academic background and conceptions of writing, which developed and have remained, in most respects, outside the fields of English and Composition Studies. Because my career in writing instruction began as a teacher *in* one of those *other* disciplines, when I try to understand what we are doing at Cornell I tend to view this work from the perspectives of the teachers in physics, political science, entomology, or history (among dozens of other fields) who have been involved in our programs. Views of this work through the disciplinary lens of composition distort these perspectives to varying degrees, and I'm sure that my tendency to privilege the "other" results in part from an ethnographic, relativistic disposition. To the extent that these are personal or institutional anomalies, they hold no more than anecdotal relevance to collective issues and understandings in our profession.

I strongly suspect, however, that writing teachers and program administrators at other schools have experienced similar dissonance and distortion between competing views of their work within and outside the field of composition. The "stages" that Bazerman described do not just trace a phase shift in the development of writing programs. They also represent conflicting viewpoints in an unresolved argument. Does authority over academic writing and writing instruction reside in our writing programs and profession, or does this authority reside in the diverse disciplines represented in our programs? Is this authority centralized or decentralized? When we move beyond Freshman English and conceptions of general, "basic" skills, into the branching, labyrinthine corridors of specialized discourse, who are the real experts in academic writing? Few of us who work closely with scholars and teachers in fields of inquiry remote from our own academic backgrounds (whether those backgrounds were in Literary Studies, Rhetoric and Composition, or, for that matter anthropology) could honestly claim that *we* are the real experts, either as writers or as teachers of writing, in these fields.

These questions aren't so different, in the end, from the ones that have vexed ethnographers for generations, about who really understands and can explain

another culture: the anthropologist/"culture specialist" or its members? A lapsed anthropologist like me is not the only writing teacher who remains of two minds about such questions or shifts back and forth between them, assuming the role of an authority on writing in physics at a composition conference and that of a bewildered novice when talking about this writing with a real physicist. Do our programs represent our own expertise as composition specialists, or do they represent the kaleidoscopic realms of expertise distributed evenly throughout the university? Do we depend on these other teachers in the disciplines, or do they depend on us? Most of us would like, in Peter Elbow's terms, to "embrace contraries" (1983) and answer, "Both." But these views of what we are doing remain contrary. The directions in which we lean, to varying degrees, partly determine our institutional and professional identities along with the meanings, for those of us in independent programs, of "independence." For people involved in interdisciplinary writing programs at other schools, the potential relevance of Cornell's programs derives from the degree to which they have leaned toward, acknowledged, and depended upon, the diversified expertise of teachers in these "other" fields, including English.

WHERE ANYONE CAN STUDY ANYTHING

It's no coincidence that the radical change in writing instruction at Cornell occurred in the early years of the same period of disruption and challenge to educational traditions that led to the WAC movement. But related beginnings sometimes have their own, very different beginnings. Russell notes that in this general climate of educational reform, the first WAC programs within English were inspired by earlier progressive education movements in secondary education, led by figures such as James Britton and John Dewey (2002, p. 285). Ideas that led to fundamental changes in writing instruction at Cornell, however, were built into the foundations of this university in a much earlier period of educational reform.

In her detailed history of what is now called the First-Year Writing Seminar Program (which she directed for many years), Katherine Gottschalk provides evidence that even in its early decades, Cornell's faculty "harbored the belief that the teaching of writing should be firmly embedded in the study of material about which both faculty and students were (or were becoming) knowledgeable" (1997, p. 22). Gottschalk's essay is titled "Putting—and Keeping—Cornell's Writing Program in its Place," and the "place" she means is, at least in principle, everywhere. This decentralized view of writing as disciplinary activity emerged from the founding principles of Ezra Cornell's intention to create a distinctly American university where (in what became the university's motto) "any person can find instruction in any study."

Terse as the statement was, William Strunk Jr., best known as E. B. White's teacher at Cornell in the 1920s, might have urged Cornell to say, "where anyone can study anything." But Cornell's language and his progressive goals were those of the 1860s, and his main ally was the historian Andrew Dickson White, who became the university's first president in 1868. At a time when the nation's elite colleges were primarily devoted to the cultivation of young gentlemen, through classical and sectarian instruction, Cornell and White proposed secular, practical education in fields such as engineering, agriculture, and military science. In his inauguration day speech, Cornell also stated explicitly that "any person" included "the poor young men and the poor young women of our country" (Bishop, 1962, p. 88), and against considerable opposition the university became one of the first to enroll women, in 1870. Taking advantage of the recently passed Morrill Land Grant Act, Cornell built the university on a farm he sold to the state of New York, on a hilltop overlooking the rather sleepy town of Ithaca. It therefore became New York's land grant university, a public institution; but Cornell also donated the proceeds from the sale to a university endowment. As a consequence, Cornell University became both public and private, a New York State university and, eventually, an incongruous member of the "Ivy League" of private schools.

As a result of these historical developments, Cornell also became an unusually decentralized, complicated place. The sprawling Ithaca campus now consists of three statutory, New York State colleges and four private colleges, along with graduate and professional schools, outlying experimental stations and test farms, livestock barns, laboratories of ornithology and bioacoustics, and dozens of other research facilities of which individual students and faculty members are largely unaware. When leaving my office, for example, a freshman once told me that she had to go "get some blood." When I asked her if she meant "give" some blood (assuming an ESL error), she said, "No, I have to get some blood from the cow barns to take to the vampire bat lab," as part of her work/study job in animal science. Indeed, almost anyone can study almost anything on this campus, and the daily routines of this student's educational experience carried her to (necessarily dark) corners of the university that I knew nothing about, after many years of broadly ranging work in its interdisciplinary writing programs.

For the purpose of understanding the development of these writing programs, along with their potential relevance to other schools, this example illustrates one basic premise: that the real interdisciplinary beings on campus are undergraduates, especially in their first year. To the extent that we try to teach writing as a general skill, we must presume (or at least pretend) that we know what our students are doing, what writing generally means in their experience, and what they need to know. But in a typical freshman writing class at Cornell

(as at other large universities), the students who converge from many directions collectively know more about what is really going on across the campus than their teacher does. We are primarily inhabitants of our offices and departments in particular buildings, and I know many teachers who have never entered the alien territory of departments a hundred yards from their offices. Our students are academic nomads who roam throughout the campus every day with heavy packs of books and notes from several disciplines—from the complex realms of biology, mathematics, civil engineering, or physics to those of history, economics, or American literature.

A second premise concerns the administrative systems and policies that define the functions of writing instruction within the university at large. The vampire bat lab assistant I mentioned was enrolled in my developmental writing class, listed as "Writing 1370" in the endowed College of Arts and Sciences, to satisfy part of her nine-credit "oral and written communication" requirement in the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Other colleges—in Engineering, Human Ecology, Industrial and Labor Relations, Hotel Administration, and the College of Art, Architecture and Planning—have their own writing or communication requirements, satisfied wholly or in part by our First-Year Writing Seminars: now more than 100 topical courses offered in more than 30 departments and special programs. Each of the seven colleges maintains its own admissions office and standards, its own administration, curriculum, course approval criteria, and degree requirements. Each has developed a distinct organizational culture that includes complex internal and external agreements (and disagreements). One result of these decentralized, diversified systems is the difficulty of reaching consensus on any matter of university policy.

What does it mean for anyone to "teach writing" at this place, in ways that address the needs of "any person" in "any field of study"?

Until the 1960s, Cornell's historically convenient answer to this question wasn't substantially different from others in higher education: Freshman English. When E. B. White entered Cornell in 1919, he was obliged, like everyone else, to take two semesters of English 1, which assigned weekly, literary essays in uniform sections designed by an English Department committee. Readers of *The Elements of Style* (1959) usually assume that William Strunk Jr. introduced White to the principles of clear, elegant prose in this freshman writing course, but Strunk used the booklet in an advanced, two-semester prose analysis course, English 8, that White took in his junior year when he was, as a major in journalism, already the editor of the student newspaper. Strunk's course, like his little book of rules, was designed for serious, accomplished writers who had their own reasons for wanting to refine their work and could therefore determine, for example, which words were "needless" (Rule # 13).

English 8 was indeed one of White's favorite courses at Cornell, but he had hated English 1 and received a D his first semester. When adjusted for grade inflation, his attitude and performance were roughly equivalent to my own, in Freshman English, decades later. And so was his response when he managed to get the second semester requirement waived and wrote to his mother, "This morning came news of my utter redemption from deepest gloom, for I got an exemption from any more of those weekly abortions which the English Department deals out in large portions—which is to say I won't have to write so much stuff every day" (Garvey, 2009, p. 11).

By 1966, dissatisfaction with the course (then English 111–112) had spread to everyone involved, including English Department faculty and the legions of graduate students and adjuncts who taught sections of the course. The resulting decision by Arts and Sciences faculty to redistribute writing instruction, from a general English skills course to topical seminars taught in several disciplines, differed fundamentally from the motivations, ideologies, and contexts of the initial WAC movement a decade later. Faculty members in English were, like those at other research universities at the time, specialists in Literary Studies, with little interest in composition theory and pedagogy, and the English professors involved in this interdisciplinary decision wanted especially to *abandon*, not to promote, current premises and pedagogies of English composition. As evidence that faculty members in English were among the strongest advocates for relinquishing centralized authority over writing, Gottschalk (1997) cites a 1966 speech to the Cornell trustees by English professor Edgar Rosenberg, who became the first director of the new Freshman Humanities Program. Echoing Ezra Cornell's founding principles, which paired the diverse interests and goals of students with those of diverse teachers, Rosenberg noted that a student is "apt to feel . . . that a course addressed to nineteen hundred and ninety-nine others is not going to respect (or indulge him in) his own individual tastes and proclivities" (Gottschalk, 1997, p. 24). Rosenberg's 1966 brochure for the new program predicted that the quality of instruction would result from "the individual instructor's particular field of interest and expertise," paired with "the intellectual proclivities which the freshman brings with him to Cornell . . ." (Gottschalk, 1997, p. 24). Although the brochure estimated that students in these seminars would write "approximately a paper a week," all other structural and pedagogical decisions were left to the individual instructors who designed and taught these courses (Gottschalk, 1997, p. 25).

At Cornell, therefore, the curricular complexity and specialization often viewed as sources of resistance to WAC became the foundations for a new approach to writing instruction, built into the fabric of the university from the beginning. These early, endemic origins of interdisciplinary writing instruction

at Cornell are rarely acknowledged in the history of composition, but they are not entirely unique. Chris Thaiss et al. (in this volume) describe similarly interdisciplinary views of writing, independent from the field of English, rooted in the history of UC Davis, a branch of another Land Grant university.

What do students need to know about writing in this kind of institution? Faculty and administrators were already inclined to assume that there were many answers to this question, known by specialists in diverse fields of study. Students should learn whatever teachers in these fields imagined writing to be. Then and in following years, most of these teachers were oblivious to shifting trends in composition, which typically followed those in Literary Studies. Should writing be taught as rhetorical form, as personal expression, as a literary art or craft, as communication within a discourse community, as a mode of learning, as the making of meaning, or as a social construct? Directors of the new writing program did not try to dictate answers to this question, and individual teachers answered it in a bewildering variety of ways that remain largely unknown.

ENDLESS EXPERIMENTS

For purposes of rationalizing and theorizing writing instruction, establishing institutional identity, or charting the course of program development, such open, inductive principles are difficult to articulate, easy to forget, and nearly impossible to evaluate. The premise that requisite knowledge for this instruction resides everywhere in the university, in unpredictable forms, seems less a theory or philosophy than a simple acknowledgement—a naïve sense of trust or faith. As a basis for program administration, it doesn't seem like much to go on with.

But this is the premise that Cornell's program directors and staff have tried to maintain and extend, with certain limitations and costs, for nearly 50 years. One of the limitations most obvious to us, in the 1980s, was that our writing seminars were confined to the first-year curriculum, primarily in the humanities and social sciences, through established relations with these departments. In reality, ours was a WISD program—Writing in *Some* Disciplines—primarily in Arts and Sciences, at the bottom of the curriculum. What would students in our writing seminars be doing as writers at advanced levels, across Cornell's seven colleges and curricula? We had no idea, and neither did anyone else.

In this respect, Cornell was no longer the hidden vanguard of writing in the disciplines. At the time, the emerging model for extending WID to advanced instruction was the passage of mandated requirements and departmental offerings designated "writing intensive," administered by writing programs that collaborated, in some cases, with interdisciplinary faculty committees. Schools that adopted this model included some very large universities such as the University

of Massachusetts at Amherst, which had launched its mandated program in 1982, the year of our "independence" (Forman et al., 1990).

At Cornell, however, the prospects of passing such a mandate were dim and those of administering it—persuading departments and faculty to cooperate; developing and maintaining general guidelines for designated courses across colleges—were horrifying. To meet a university-wide "WI" requirement for "biology," for example, where would we turn? Cornell's vast Division of Biological Sciences in that period included seven biology departments in the colleges of Arts and Sciences and Agriculture and Life Sciences, with related life science departments in the colleges of Human Ecology and Engineering. Which departments should comply? How many of these courses would we need to meet the upper-level requirements of some 2000 biology majors at the time?

More fundamentally, however, these mandates and designations conflicted with the principles of voluntary participation, collaboration, and trust that had spared us from the types of resistance and disagreement described in a WPA panel I attended, at the 1991 CCCC, titled "Trials of the 90s." The missionary work of the early WAC movements then seemed to have evolved into something closer to law enforcement. The costs of the principles we maintained included the limited range of departments and teachers involved. The main benefit, for those of us who loved our jobs, was that we rarely had to persuade anyone to do anything.

In his application to the Cornell President's Fund for Educational Initiatives, therefore, Harry Shaw proposed a new program based on the original premise that requisite expertise and motivation for integrating writing and learning were already distributed among disciplines. When we assembled this proposal, we did not ask for institutional mandates or new writing requirements. We did not intend to develop general guidelines or designations for courses affiliated with the program. Nor did we propose to add writing assignments or components to the disciplinary "content" of these courses. Through collaboration with teachers and departments, we hoped instead to put attention to language "into solution" with learning in ways that would "enrich" teaching and learning in advanced courses. Because this attention is labor intensive and courses at Cornell are often very large, with shortages of teaching assistants, we proposed to use our funding primarily to support and train additional teaching assistants in affiliated departments to collaborate with faculty members in these projects. At the suggestion of Geoffrey Chester, then Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, we named this program Writing in the Majors. Chester, a physicist, also encouraged us to begin discussions in fields and levels of the curriculum most remote from the traditional domains of writing instruction: advanced courses in the sciences (Shaw, 2003, p. 67). As a result of this advice, the early Writing in the Majors projects included fields such as particle and condensed matter physics, astro-

physics, physical and organic chemistry, oncology, evolutionary biology, and a senior-level course in geometry.

In the discussions that led to these projects, Shaw and I adhered quite religiously (and against many temptations), to the "faith-based" approach we had proposed. We gradually learned to maintain a kind of innocent, inductive curiosity and to deflect suspicions that we expected professors and departments to do something *for* the writing program. We learned to steer discussions away from faculty declarations of what all students need to learn as writers and toward their own specific *dissatisfactions* with the kinds of learning that occurred in their own courses, fields, and curricula. That's where productive discussions always began, and when teachers seemed entirely satisfied with their courses and curricula, we cordially ended the conversations. In their discussions with teachers in the disciplines, all WPAs have to develop these skills, but the absence of mandates, requirements, guidelines, and other centralized imperatives in our program made this work much easier.

After the second year of the program, as awareness of it spread, we no longer had to spend much time recruiting faculty. They more often came to us with ideas for course changes or new courses they had already developed. Among the best teachers especially, dissatisfaction with their approaches was everywhere, and this dissatisfaction almost always had something to do with uses of language. For example, a professor in Human Development once asked to meet with me because he felt so awful ("guilty," he said) about teaching an upper-level course on American social services—based on thorny, unresolved issues that needed discussion—in a lecture format to more than 100 students. He wasn't asking for program support. Instead, he wanted to know what I thought about the idea of asking the students, on the first day of class, to *leave* the lecture hall, wander around for 20 minutes, and decide what they were most proud and most ashamed of about social services in this country. When (and if) they returned, he would ask them to write their ideas on index cards, exchange them with another student, add a revised viewpoint if necessary, and pass all of the cards to him. Then he would read some of these responses aloud and open them to discussion for the rest of the class. "Is this too weird?" he asked. "Will any of them come back?"

I told him I thought it was a wonderful idea, that it seemed weirder to him than it would to them, and that they would want to return—which, he later told me, they did. One of the most important things we've learned, in the spirit of research, is that experiments with writing in the disciplines are already going on throughout the campus, in every field. Through support for talented and imaginative graduate students and the exchange of ideas we've learned from teachers like this one, we simply identify, expand, and help to "enrich" these endeavors. In the third year of the program, Geoffrey Chester, the physicist who helped to steer us

in this direction, politely asked me when I thought Writing in the Majors would "move beyond its experimental phase," toward program guidelines and perhaps requirements. I evasively said, "Maybe in a couple of years," but I wanted to ask, "When do you think physics will move beyond *its* experimental phase?"

Is this faith-based approach to program development justified? Or, in more empirical terms, have the results of this endless, inductive experiment validated its hypotheses? One cost of this approach is that the hundreds of distinct ways in which Cornell faculty members and graduate students have put writing instruction into solution with learning defy general assessment. The standardized, quantifiable measures of effectiveness that institutions often require of writing programs promote standardized systems. The results we can provide from endless experiments consist of endless anecdotes and detailed explanations, and when programs like ours are devoted to increasing the satisfaction of departments, faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduates in courses we support, their almost unanimous expressions of satisfaction represent self-fulfilling prophecies. When I talk about Cornell's programs with teachers and administrators at other schools, therefore, I acknowledge that the decisions we've made won't necessarily work at their institutions and don't work at Cornell in ways that would necessarily meet their goals and administrative demands.

Still, the homily that one Cornell administrator confronted me with, that "the plural of anecdote is not data," isn't necessarily true, especially in qualitative research; and the relevance of our work for teachers at other schools lies primarily in our anecdotal evidence that the real vitality of any WID program—whether mandated or not, in or outside the English Department—emerges from specific rhetorical and pedagogical problems and solutions that arise in particular disciplines or from patterns we can observe among them. How far can you remove a concept from the context in which students learned it before they no longer recognize the concept? Not very far, a chemist discovered through a series of essay assignments in his laboratory course; but the relevance of the question is not confined to laboratory science. How can students acquire a deep, intuitive understanding of special relativity or quantum physics that does not depend on the medium of mathematics? Through the medium of writing, of course, but the question raises others about the limitations of mathematical representation and understanding.

In this essay I can't begin to convey the variety and substance of these experiments. In *The Elements of Teaching Writing* (2004), Katherine Gottschalk and I have described some of these teaching strategies and motivations. Two collections of essays that Jonathan Monroe edited during his term as Director of what is now named the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines—*Writing and Revising the Disciplines* (2002) and *Local Knowledges, Local Practices: Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell* (2003)—include explanations of writing and teaching

practices from a wide range of Cornell faculty, with more elaborate explanations of the principles and structures of our programs than I have provided here. In the chapter "Working with Faculty" in his book *Introducing English: Essays in the Intellectual Work of Composition* (2001), James Slevin discussed the vitality, diversity, and intellectual depth of ideas exchanged in the faculty seminars he led at Cornell for many years.

I expect, however, that those of you who collaborate with faculty members or graduate students in interdisciplinary programs do not need to be persuaded that these scholars contribute a wealth of knowledge and imagination to your endeavors or that the success of your programs depends on them. Among these teachers and disciplines, the potential for new motivations and methods of teaching writing seems as unlimited and interwoven as the paths of inquiry they pursue.

INTERDEPENDENCE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY IDENTITY

When I say the goal of Writing in the Majors is to put writing "into solution" with learning in particular courses and fields of inquiry, I have two meanings of the phrase in mind.

One refers to the chemical distinction between solutions and mixtures: integrative and additive. Put into solution with water, salt or sugar alters the substance but not the volume. Mixed into water, stones increase the volume and sink to the bottom. In disciplinary courses affiliated with writing programs, designations, requirements, and general guidelines for quantities of writing tend to create mixtures and resulting concerns about volume—content displacement— that teachers invariably raise when they are trying to meet program guidelines for requisite amounts or types of writing in designated courses. And when they and their students are thinking of writing as a substance distinct from content, this component of the mixture tends to sink to the bottom like a stone.

The second meaning concerns solutions to problems that generalized conceptions of academic writing can broadly describe but can rarely solve in practice, especially at advanced levels of instruction. When college students are still interdisciplinary beings and academic nomads, taking introductory courses in a variety of fields, we can teach them general, broadly differentiated principles of academic writing, reading, and inquiry, such as methods of using and referencing sources, or introducing and developing arguments. Beyond their first year, as they enter diverse branches of the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, these generalizations quickly break down. As writers, they begin to encounter problems that are deeply entangled with specific ways of thinking—ways of acquiring, producing, and representing knowledge as academic beings they have not yet become. Specialists in Composition have generally described these problems. In a particularly

influential and thoughtful essay, "Inventing the University" (1985), David Bartholomae illuminated the rhetorical and stylistic challenges that undergraduates encounter in their efforts to write, in a single term, as though they were scholars in English, psychology, anthropology, or economics. "And this, understandably," Bartholomae observed, "causes problems" (1985, p. 135). To turn attention to these problems, we have routinely assigned Bartholomae's essay in our teaching seminars since its publication. But who can actually solve these problems?

In 1989, a graduate student in astronomy appointed as teaching assistant in one of the first Writing in the Majors courses, Topics in Astrophysics, told me that although he appreciated the rare chance to talk about writing and teaching with people in other fields in our graduate training seminar, most of the assigned readings for the class were largely irrelevant to his teaching and very tedious to read. "Inventing the University" was one example he mentioned. When I asked why, he observed, "You have to read them all the way through. You have to start at the beginning, and once you start, you can't skip ahead or you won't know what they're saying." I then asked him how *he* read articles in astrophysics. In response, he pulled one from his backpack (on gamma radiation from a galactic center), put it on my desk, and patiently explained what "reading" typically meant in his field: starting with the title and abstract, perhaps, and skipping to the figures in the results section, or looking for the research question at the end of the introduction and skipping to the research claims and conclusions in the final section, going back to the methods or results to evaluate the claims.

When I later mentioned this astronomer's complaint to one of my colleagues, she suggested that he just hadn't learned how to read academic discourse analytically and critically. But the strategies he explained to me *were* efficient, nonlinear methods of reading scientific literature analytically and critically—approaches to reading and writing he hoped to teach students in Topics in Astrophysics (a course based entirely on writing and discussion of current research literature in the field) and in his career. He recognized that the composition theorists whose work we assigned were writing *about* issues broadly relevant to the roles of writing in the university and the challenges students face. His underlying complaint was that these authors were writing primarily *to* one another, *in* forms of discourse fundamentally different from the ones with which knowledge is constructed and exchanged in his field, where he knew how to solve these highly specialized rhetorical problems.

Consider those of using, referencing, and documenting sources. In close succession one afternoon, I met with two pairs of teachers in Writing in the Majors courses: professors and their teaching assistants first in history and then in physics. Both pairs wanted to discuss problems they observed in student papers, both involving references. The historians were concerned that students were basing

their arguments on ideas and quotations from "secondary sources" (the work of historians) when at this level they should quote and develop arguments from "primary sources." The physicists, on the other hand, were concerned that in review papers based on research articles, which they consider "primary sources," the students seemed determined to use quotations from these articles rather than brief summaries and numerical citations. What the historians thought their students should have learned in their first-year writing seminars represented, for the physicists, bad habits of quotation they had probably acquired in those seminars. These differing expectations are not just matters of convention or basic writing skills. You won't find solutions to such problems in college handbooks. They lie at the heart of variations among disciplines.

In response, I simply pointed out that these "rules" for writing and thinking vary in ways their students have no way of knowing until they are taught. And because their own fields created and maintain these rules, these scholars are responsible for teaching them to their students. As a principle for Writing in the Majors, I call this "linguistic atheism." There is no God of Writing, no central authority over written language responsible for creating and solving the problems that all of us encounter. Nor, then, are there legitimate priests of writing, in the English Department, in the "independent" writing program, or elsewhere. The language we use belongs to all of us. The ways in which we use this language and expect our students to use it are our responsibility, and if we don't teach our students how to meet our expectations, we can't expect anyone else to do so.

The extent to which we depend on the independent responsibility of these teachers raises questions about the nature of our own *in*dependence, as a university program, along with our own expertise, responsibility, and identity. What does the Knight Institute *do*, exactly, and represent? Do we have distinct disciplinary knowledge of our own to offer, or are we, as a friend once put it, "just selling wind"?

I won't try to answer this question for everyone on our staff. Our roles, academic backgrounds, and areas of expertise are, like those in most writing programs, differentiated. Over the years, members of the staff have come from academic backgrounds in history, biology, science and technology studies, applied linguistics, creative writing, and other fields, including Rhetoric and Composition and Literary Studies. Along with our administrative responsibilities, we teach writing, from the freshman level to graduate courses and faculty seminars. Our main areas of experience and training include ESL instruction, developmental writing, and writing center administration, and these responsibilities create differing views of what the Knight Institute is and does.

For me and for my colleagues, I can say that our programs and positions have been institutionally disconnected from the English Department for so long that

independence from that field no longer means very much to us, if anything. For me, particularly, it means no more than the necessity of our independence from *any* department or discipline. Some of my colleagues identify more closely with the academic field of composition than others, but this professional identity has very limited institutional meaning. At a university where any person is supposed to be able to study any subject, Rhetoric and Composition hasn't been one of these subjects for as long as anyone can remember, and we have never tried to develop such a concentration, department, or graduate field. Apart from the administrative difficulties involved, doing so would clash with the principles on which our programs are based.

According to these principles, "independence" best characterizes the roles and motivations of teachers involved in our programs. We depend on them, and they depend on us, as sources of support for pervasively essential dimensions of academic life that, in competition with the priority of specialized research, are routinely neglected. In this respect, the Knight Institute is an "interdependent" program, valuable and valued because it helps teachers to solve problems they care about, with strategies we've usually learned from other teachers in other fields. Questions about our institutional identities and expertise in this work are more complex, and I can reliably answer only for myself.

To avoid distractions, I'm now trying to write the end of this essay in a lounge area of an animal science building nearly a mile from central campus, where our offices are located. Even here, however, I've run into professors and graduate students I know and whose work I *somewhat* understand. Although I still haven't visited the vampire bat lab, I would feel *somewhat* familiar with a great variety of other buildings and departments on campus, where I know *something* about fields of inquiry, ways of representing and conveying knowledge, and pedagogical challenges for teachers and students. In a research university that produces, reproduces, and attaches status and identity to specific types of academic creatures, I've become an anomaly: an interdisciplinary being or, oxymoronically, a professional dilettante. At a professional level in an interdisciplinary program, my perspectives mirror and illuminate those of the more numerous, amateur interdisciplinary beings on campus: undergraduates. (For another perspective on writing faculty working in STEM environments see Everett, this volume.)

This peculiar identity suits me. It's what I always wanted, truth be told, as a student whose interests in one subject always led to interest in another and who felt that bewilderment was a blessed state. In higher education, I'm not alone in this disposition and *un*disciplined expertise. I share it with many other people in interdisciplinary writing programs and with those in another neglected, pervasive, and related dimension of academic life: teaching and learning.

But I'm also aware that such positions do not suit composition specialists who want professorial status and institutional acknowledgment of their expertise in a specialized field of knowledge production, comparable to the disciplines involved in the programs they administer. In their essay "Locating Writing Programs in Research Universities" (2002), based on surveys and other information from 15 of these institutions, Peggy O'Neill and Ellen Schendel document the challenges of meeting such aspirations at places like Cornell, where status is so tightly linked with professorial rank, specialized research, and publication in established departments. O'Neill and Schendel quote from an electronic exchange between Thomas Miller and Katherine Gottschalk (2002, p. 206) in which Miller characterizes programs at "elite" universities, including Cornell, as "service units," without departmental status or research missions, where writing is taught primarily by graduate students and adjuncts in ways disconnected from the intellectual core of their disciplines. Gottschalk replies, as I would, that the vitality and institutional value of the Knight Institute result from its *connections* with the intellectual work of graduate students and faculty in diverse disciplines (see also MacDonald et al., this volume).

The views of our work presented here offer further counter-arguments. All Writing in the Majors courses and many First-Year Writing Seminars are designed and taught by faculty in the disciplines. The Ph.D. candidates involved in our programs are typically brilliant, innovative young scholars and teachers who represent the future of higher education. While I believe that pay scales of the program staff should be closer to professorial positions, in all other respects our appointments, benefits, and working conditions as senior lecturers and lecturers are equitable, secure, and wonderfully collegial. We rarely, in staffing emergencies, hire temporary instructors. I don't believe that any of us would prefer to work in a hierarchical composition program or academic department in which a few professorial faculty members supervise larger numbers of subordinates. In this respect, the real "service unit" for writing, disconnected from knowledge production and staffed by graduate students and adjuncts, was the Freshman English course that Cornell dismantled in the 1960s.

At the end of their essay, O'Neill and Schendel present a further response, from Richard Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer at Rutgers (2002, pp. 207–209), to measures of a program's success and value based on traditional currencies of professorial, departmental status, and specialized knowledge production. I can summarize that response as the question, "How well is that working?" By most accounts, this traditional value and reward system is leading higher education into deep trouble. One symptom of its deterioration are the diminishing hopes of Ph.D.s that they will ever enter tenure-track positions, especially in fields of the humanities that have traditionally produced composition specialists. Pinning

the future of Composition Studies and writing programs to this system encourages us to board a once elegant but sinking ship.

For the Knight Institute's programs, in any case, the future lies in the increasing values of interdisciplinary knowledge and expertise, when traditional departmental divisions no longer correlate with emerging fields of research. As research specialists, scholars in the Psychology Department often collaborate most closely with those in fields of neurobiology, linguistics, or computer science. Many economists draw theoretical and empirical models from fields of behavioral sciences, social psychology, or organizational behavior. Growing numbers of scholars are now affiliated with interdisciplinary programs in information science, cognitive studies, environmental studies, neuroscience, or cultural studies, along with dozens of interdisciplinary area programs, such as Asian Studies. For several years I've served on the teaching staff of an NSF funded Ph.D. program that trains graduate students from a wide range of fields (in the sciences, social sciences, and engineering) to collaborate in finding solutions to development problems in sub-Saharan Africa.

Two years ago, I also served on a university provost's committee charged with the task of developing courses that cross disciplines, departments, and colleges, taught by pairs or teams of faculty members in different fields. The cross-disciplinary courses we hoped to develop would reveal issues, lines of inquiry, and emerging bodies of knowledge that disciplinary categories conceal. Our announcement of the program produced dozens of faculty proposals, including one for a course on "Exploration" taught by Mary Beth Norton in History and Astronomy professor Steven Squyres, one of the lead scientists for the Mars Rover project. Another proposed course explored cross-disciplinary research on "Networks" in biological, social, and electronic systems.

In our second meeting, faculty committee members from several fields suggested that the Knight Institute would be the most logical home for this program. In fact, many of the courses affiliated with Writing in the Majors, such as Plagues and People (offered in Entomology) and Human/Environment Relations (in Design and Environmental Analysis) were already on cross-disciplinary subjects and became components of the new program as well. Another reason for the suggestion was that the Knight Institute was already connected, in an *interdependent* fashion, with diverse departments, teachers, and administrative systems across the university's seven colleges. And a third reason concerned the central, integral roles that writing would play in the designs of most of these courses, as a medium that represents and registers changes in current scholarship. Scholars involved in this program are in the process of creating the disciplines and professions—some of them unimaginable 20 years ago—that current and future students will enter. With university funding, what is now called the

University Courses Program is jointly administered by the Office of the Provost and the Knight Institute, where Elliot Shapiro (now Director of Writing in the Majors as well) is its co-director.

At the end of my own career, I believe that the future vitality of our profession lies in this direction: in flexible, interdisciplinary, interdependent connections with continually evolving lines of inquiry. I'm not suggesting that Cornell's programs can fully achieve this goal or that the structures of other writing programs should emulate ours. I simply mean that if the "threshold concepts" of interdisciplinary programs include "defining writing as a disciplinary activity" and "understanding the situated nature of writing," as Anson argues (2015, p. 205), we need to acknowledge, in theory and in practice, the complex, unsettling implications of these premises. In other words, the ongoing viability of what we know and do as composition specialists will depend on our grasp of what other disciplinary and cross-disciplinary specialists currently know and do.

For members of our profession with academic moorings in English and other traditional disciplines or those who want comparable, independent status and identity, our institutional identity at Cornell may seem intellectually rootless, institutionally vulnerable, and theoretically ambiguous. Because academic departments still define status hierarchies and employment conditions in higher education, I understand why writing specialists want to be affiliated either with an established department, such as English, or with their own independent unit and discipline.

But these forms of security and identity carry their own, less obvious costs and potential hazards. Beyond the trend toward adjunct employment within departments, including those in Rhetoric and Composition, these hazards include intellectual isolation—disconnection from, in Bazerman's terms, "the roles written language actually takes in disciplines and disciplinary classrooms." Official departments and disciplines do not accurately represent these actual, changing roles of written language in higher education: what faculty members write, where they publish their work, what they teach in their classes, or what their students need to learn. No single discipline or theoretical construct can account for these kaleidoscopic transformations. If we hope to remain useful as writing specialists, to our institutions, to their faculty members, and to their students, we need to maintain agile, interdisciplinary, interdependent connections with the essential, living medium of all academic life: language itself.

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