

Chapter 16. My Composition or Yours? What We Teach in First-Year Composition

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Students filter through the academic system at the two year college at a rapid pace and it is difficult for me, as a writing instructor, to envision a consistent, effective pedagogical strategy. Each semester of General Education classes—like *Research Writing*, *College Writing*, *Introduction to Literature*, or *Basic Writing*—the student population seems to balloon with one specific major. For instance, one College Writing class was almost entirely nursing students, whereas a Basic Writing course was mostly Special Education majors. These unique microcosms break down the greater question of “What should I teach in first-year composition?” to a particular dichotomy: my composition or yours?

Nursing students will use a unique blend of Latin, English, and acronyms in their daily career writing to assess charts, prescriptions, and translate doctors’ handwriting. Though this is a necessary skill for nursing students to possess, it would seem out of context to rely on the composition instructor to teach these skills. However, it also seems inappropriate to have these students compose lengthy research papers or cause and effect essays if they already understand those patterns of logic. Embracing students’ future goals in the first-year composition classroom can lend itself to the social construction of knowledge—students’ abilities to make public what their education and career goals are and how they plan to move forward with their educational process while still in an academic setting. By working with a specific-career focused demographic in sections of writing class, we can shift the focus from our traditional writing expectations to their writing needs.

Background Literature

The 1954 *Conference on College Composition and Communication* held a workshop to explore the writing processes of college students after completing their required composition course in their freshman year. The report chronicling the events of this workshop notes that: “The members of this workshop began with the assumption that there is a general falling off in composition ability after the freshman year, often to a point where remedial work becomes necessary” (Hackett 114). The findings of this group in 1954 remain constant today. At many universities, students are required to take writing classes within the first year or two

of their academic career. Sometimes, depending on the major, students rarely write documents of length for their remaining college days. However, it is not just about enhancing writing across the curriculum (WAC). Perhaps the issue can also be addressed within the composition classroom: If students do not understand practical applications of their composition skills or how to utilize the skills without guidance, we are teaching in a vacuum. We are throwing terminology, skill sets, and expectations at students, knowing that they will need them far beyond the scope of their coursework, but not telling them how or why these skills will be necessary. We need to adjust the coursework to the specific demographics for each field of study, if not for each individual.

In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley identified the shift of composition from a study and response to literature to, well, nothing in particular: “Indeed, the teaching of canonical literature as the primary subject matter for writing courses has diminished considerably since WWII, leaving no single model of writing instruction to replace it” (119). One of the hot topics within composition studies is the role of composition, particularly first-year composition, in the university. Is it a service course? Is it a means of gatekeeping? And, if so, are either of those objectives actually bad? In my experiences as both a professional in student affairs and student services, as well as a faculty member, I find that diverse elements of a college or university are service-oriented: we work in a culture geared to ask, “Would you like a transcript with that?” I do not just believe that composition is a service course because, arguably, a number of general education courses are offered as a service to enrich students’ educational and cultural perspectives. Perhaps this is more evident at liberal arts institutions, where a variety of required cultural activities are offered to students as the same kind of service. As much as I myself believe in education for education’s sake, that ideal has drastically changed for many American colleges. Jeff Smith’s article “Students’ Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics” presents the concept of gatekeeping in academics as a natural progression:

It’s obvious that after our students leave our writing classes, most are likely to have to pass through gates: graduation, graduate-school admission, professional certification, job searches, performance and partnership reviews. But even if this weren’t so, gatekeeping would still be part of the picture. For students have already passed through gates en route to our classrooms.
(303)

Perhaps then, it’s the “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” mentality that I am presenting. I would identify this approach to the writing classroom as a mix of accepting the challenge that Faigley presented of finding a unified model of composition and embracing the unique opportunity of first-year composition as a service course. I cannot convince all of my students of the benefits of the education for education’s sake viewpoint, but I can help them understand and move

forward with the career path that they have chosen. I can acknowledge that they have career goals and help them navigate and understand that direction by assisting them to research and develop the genre of writing that they will use in their chosen field of study.

Another consideration for the composition classroom is the overall first-year experience for college students. For anyone who is not familiar with or does not remember college life from the student perspective, Rebekah Nathan (pseudonym) offers a unique perspective on the living and learning situation of college students in her book *My Freshman Year*. Kirk S. Kidwell condenses her experience: “Most will survive their first-year at college and go on to graduate, but all too many will drop out before the freshman year is over” (253). Students are encouraged to take required composition courses in their first (and second, if applicable) semesters as college students. Therefore, while students are in this dramatic transition period, they are also our composition students. Students in our composition courses are “on their way to becoming critical thinkers” (Kidwell 254). They need less guesswork and estimation about their careers and educational paths and more solid, tangible movement towards their individual goals. Students need a composition course with a focus on these individual goals and something to bridge the gap between the information that they learn in school and what they will apply in their careers. For those still struggling to identify the value of higher education, such a shift encourages student buy-in for the educational processes as a whole.

Chris Street and colleagues from the California State University System wrote “The Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC): Preparing All Students for College and Career,” which also examines the disjointed transition from high school to college-level writing. They begin with the question: “When students have such different needs and goals, how can [the teacher] ensure success for each one of them?” (34). The ERWC is developed from seven principles related to the rhetorical analysis, understanding, and application of texts to both reading and writing. The general nature of these principles allows room to interpret and individualize this learning process for students based on their unique educational and career goals. Karen Bishop Morris’s chapter in this collection also explores this concept by asking other difficult questions such as: “Should I penalize an ELL student with strong research writing on a sophisticated idea for making common grammatical errors?” To what end can the process be individualized bearing in mind the ramifications of any decision on the parties involved, both student and faculty?

A specific example of individualizing this process is described in Craig McClure’s article “Introducing Scientific Writing to Students Early in Their Academic Careers.” This article explores the option of integrating more writing-based activities in an introductory chemistry course to help students understand the writing process as used in their discipline. McClure found that it was “difficult for students late in their undergraduate studies to write in a format appropriate

for a scientific journal,” which he recognizes as a disservice to the students who will actively pursue a career in the science community (20). In lieu of the incorporation of a WAC program at his institution to systematically guarantee student writing throughout the academic career, McClure has students define sections of a publishable laboratory report. After these sections and subsections are defined, students are required to write in that format for all of the formal writing assignments of the semester. This familiarizes them not only with the writing style but also with the format and language appropriate to their discipline and chosen career path. Though McClure’s article specifically describes an activity and writing process for a chemistry major, the concept can be tailored to fit the needs of any academic discipline or a multi-majored composition course. Considering interdisciplinary writing is important for composition faculty and students. Faculty need to ensure that the basics of composition are being taught, but contextualized in a manner that will make writing skills extend across disciplines, as well as outside of college in general.

Pedagogical Implementation

Is there a way to tailor the educational and career writing needs of each student to assignments and coursework in the composition classroom? Is there a way to streamline the process so that students are not working on such individualized projects that it makes grading difficult? Is there a way to blend what we, the composition instructors, want to teach and what the students need to learn? Jonathon Monroe’s article “Writing and the Disciplines” identifies the need for instructors to demonstrate the value of writing within various disciplines and model them as a definitive part of each discipline, “not as an add-on or a detour, but as integral to the kinds of research and teaching on which students’ success in their respective disciplines necessarily depend” (5). Therefore, it cannot be the goal of the composition instructor to teach the elements of composition or writing that we want to teach; we need to teach what students need to learn.

One of the first assignments that I ask of my face-to-face community college students is to research expectations for writing within their major or career field. This is the first part of a two-part assignment in which students need to identify with their careers and situate themselves within their current field. First, students have to identify what type of writing is used, how it is used, if specific documents are used, if lines just need to be filled in or if independent writing has to be done, what type of language is used, and what is considered appropriate for that genre of writing. For the few students who have not yet declared a major, they have the option to research writing conventions for either their dream jobs or the jobs that they currently hold. Students write a 2-3 page analysis of what they have researched at their own workplace (if they are currently working within their field) or what they have found in online and library inquiry. In the few semesters that I have assigned this type of writing, there have been a wide variety of student

responses. Some who actively work in their fields of interests discuss the brief notes that need to be made on medical charts or the terminology used solely by their institution. One student, a criminal justice major, dreams of working for the FBI. His response included documentation of cases, including the importance of recording events as they occur while still maintaining mandated privacy.

The second part of this assignment is for the students to find examples of writing within their field, replicate these documents, and write a reflective analysis about the writing process. Students within the medical fields sometimes choose to find a patient intake form and fill it out, then analyze the type of writing and terminology used. For students who already work within their field, I was hesitant to assign this project for fear that they would already know the answers and not put much time into the assignment. However, I found that students were very engaged in the process. They were receptive to the idea of working within their field and of researching something that directly affects their lives, learning, and career paths.

It became a rewarding experience for these students to see their jobs in a different light. For example, the student who dreams of working for the FBI found official documentation through internet and library research and was able to describe an entire crime scene. This student identified early on that communication and writing are essential for all aspects of accomplishing tasks within the criminal justice field. For instance, the crime scene report could not just read that a dead body was found. All of the necessary elements of narrative-writing had to be enacted: the who, what, where, when, and why. If the writing was lackadaisical, the student learned, the entire investigation could be ruined. These positive revelations are two-fold: the student learns the writing process and the student is able to contextualize the writing process into something that they will need and use in their futures. While it may not be providing a lot of room for student creativity, I feel that that the opportunity for students to work within their fields strongly outweighs my reservations about the direct approach of the assignment.

Once students complete their investigation of writing within their fields, these activities become the basis for several smaller writing-to-learn activities within the classroom. Deanne Gute and Gary Gute identify writing-to-learn activities as those that “require minimal class time and allow instructors to suspend composition and evaluation formalities in order to stimulate deeper engagement” (192). Focusing smaller writing assignments on disciplinary or career-based writing allows students to have a deeper engagement with both the composition course itself and their desired careers. For instance, I have several in-class writing opportunities surrounding the career-based theme including freewriting, letter writing, cover letter writing, and even poetry writing. Allowing students to pay attention to writing within their individualized career paths provides the bigger picture and gives them the opportunity to consider what they will do upon receiving a degree.

The types of writing assignments that I have described do not require that

composition instructors become experts in other fields. I do not advocate for composition instructors to learn about crime scene investigation or emergency room incident reports. However, as previously described, the writing process remains the same for all of these genres of writing. Many of the characteristics of traditional genres remain true with the career-based writing. Therefore, the responsibility for investigating disciplines falls onto the student, whereas the instructor remains focused on developing and honing the students' writing process.

Our composition classrooms continuously hold groups of students who, for the most part, do not understand or are not able to connect writing to their personal or professional lives. Though these students rotate through our classrooms at a high volume in a two-year program, it is not our role, as instructors, to teach them just the elements of composition that we like or see value in. We need to actively seek out the type of composition and writing instruction that will be most effective to individual students or demographics of specific fields of study. This reach outside of our own discipline allows for a two-fold advantage: students learn the elements of overall *good writing*, and they learn more about writing as it relates to their career paths. Though the connotation of *service course* in relation to composition is usually negative, I advocate for a positive realization of the term in order to embrace the learning opportunities that are best for our students.

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