

# 14 REINVENTING WAC (AGAIN): THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR AND ACADEMIC LITERACY <sup>1</sup>

Doug Brent

In “The Future of WAC,” Walvoord (1996) argues persuasively that the WAC movement “cannot survive as Switzerland” (p. 69): that is, in order to maintain its forward momentum and avoid schism, isolation or atrophy, WAC must align itself with other educational movements that have national stature and staying power. She mentions a number of movements with which WAC has natural affinities: critical thinking, ethical thinking, assessment, and educational reform in general. McLeod, Miraglia, Soven and Thaiss’ (2001) recent edited collection *WAC for the New Millenium*, adds further weight to this argument with essays that detail WAC’s relationship to related movements such as service learning, learning communities, electronic communication, and writing-intensive courses.

In this paper I wish to argue that WAC also has affinities with another broad national movement: the First Year Experience, and its flagship vehicle, the First Year Seminar. At a number of institutions, these affinities are already being translated into programmatic convergence.

The interests of WAC reach far beyond the first year, of course. But the First Year Seminar, especially in its more recent stages of evolution, can offer an excellent platform for the broad cross-institutional goals and the interactive pedagogy that it shares with WAC and with first year composition. I will describe how First Year Seminars have been steadily evolving in the direction of WAC, and illustrate the convergence through a case study of the First Year Seminar program at the University of Calgary. Through interviews with faculty members and students, I will show how the pedagogy of these seminars integrates writing into inquiry-based research and engages students in writing as a process.

## THE FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

The First Year Seminar is a curricular form in the midst of profound changes. It first appeared in the seventies and eighties as part of a broad spectrum of strategies adopted in many American universities to deal with unacceptably high attrition rates, not just among at-risk students but among students at large. Along with learning communities, intensified academic advising, residence life programs and other strategies to help students in transition, First Year Seminars originally appeared in the form of “University 101” or “Extended Orientation” courses. These courses, usually but not always given for credit and compulsory, cover topics ranging from library and study skills to adjusting to university life, dealing with sex, drugs and alcohol, personal values, and career advising.

These U101 seminars still represent over sixty percent of first year seminars offered in the United States (*2000 National Survey*, 2000). But throughout the history of the First Year Seminar movement, a substantially different type of seminar has quietly existed in the background: the “academic content” seminar. Murphy (1989), who published one of the most influential taxonomies of First Year Seminars in the first issue of the *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, defines the academic content seminar thus:

This model differs [from the U101 seminar] primarily because of the emphasis given intellectual content. The great books of literature or current social issues are often the medium of course content. Objectives generally center around the improvement of communications skills, especially the development of critical thinking. (p. 96)

In the years since Murphy published this founding taxonomy, the academic content seminar based on a special theme has become more clearly differentiated from the seminar with common content across sections. The theme-based seminar allows each instructor to develop a seminar formed around his or her particular research interests rather than a more general “great books” or “social issues” theme. This model allows for a more concentrated engagement with the process of drilling down into a specific subject, and encourages the students to become, in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) term, “legitimate peripheral participants” in the research community to which the researcher belongs.

Most frequently (but not exclusively) found at research-intensive institutions, academic content seminars concentrate on the intellectual rather than the social transition from high school to university culture. They are designed to counter the typical first-year student’s experience of sitting in a large lecture the-

are taking notes on the results of research rather than engaging with the process of doing research. By the time students get to third and fourth year and begin to encounter smaller classes, more experienced professors and the opportunity to pursue research on a topic of interest, it may be too late. Whether or not they have dropped out or foundered, they may be convinced that university is all about knowledge uptake, not knowledge creation, and be unable to re-engage with the university as a discourse community.

However, this model continues to be virtually invisible in the First Year Experience literature, most centrally represented by its flagship journal, the *Journal of the First Year Experience and Students in Transition*. A very small number of research studies mention that their sample is an academic content seminar program (see for instance Maisto & Tammi, 1991; Hyers & Joslin, 1998), but the academic nature of the seminars' content is treated as incidental. None of these studies gives examples of the academic content, and the seminars are assessed according to exactly the same standards as U101 seminars. Retention is foregrounded as the most important outcome, with academic skills, grade point average, and general adjustment following behind. In particular, the pedagogy of academic content seminars is rarely theorized.

Despite this relative neglect in the literature, seminars featuring academic content continue to grow in proportion to U101 seminars. In 1991, academic content seminars of both types comprised 17.1% of first year seminars surveyed by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (Andersen, Gardener, Laufgraben, & Swing, 2003). By 2000, they had grown to 29.5% (*2000 National Survey*, 2000). Moreover, studies of First Year Seminars are beginning to take more of an interest in what goes on in such seminars. The Policy Center on the First Year of College reports that, according to student surveys, academic theme seminars were ranked as more effective than U101 or "transition" seminars on two measures: improving academic/cognitive skills and improving critical thinking skills (Swing, 2002).

The gradual emergence of academic content seminars into the sunlight coincides with a renewed and often highly vocal movement to re-integrate research and teaching, particularly in large research institutions in which research and teaching have threatened to become almost totally disengaged from one another. The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998), one of the most high profile studies to engage this problem, laments,

Recruitment materials display proudly the world-famous professors, the splendid facilities and the ground-breaking research that goes on within them, but thousands of students graduate without ever seeing the world-famous professors or tasting

genuine research.

The Boyer Commission proposes far-reaching remedies for this problem, chief among them being the First Year Seminar used expressly as a tool for fostering intellectual engagement, not just bodily retention:

The focal point of the first year should be a small seminar taught by experienced faculty. The seminar should deal with topics that will stimulate and open intellectual horizons and allow opportunities for learning by inquiry in a collaborative environment. Working in small groups will give students not only direct intellectual contact with faculty and with one another but also give those new to their situations opportunities to find friends and to learn how to be students. Most of all, it should enable a professor to imbue new students with a sense of the excitement of discovery and the opportunities for intellectual growth inherent in the university experience.

The Boyer Commission thus sets a new agenda for First Year Seminars in which engagement with the research culture is a more important goal than retention for its own sake.

## STUDENT RESEARCH AND STUDENT WRITING

This increasing focus on engaging students with the university “research culture” brings the First Year Seminar closer to the orbit of Composition Studies, particularly Writing Across the Curriculum. Although in some ways an orphan or at least peripheral genre in much of the Composition Studies literature, the writing of “the research paper” has long been of interest in the field. In 1982, Larson argued persuasively that “the research paper” is too broad a designation to be useful in defining a genre, and that almost any type of paper could legitimately be called a “research” paper. Yet, like the proverbial bumblebee that is supposed to have been scientifically proven to be unable to fly, the research paper continues to fly anyway. A number of early studies such as those of Schwegler and Shmoon (1982) and Nelson and Hayes (1988) suggest that, *pace* Larson, there is indeed a particular and special set of skills, and more important, a special set of tacit assumptions and a special mindset, required when students are asked to write from sources. The stresses of building an essay that incorporates the

ideas of others, Nelson and Hayes (1988) argue, can easily drive students to an efficient but intellectually sterile “content-driven” strategy:

If your goal is to assemble and reproduce what others have written on a topic, then search strategies that allow you to locate sources with easily-plundered pockets of information are especially appropriate. In contrast, if your aim is to “argue for a position” or “find a new approach” to a topic, then you’ll need research strategies that allow you to zero in on issues and evaluate the relevance and validity of possible sources. (pp. 5-6)

Literature aimed at the subset of academic librarianship known as “Bibliographic Instruction” follows a remarkably parallel path, though the two bodies of literature rarely cite each other or otherwise connect. Important studies such as those of Fister (1992) and Leckie (1996) reveal a wide gulf between the research processes of professional scholars—which those scholars tacitly expect of their students—and those which most students practice. Like Nelson and Hayes (1988), Fister (1992) and Leckie (1996) note that many students use an efficient but low-investment strategy of scooping up as many citations as they feel they need to fill a certain number of blank pages rather than letting an issue drive a gradually widening and deepening research process.

If we want to encourage students to choose high-investment strategies of research and writing, Nelson and Hayes (1988) argue, the structure of the course is all-important. For good academic discourse to flourish, the classroom environment should offer immediate feedback on drafts, talks and journals, a focus on high-level goals, and sufficient time, in staged assignments, to develop an argument rather than turning to highly efficient but low-investment strategies based on retelling information.

Again, the Bibliographic Instruction literature makes similar points. Article after article registers frustration with the typical fifty minute “library orientation” in which library staff must try to distill what students need to know about finding information into a decontextualized talk of which students will remember almost nothing. Leckie (1996) argues for a more integrated strategy that she calls “stratified methodology,” essentially a strategy of presenting an assignment in several phases from proposal to draft to completed assignment, with plenty of time for development and feedback at all stages. She also argues that “using the library” cannot be taught as an atomistic skill but instead should be closely integrated with course content. Her recommendations for librarians could be lifted directly from an introductory handbook for WAC program directors:

In the stratified methodology, the responsibility for at least introductory bibliographic instruction in a discipline is deliberately shifted to the faculty member, who is then able to put it into the context of the course content. The librarian can be supportive, by providing examples, suggestions, outlines of what needs to be discussed, and/or coming into class for certain parts of the process (e.g., a talk about Readers' Guide). In a way, academic librarians then would become bibliographic instruction mentors, assisting and encouraging faculty with respect to integrating information literacy into their courses.... Furthermore, academic librarians should be visible participants in annual teaching workshops which many universities offer for faculty. (p. 207)

Throughout both bodies of literature on undergraduate research or "academic literacy" (Lea's, 1998, term), the call is loud and clear: the road to academic literacy involves pedagogies of integration, extended process, and grounding in genuine inquiry.

### THE FIRST YEAR SEMINAR AS A VEHICLE FOR ACADEMIC LITERACY

Typically, this search for meaningful contexts for research-based reading and writing has felt expression in the WAC movement, most notably in the Writing in the Disciplines variant in which Writing Intensive (WI) courses provide disciplinary context. In its most strongly argued form, this movement represents a sharp turn away from general-purpose first year composition courses—dubbed General Writing Skills Instruction or GWSI courses by Petraglia (1995) and others—toward courses located firmly in established academic disciplines. Russell (1995), for instance, argues strongly that only such contexts can provide the activity systems that constitute specific genres of writing. Outside such activity systems—for instance, in Composition 101—writing inevitably collapses into a set of skills so generalized as to be meaningless. The location of writing-intensive courses within disciplines answers the need to immerse students in the discourse of specific academic disciplines rather than in the grey all-purpose academic discourse which can come to characterize "the research paper" as taught in many composition courses—what Russell disparagingly calls "Universal Educated Discourse" and claims is a myth.

In “Rethinking Genre in School and Society,” a later and more theoretical article, Russell extends this analysis by explicitly linking activity theory and genre theory to create a complex model of written genres as activity systems with intricate boundary problems, power relations, and (most important for this discussion) profound implications for the actors who would enter such systems via the set of activity systems represented by school genres. Russell draws a clear distinction between the written genres of full-fledged disciplinary activity systems that make up the professional world and the “abstracted, commodified” genres with which students typically work:

These abstract, commodified tools are offered as discrete facts, often to be memorized—facts whose immediate use may be viewed by students in terms of a grade ... but also, potentially, as tools for some unspecified further interaction with some social practice outside school. However, because students have not sufficiently specialized—appropriating the motive of a professional activity system—those potential uses remain vague. (p. 540)

Even in a disciplinary course such as introductory biology, Russell suggests, students do not yet have a sufficiently deep history of involvement with the discipline to make sense of the more professional forms of its genres. Somewhat depressingly for those of us who would like to introduce students to at least a taste of the university’s research-based activity systems in first year composition or in interdisciplinary seminars, Russell’s analysis can be taken to suggest that there is very little point. Only in fairly advanced disciplinary settings, Russell seems to say, can students have enough background that such an introduction can make a difference.

There has, of course, been considerable reaction to such assaults on first year composition. To begin with, it is important to set aside the purely political. Although WAC can, and often does, co-exist in a complementary relationship to a first-year composition program, the relationship between WAC and FYC can be soured by arguments over whether academics in content areas, with little or no training in composition, are qualified to teach writing. Blair (1988) and Smith (1988) presented both sides of this argument in a classic pair of articles in *College English*, and the argument is more recently continued in Chapman’s (1998) article, “WAC and the First-Year Writing Course: Selling Ourselves Short.” At its worst, this argument can degenerate into a power struggle between the English department and the rest of the institution. When decorum is maintained,

the argument proceeds along the more substantive lines articulated by Bazerman (1995). Despite being a pioneer in the study of discipline-situated discourse, Bazerman also argues that there is a place for a less discipline-specific type of writing course. He argues that undergraduate education should

make real and visible over the period of a student's education a variety of discourses, so that the students can reorient to and evaluate new discourses as they become visible and relevant. A course that spans boundaries and sits precisely at a juncture in the discursive lives of students, as the first-year course does, is a place that can effectively make that point. (p. 257)

The intricate struggles between FYC and WAC programs, and the concomitant blurring of programmatic genres, make much too long a story to tell here. Each institution will need to make its own choices in the context of its own local politics, local histories, local funding and local prejudices. It may suffice simply to point out that the choice is not necessarily either/or, and many institutions with sufficient resources to do so have been able to work out a vast range of strategies for allowing FYC and WAC to co-exist in amicable and often mutually supportive relationships. The purpose of this article is simply to point out that the emergence of research-oriented First Year Seminars offers an alternative, or additional, site for explicit or tacit teaching of academic discourse, or as Bazerman would prefer, a variety of academic discourses.

While not as highly situated as a discipline-specific WI course, the First Year Seminar can be far more situated than the typical first year composition course. By introducing freshman students to the research community in the context of an interdisciplinary theme, generally coupled more or less tightly to the instructor's own area of research, the First Year Seminar can be highly effective in reaching an audience of students who may not yet be themselves situated in a discipline without pretending to offer an introduction to such a thing as Universal Educated Discourse.

In many ways, the thematic First Year Seminar is better positioned to introduce students to the academic research community than are many first year "Introduction to X" courses that function as gateways to disciplines. In the survey mentioned earlier, Swing (2002) compares the interdisciplinary seminar on a special theme with discipline-specific seminars, defined as "an introduction to a major or academic department." Discipline-specific seminars come in dead last on all measures of transitional adjustment, including those in which thematic seminars are particularly strong: improving critical thinking and academic/cognitive skills. It should surprise no-one that discipline-specific seminars score



poorly on measures that have little to do with the purpose of such seminars: none of the measures used by the National Policy Center comes anywhere close to measuring the degree to which these seminars are successful in introducing students to the basic concepts of the discipline. But this is exactly my point: when academic discourse is introduced in the context of a discipline, attention to more general outcomes such as academic literacy is apt to be overshadowed by a strongly felt need to “cover the material.” In the case study that ends this article, I will show this effect in more detail.

The National Policy Center’s findings mirror the experience of many WAC programs in which WI courses slowly become more and more oriented to transmitting the information considered crucial to the discipline and less oriented toward making explicit the processes of academic literacy. However, in a thematic rather than a discipline-specific First Year Seminar, the active engagement of students in research culture and academic discourse is foregrounded, and the course content is treated as a vehicle rather than the *raison d’être* of the course. Thus faculty members are liberated from the “anxiety of coverage” that can sabotage many a well-intentioned WI program.

Another major advantage of embedding WAC in a First Year Seminar program, rather than a WI program, is strategic. Particularly at institutions without a strong writing culture, funding, in many cases, is easier to find for programs with this more respectable (Boyer-certified) agenda, as there is little incentive to see the problem as one that “should have been fixed at high school.” If the word “writing” is left out of the course title, senior faculty members (and students) from across the institution are less likely to equate these programs with current-traditional spelling and grammar, less likely to protest that they do not have the time or training to engage in them, and less likely to feel that such courses are somehow or other “remedial.” Even if the word “writing” is left in the title of the course, or at least of the program, the focus on research allows considerable baggage to be left behind. Hjortshoj (2003) shows us this phenomenon in his description of Cornell’s Writing in the Majors program, which he directs.

Because writing assignments and other features are included in course descriptions and syllabi, students who enroll in these courses know what they are getting into, but they are often unaware that a course is affiliated with Writing in the Majors. As much as possible, we have tried to put work with language into solution with learning, so that writing becomes, as Martha Haynes noted in her syllabus for Astronomy 201, “a natural consequence of trying to understand *any* subject.” (Hjortshoj, 2003, p. 45)

Further examples stud the literature, although they tend to be scattered and seldom thematized in most WAC discussions. In “Ending Composition as We Knew It,” Runciman (1998) describes how Linfield College has replaced first year composition with a series of seminars “taught by any teacher on any topic that lends itself to inquiry, provided the course adopts certain pedagogical practices and encourages in students a self-conscious awareness of the intellectual habits of minds associated with those practices” (pp. 44-45). The First Year Seminar, argues Runciman (1998), is the ideal vehicle for cherished WAC goals such as context-specific writing and broad cross-institutional responsibility for instruction. Moon (2003) tells similar success stories from Gustavus Adolphus College and Willamette University. Her stories foreground the importance of faculty workshops on innovative pedagogy and the degree to which they are able to shift faculty notions regarding what constitutes “writing” and “research.” The First Year Seminar taught by faculty from across the disciplines provides a pedagogical focus that encourages discussion of issues related to pedagogy, writing and general education. In effect, it creates an environment in which more general educational outcomes are problematized and therefore made foci for discussion in ways that are less likely to occur in the safe confines of faculty members’ traditional disciplinary homes.

Runciman (1998) admits that the experience of Linfield College is highly local and not necessarily generalizable. In a response, Daniell (1998) picks up on this issue of local context and argues that, while discourse-intensive First Year Seminars may be possible in a small teaching-intensive college, they are unlikely to work in large research universities in which the undergraduate teaching agenda takes a back seat to graduate teaching and research. Moon (2003) expresses similar concerns about First Year Seminars in environments other than the small liberal arts college.

I think that they are selling the model short. Although the First Year Seminar doubtless works differently in a large research university, the Boyer Commission underscores a strong connection between the content-oriented First Year Seminar and the research agenda of such institutions. The model was pioneered by large research-based universities in the United States. Cornell, for instance, replaced its writing program centered in the English department with a far-reaching and well-funded program of first year writing seminars—in companion with the more senior Writing in the Majors program mentioned above—in a long process of development that started in 1966 (Monroe, 2003). Princeton, working in some ways from the opposite direction, has recently replaced its program of disciplinary writing-intensive courses with explicitly labelled Writing Seminars, in parallel with “Freshman Seminars” but fulfilling different requirements (Walk, Jurecic, & Musial-Manners, n.d.). In a survey that explicitly

targets Doctoral/Research Extensive universities, the Policy Center on the First Year of College lists 70 universities that have some form of First Year Experience program, of which at least 18 feature content-based First Year Seminars similar to those I have been describing (Cutright, 2002). In the Canadian context, the model has been emulated by two of the biggest and most research-intensive universities in the country, the University of Toronto and McMaster University. The research-based First Year Seminar, then, is not only feasible in larger institutions, it is arguably an excellent vehicle for introducing students to academic discourse in a research-intensive context.

### THE FIRST YEAR SEMINAR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

This brings me to my own experience of leading the development of a First Year Seminar program that incorporates the lofty ideals of the Boyer Commission with the trench warfare of Writing Across the Curriculum. The University of Calgary is a mid-sized (29,000 students) research/doctoral university with a strong and rapidly growing research agenda. Its recently adopted Academic Plan emphasises the engagement of undergraduate students with “the foundation of scholarship, on which all our activities rest, [and which] distinguishes us from other post-secondary institutions” (University of Calgary, 2002). It is therefore a fertile ground for research-oriented First Year Seminars.

On the other hand, the University of Calgary has been an extremely difficult nut for WAC to crack. There is no clearly articulated composition program beyond a writing program that has, by close association with an entrance test, become intractably bundled in faculty members’ minds with remediation. The English Department does not teach composition at all. In 1992, a high-level committee to investigate the possibility of a WI program returned with the information that it would be too costly and that faculty would not like it. A wide-ranging curriculum review process in 1996 simply ignored WAC in favour of other goals, despite the protests of a few people associated with the writing program (such as myself). In short, the University of Calgary is an excellent place to test the theory that First Year Seminars can accomplish WAC-related goals even in a WAC resistant environment.

In most Canadian universities, departments are grouped into faculties such as Humanities, Social Sciences and Science—higher-level groupings that fulfill the function often filled by colleges or schools in American institutions. At the University of Calgary, local politics dictate that first year programs operate at the faculty level. In other universities, particularly smaller institutions, they

typically operate across the entire institution. This distinction is not particularly important for the purposes of this article, although any one considering setting up such a program would be well advised to select a level (department, faculty, or institution) at which political support and funding are the most secure.

The First Year Seminar program at present exists as such only in one faculty, the Faculty of Communication and Culture, although other faculties are attempting related experiments in somewhat different forms. Communication and Culture is a small, non-departmentalized faculty with a specific mandate to offer general education and interdisciplinary programs, including Communication Studies, Women's Studies, Canadian Studies, and other programs that fall between the cracks of more conventional disciplines. It is therefore a natural home for interdisciplinary thematic seminars designed to introduce students, not to a discipline as such, but to the process of making knowledge through interdisciplinary inquiry. From a pilot of two sections in 1999, the program has grown to 14 sections—still insufficient to accommodate all the students in the faculty, let alone the university, but substantial enough to introduce a significant number of students to the research environment.

After the expiry of initial start-up funding, the seminars have been sustained by diverting staffing from other courses. In Communication and Culture, this is made easier by the fact that the faculty has no departments with individual budgets. The program is not big enough to have its own dedicated director, but the seminars are in the portfolio of the Associate Dean (Academic)—myself—who has considerable responsibility for the sharing of resources across all programs. I can decide to mount, say, two fewer sections of Canadian Studies courses and three fewer sections of Women's Studies courses, and ask the faculty members who would otherwise have taught them to mount first year seminars instead. At other institutions with a less centralized structure, the same results are secured by "taxing" the departments—that is, requiring each department to supply a certain number of first year seminars to the institution. Clearly there are tradeoffs to be made in balancing the numbers of first year seminars against the need to provide sufficient sections of discipline-specific courses. In the absence of special funding such as Cornell's enviable Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines (see Monroe, 2003), keeping a first year seminar program alive and healthy requires considerable institutional commitment and political leadership willing to make these tradeoffs and convince both upper administration and individual faculty members of their value. I credit the success of my own nascent program to a great deal of direct support both from my own Dean and, more abstractly, from the senior administration, which has made various forms of inquiry-based learning an institutional priority.

Sections are limited to 25 students—more than the 16 to 18 typical of first year seminars elsewhere, but a huge stride from the typical introductory course that is limited in size only by the fire marshal. Full-time faculty members are recruited to teach sections, tempted by the relatively small class size and the opportunity to design a course around their own research interests. Pedagogy varies from one section to another, but by a combination of teaching workshops (funded by the faculty) and moral suasion (administered chiefly by the Associate Dean Academic, in whose portfolio the seminars reside), a number of important features have become standard. Each section takes students through a cumulative process of small assignments leading by degrees to a major research project. Faculty members mentor students through multiple drafts of assignments, and schedule at least one (usually more) individual conference with each student as the drafts develop. Library staff are deeply embedded in the process, mentoring students through stages of an ongoing research assignment rather than being limited to hit and run workshops. Finally, although the seminars are not labelled “writing” seminars, students find themselves doing writing, writing and more writing.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF RESEARCH IN A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

We have a variety of survey results that suggest the seminars are “working,” according to various definitions of “working.” Students generally report that they like the seminars, pointing in particular to small class sizes and interaction with faculty members. They report that the seminars are most effective in helping them find material, followed by developing their writing and reading skills. Other surveys, designed to measure changes in attitude rather than simply satisfaction levels, suggest that students who have taken the seminars are more positive about approaching faculty members for assistance, using the library, and generating knowledge collaboratively with other students. These surveys also suggest that the seminars increase students’ confidence in their ability to function effectively at university.

To give more depth to this quantitative data, I interviewed four of the six faculty members who taught the course in Fall 2003, and 19 of the approximately 100 students taking the course from those faculty members. I was especially interested in how the faculty members saw their role as teachers of the course, and how their students experienced their first exposure to university research both in the First Year Seminar and in other courses they were taking simultaneously.

### *The Faculty Members*

The four faculty members interviewed are all tenured or tenure-track professors. Only one is a rhetoric specialist, specializing in historical rhetoric rather than composition studies. Another teaches Canadian Studies from the perspective of a historian; the other two teach Museum and Heritage Studies.

The impression that leaps out of the interviews with faculty members is one of passionate intensity. All four declare an interest in helping students learn the nuts and bolts of university work—using the library, writing research papers, making sense of complex and sometimes difficult material—but in all cases this toolbox approach is subordinate to a larger mission of helping students share at least a small part of the faculty member's love of research:

And the thing about research is, it's a passion. You won't succeed in writing great papers or doing great research unless it really consumes you. I mean you can write competent papers but the stuff that really goes, you have to really care about it .... And the thing is that if you do get the bug it's fun, it's enjoyable and I was hoping that at least some of the students would learn to enjoy research as much as I do.

This passion for the craft typically translates into a pedagogy that foregrounds personal mentoring. The faculty members I spoke to are very positive about the practice of scheduling one-on-one appointments to discuss students' drafts—something they tend not to do in other courses, even when enrollment is low enough to make it feasible. In addition, this focus on mentoring translates into classroom practice that I can only describe as “intimate”:

I move around them a lot and I sit with them, I bring them out. Like I want you to talk about the Plus 15 in Calgary [a system of overhead walkways], bad or good. How people are going to hate it or love it. Discuss it. Give you ten minutes. In the meantime, Jocelyn, come sit beside me, tell me where you're at, give me your term paper, what's happening in your young life.

When eight or 10 are done, then I just stop it and we discuss the Plus 15. A lot of interaction, bringing forth, back and forth, back and forth. And all the time paternal yet non threatening, enthusiastic, yet demanding. That's the crucial balance I've got here of paternal yet welcoming and friendly.

Three of the four faculty members explicitly use the image of a paternal or maternal relationship with their students as they guide them through the wilderness of university practices. It seems as though, by offering faculty members the opportunity not just to talk about their favourite topics, but to mentor students in their favourite *activity* (researching), the seminars bring out a pedagogical style that emphasizes building relationships with students above transmitting information to them.

The faculty members also note freedom from the “anxiety of coverage” as a key to their pedagogical style. When I asked them whether they would teach other courses in the same way, especially if they could be guaranteed a similar class size, most at first declared that they would. But when I probed a bit more for exactly how they would teach a disciplinary course in their content area, they began to talk of subtle but important differences:

I don't see it as my job to teach students how to write papers in Museum and Heritage Studies 201. It may be incidental in that I might put comments on people's papers like “you're repeating yourself,” or maybe “you should start out with an outline.” But I'm not there to teach them how to use the library or those things. I am there to give them an overview of the field of Museum and Heritage Studies and that's what I do. I take the Handbook of Museum Management and I identify the topics that are important and I make up my course outline because I know that if I can cover the main points of the Handbook of Museum Management you can't go wrong because it covers everything that is important and that's what I do. But in this course I'm teaching them about research ultimately and what makes university different.

By releasing faculty members from the felt need to keep plowing through topic after topic to make sure that they have not missed anything that the students really need to know, the seminar gives them license to concentrate on *process* in ways that only composition teachers (and sometimes not even them) are typically licensed to do.

I do not want to suggest that this is magic. Developing this interest in process pedagogy requires ongoing conversations on the purpose of the seminars and recipe swapping sessions among the faculty members who teach them. It also requires constant vigilance over course outlines to make sure that they do not creep into being introductory surveys rather than interdisciplinary explorations of a topic in some depth. But I cannot emphasize enough the importance of creating a space free of “coverage,” a space in which process pedagogy has room to happen.

*The Students*

When I spoke to students, I did not, of course, find that all share their professors' passion for research. More often than not, they had taken the course because the handbook recommended it, with little advance appreciation of what the seminar would do for them. Most chose sections that fit their timetables with little reference to the specific topic. But the students' descriptions of what happened in the seminars, compared to what happened in other courses that they identified as having a "research paper" component, is highly instructive.

When asked to describe research experiences outside the First Year Seminar, most report experiences that I can only describe as "meagre." For instance, this student describes doing a "research paper" on *Oedipus Rex* in a Greek and Roman Studies class:

We just took the textbook and had to go to the library and find other texts so it was like a literary research. Um, and just found points and other information that supported my thesis.

When I pressed her on this a bit, she elaborated on how she had developed her thesis that Oedipus had caused his own downfall:

I had come to that conclusion before I found my sources. Then when I went through the sources I found points that supported what I had already thought was true.

This student is reporting what Nelson and Hayes (1988) describe as a "low investment" strategy, marked by the assumption (perfectly reasonable, but not the one we would wish students to adopt) that the purpose of research is to find support for a more or less preconceived point of view.

Aspects of this attitude also appear when students describe their research experiences in the First Year Seminar. In particular, they report using the question, "Does this source support my point of view?" as a major device for sorting through the deluge of material available. But they also frequently report a much difference *pace* that allows them to become personally engaged with the topic at a much deeper level:

I went into the library like five weeks basically before it was due and really wanted to get into it. I found straight off so much you know? I had aboriginal narrators that I wanted to do and



Hollywood narrators to find out what is different in film stories compared to novels. I just bounced around quite a bit until I came to something that we actually read in the text book. There was one little line in our text book that said that gossip was the foundation of narrative. So I went into it and started reading it a little more. I took out probably six or seven books out of the library and just sat there and went through them and underlined things and just wrote it all out and it was very broad. Then I handed in an outline to my professor and she handed it back and said that it wasn't very good. So I basically re-wrote it in about a week period.

I know from speaking to the professor that there was a lot more to this conversation than simply saying "it wasn't very good." But what I most want to note is the fact that the student reports digging into material in pursuit of questions rather than simply looking for support for a preconceived answer. She also plays with her topic until, based on a small reference in the course material, she finds a line of inquiry that she wants to follow. This is much more like the "high investment" research process that Nelson and Hayes (1988) describe.

Some students found themselves far more personally engaged than they expected or even wanted to be. One student whose grandparents survived the Ukrainian Famine in the thirties researched it exhaustively, interviewing family members and trying (unsuccessfully) to access the archive of the Institute of Ukrainian Studies in Toronto.

I had a lot of personal emotion issues though because what I was dealing with was really horrendous. I really don't deal well with atrocities. But when I got my grandmother's accounts there were so many things I didn't know, and when it happened to someone you know I had a lot of personal issues. I'd start working at it, and I couldn't work on it because I was just too angry. I did not expect that at all. In the end while I had learned a lot and for me as a person it was important, I don't think I would do this topic again. You know, it's just university. I mean you read something and you can't sleep for two nights, I don't have that much invested in research.

Although this extreme level of engagement is rare in the interviews, a repeated theme is the way the pace of the course and its emphasis on spiralling deeper

and deeper into a topic of interest sparks a level of engagement rarely seen when students describe their experience of research in other courses.

I also heard a number of students showing some understanding of how knowledge is built as a shared social act. The following is a response to a question about what helped the student feel comfortable seeking answers to complex questions:

Not just the professor but the other people in my class as well because we kind of all worked together. So if one person couldn't find the book or didn't know where to look they would you know, we would ask and we would all go in a big group together to the library and all kind of help each other find stuff. And so it was a very good class that way, the professor helped you a lot and told you which floor to go to and stuff but if you couldn't figure it out you all helped each other.

In fact, this instructor divided the students into two groups and told one group to come only on Tuesdays and the other to come only on Thursdays. This gave the students an unparalleled opportunity to work together in a commonly assigned time that had already been booked off their timetables:

We had all assumed at the beginning that we were going to have all that time for class, right? So all of a sudden we all had this chunk of free time. You'd get an assignment on Tuesday, you'd go the library on Thursday, get most of it done and then you would have the next Tuesday and Thursday to polish it. So we all went together on Thursdays.

The collaborative aspect of the course also works itself out in the form of oral work-in-progress reports. Oral presentations of results are common in many seminar courses. However, they typically tend to be presentations of completed or almost completed work. In the First Year Seminar, however, the focus on research as an unfolding process leads most faculty members to schedule oral presentations relatively early in the process and to use them as an additional mechanism for students to develop their research collaboratively from the get-go:

We also each of us stood in front of the class and talked about what our initial findings were or what direction we would like to go in. And then we ended up actually having a class discussion. And I was able to gain more that way too, because some

people had suggested stuff that I hadn't considered, or the way they had worded it, and I kind of put my thoughts to words. So that was helpful.

I don't want to paint too rosy a picture of how well students in their first year picked up on the finer points of being part of a research community. Although all students I spoke to had been shown how to use journals, and most had used them to at least a certain extent, not a single one was able to tell me clearly how the material got into the journals or for what purpose. This effect was magnified when we discussed articles in online journals which provide even fewer reference points for context. But even students who had put their hands on bound print journals had little conception of the conversations that occur in them.

Moreover, of the nineteen students I spoke to, only one reported following up a reference in another piece of reading. More typically, they research by combing the plethora of bibliographic tools they have been given, turning up sources individually and treating each as if it were unique, picked out of space, rather than as a part of a vast web of discourse.

In turn, this lack of a sense of a web of discourse is related to a highly instrumental sense of citation. The students were all highly aware of the use of citation as a means of avoiding accusations of plagiarism. It seems that we have taught this lesson very well. However, none of the students demonstrated a sense that they were leaving tracks for a reader who could conceivably be interested in where their ideas came from or want to track them down:

Interviewer - Do you feel that the main purpose of those footnotes was just to protect yourself against plagiarism or ... ?

Respondent - Very much so. When I write it's a stream of consciousness, I never even think about anything else. There's no other reason for it.

Interviewer - So, if you were writing now purely for your own benefit?

Respondent - There would definitely be no footnotes, no. They have no purpose for me. I'm sure everything I've ever written someone else has at some point before me written, so, no, the whole idea of original thought – because you can never keep track of who did what first.

This is gratifyingly post-modern thinking on the one hand, but on the other hand it shows no awareness of the ways researchers depend on references to lead them back through the ongoing conversation about their subject. As Hunt (2002) puts it:

Scholars—writers generally—use citations for many things: they establish their own *bona fides* and currency, they advertise their alliances, they bring work to the attention of their reader, they assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas. They do not use them to defend themselves against potential allegations of plagiarism.

This mirrors the research of academic librarians such as Leckie (1996), who reports gloomily,

It is safe to say that most undergraduates do not possess a vision of a scholarly network, and they do not have a sense of a significant mass of research findings appearing in certain journals over time, nor how to tap into this research.

This finding is disappointing, since developing this awareness of academic culture is one of the express goals of the course. But a First Year Seminar cannot do everything all at once. In particular it cannot undo at once the effects of long exposure to school-based “research” written from readily available sources in a school library and addressed only to the teacher, who presumably knows it all already and has no interest in the students’ references beyond checking to make sure they have not plagiarized. Moreover, it is arguable (by Leckie (1996) among others) that only long-term immersion in the discourse of a discipline can provide a strong “felt sense” of how that discourse hangs together as a conversation. Expecting a first year seminar, particularly an interdisciplinary seminar, to provide students with a deep awareness of how an academic community operates would certainly be immensely over-ambitious. But perhaps it is not too much to ask that such a seminar at least introduce students to the fact that they can use references as a trail of breadcrumbs leading back to other material that may be useful to them. In future iterations of the course I hope to design activities that will encourage students to do exactly that. By doing so I hope to at least crack the door a little on the world of interconnected texts

and thereby help students start the long journey toward understanding how academic knowledge actually works.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

My conversations with students in this one course are clearly not sufficient to allow much generalization. But the course can stand as an illuminating case study of a marriage between the goals and ideals of WAC and those of the academic First Year Seminar. In particular, it illustrates a case of WAC goals being realized in an institution that has not made a substantive institutional commitment to WAC. The First Year Seminar is a powerful teaching genre, often more readily accepted by both faculty members and administrations than WAC “in the raw,” and much less likely to be stigmatized as “remedial.” If it can achieve the results I have observed at an institution with a record of low-grade hostility to WAC, think what it can accomplish at institutions where WAC is already respected and positioned to make a strategic alliance with First Year Seminars across the disciplines.

However, I want to use this case to illustrate more than a way to sneak WAC in the back door. It also illustrates the degree to which the shape of the container can liberate pedagogy. The faculty members teaching the University of Calgary’s First Year Seminar understood their mission to be “teaching research” as a complex process. It did not take them long to discover that in order to do so effectively, they needed to allow time for students to explore the unfamiliar alleys and back roads of the process, to mentor students individually, to send work back with revision-promoting rather than editorial comments, and, above all, to empower them to make mistakes. When we remove the anxiety of coverage and give faculty members the opportunity to work with students on subjects that they really care about—and most important, foreground the *activity* of research rather than just the transmission of results—we create an environment conducive to process pedagogy.

It is not yet clear whether the convergence of WAC and the First Year Seminar is a major movement or just a few straws in the wind. Certainly we must never forget the advice of WAC literature that initiatives such as WAC are profoundly local in their structure, history and administrative shape. I do not expect First Year Seminars to swallow up either first year composition or Writing Across the Curriculum at more than a few institutions such as the ones described by Moon (2003) and Runciman (1998). But what is clear is that the First Year Seminar movement represents an excellent opportunity for strategic alliances with

writing programs. Translating the parallel goals of FYS and WAC into shared strengths can only be to the advantage of students.

## NOTE

1. Copyright 2005 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

## REFERENCES

- Andersen, C., Gardener, J. N., Laufgraben, J. L., & Swing, R. L. (2003). *Moving toward excellence: Assessing and institutionalizing first-year seminars* [Teleconference resource packet]. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Bazerman, C. (1995). Response: Curricular responsibilities and professional definition. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. 249-259). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Blair, C. P. (1988). Only one of the voices: Dialogic Writing Across the Curriculum. *College English*, 50, 383-89.
- The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University. (1998). *Reinventing undergraduate education: A blueprint for America's research universities*. Stony Brook: State University of New York at Stony Brook.
- Chapman, D. W. (1998). WAC and the first-year writing course: Selling ourselves short. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 2, 54-60.
- Cutright, M. (2002). *Research universities and first-year students: Now for the good news*. Brevard, NC: The National Policy Center on the First Year of College. Retrieved from <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/ruproject/essay.htm>
- Daniell, B. (1998). F-y comp, f-y seminars, and WAC: A response. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 2, 69-74.
- Fister, B. (1992). The research processes of undergraduate students. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 18, 163-69.
- Hjortshoj, K. (2003). Writing without friction. In J. Monroe (Ed.), *Local knowledge, local practices: Writing in the disciplines at Cornell* (pp. 41-61). Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Hunt, Russ. (2002, December). Four reasons to be happy about Internet plagiarism. *Teaching Perspectives*, 5, 1-5. Retrieved from <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/4reasons.htm>

- Hyers, A. D., & Joslin, M. N. (1998). The first year seminar as a predictor of achievement and persistence. *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 10*, 7-29.
- Larson, R. L. (1982). The "research paper" in the writing course: A non form of writing. *College English, 44*, 811-16.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M. (1998). Academic literacies and learning in higher education: Constructing knowledge through texts and experience. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 30*, 156-71.
- Leckie, G. J. (1996). Desperately seeking citations: Uncovering faculty assumptions about undergraduate research. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 22*, 201-208. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier.
- Maisto, A. A., & Tammi, M. W. (1991). The effect of a content-based freshman seminar on academic and social integration. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience, 3*, 29-47.
- McLeod, S. H., Miraglia, E., Soven, M., & Thaiss, C. (2001). *WAC for the new millenium: Strategies for continuing Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Monroe, J. (2003). Local knowledge, local practices: An introduction. In J. Monroe (Ed.), *Local knowledge, local practices: Writing in the disciplines at Cornell* (pp. 3-21). Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Moon, G. F. (2003). First-year writing in first-year seminars: Writing Across the Curriculum from the start. *Writing Program Administration, 28*, 105-118.
- Murphy, R. O. (1989). Freshman year enhancement in American higher education. *Journal of the First Year Experience, 1*, 93-102.
- Nelson, J., & Hayes, J. R. (1988). *How the writing context shapes college students' strategies for writing from sources*. Center for the Study of Writing Technical Report No. 16. Berkeley: University of California. ERIC Document ED297374.
- Petraglia, J. (1995). Introduction: General writing skills instruction and its discontents. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. xi-xvii). Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Runciman, L. (1998). Ending composition as we knew it. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines, 2*, 44-53.
- Russell, D. (1995). Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. 51-77). Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Schwegler, R. A., & Shamon, L. K. (1982). The aims and processes of the research paper. *College English, 44*, 817-24.

- Smith, L. Z. (1988). Why english departments should “house” Writing Across the Curriculum. *College English*, 50, 390-95.
- Swing, R. L. (2002). *The impact of engaging pedagogy on first-year seminars*. Brevard, NC: The National Policy Center on the First Year of College. Retrieved from <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/fyi/essays/essay2.pdf>
- The 2000 National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programs: Continuing innovations in the collegiate curriculum*. (2000). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- University of Calgary. (2002). *Raising our sights: An academic plan for the University of Calgary 2002-2006*. Retrieved from <http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/events/unicomm/raising/AcademicPlan.pdf>
- Walk, K., Jurecic, A., & Musial-Manners, D. (n.d.). *Princeton writing program*. Retrieved from <http://web.princeton.edu/writing/pwp.pdf>
- Walvoord, B. E. (1996). The future of WAC. *College English*, 58, 58-79.