

## CHAPTER 16.

# THE DEPARTMENT OF RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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*This chapter traces the growth of the first department of Rhetoric and Composition in the Middle East from its initial stages as a six-credit freshmen seminar (1957) to its emergence as the first Department of Rhetoric and Composition in the Middle East (2007). The piece includes a summary of the demographics of the current department, a description of the pedagogy and philosophy that informs the curriculum, a summary of the creation of the Writing Minor (2009), a brief description of the Writing Center, and references to ancillary programs, such as the Undergraduate Research Conference and Community Based Learning Courses. The final part of the chapter articulates current challenges and future plans.*

The American University in Cairo, founded in 1919, is a private university enrolling approximately 5,055 undergraduate and 1,148 graduate students per year (About AUC, 2011). The Department of Rhetoric and Composition is the largest Department in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. As of this writing, it serves 4,000 students per year in lower-division courses and 200 in upper division courses, with 34 students enrolled in a new Writing Minor (Rhetoric and Writing Minor, 2011). A separate English language program, located in the English Language Institute, serves the needs of prospective students whose English language proficiency does not meet entry-level requirements (95-102 on the TOEFL iBT total score—Internet Based Test). Approximately 45% of the students enter the university through the English language

program while the remaining 55% enter into one of three entry-level required writing courses. Students entering the university come from private international schools (American, French, German, British, Dutch) or enter directly from national schools.

The Department is responsible for three required writing courses and a growing Writing Minor. It employs 44-48 full time faculty who teach three courses per term. Ten percent of the current faculty hold PhDs in Rhetoric & Composition or related areas. The remaining faculty have degrees in creative writing, literature, history, theology, film studies, journalism, science, business, and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The required lower-division curriculum consists of three required writing courses, which use (US) WPA (Writing Program Administrators) Outcomes for First Year Composition as guidelines (<http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>) and include a heavy emphasis on rhetorical strategies—voice, analysis, audience and argument—to assist in critical thinking. The first course focuses on voice and analysis, the second on argument and audience, and the third on formal academic research. The Department's Writing Center offers tutorials to 3,500 undergraduate students annually and 110 graduate students; the Center sponsors 20 general and 10 discipline-specific workshops per semester for undergraduates and six general workshops and occasional customized courses for graduate students. The Department also sponsors an Undergraduate Research Conference, co-sponsors a linguistics conference every other year, and offers several Community Based Learning (CBL) courses.

## HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT

As Egypt's national school curriculum rests on rote learning, many Egyptian students have difficulty with independent thinking. In general, students lack an awareness of the value of a liberal arts education, have little experience in reading and writing, have not been exposed to effective reasoning, and are unfamiliar with the concept of plagiarism. Although Egypt's International Schools provide an American/European education for those who can afford it, many of the faculty in these schools were not trained to specifically address the writing needs of students.

The history of AUC's effort to address these needs began in 1957, when AUC faculty voted for a six-credit freshman seminar consisting of a two-course sequence—101 (Freshman Composition) and 102 (Research Writing). At that time, the writing faculty was composed of three local hires with BAs in the humanities or social sciences. In the 1960s, the university added a second level

of Freshman Composition (a new 102—three credits) and moved the Research Writing course to a sophomore offering (201—three credits), resulting in a total of nine credits for a three-course sequence—101, 102 and 201. In order to meet this commitment, the university asked English and Comparative Literature faculty to teach one to two writing courses per year. The most significant problem during this period was lack of consistency in grading. The need to confront this problem eventually persuaded the Literature department to consider establishing a Writing Program with specialized faculty teaching composition.

The 1970s saw the beginning of a specialized Writing Program with a coordinator and enough office space for the addition of locally-hired faculty, most of whom held MAs in literature or TESOL. During this period, it was difficult to recruit native speakers from the US with specialized training in composition; consequently, local native speakers of English, with degrees in a variety of disciplines, provided additional instruction. This marked the beginning of a unit composed of a mixture of Egyptian, European, and American faculty with degrees in many different disciplines—this diversity continues to characterize the department to this day.

As the goal was to provide an intense writing experience, the three required English courses were condensed into two courses: ENGL 112, Rhetorical Modes (four credits) and ENGL 113, Research Writing ( five credits). Grading for these courses was pass/fail. The above change was followed by the development of techniques and materials that drew from the growing body of TESOL and Composition literature in the US and UK. Recognizing that many of the students were not prepared to master the level of writing required in the new courses, the Director of the Writing Program, who was also the Chair of the committee that was in the process of creating a new Core Curriculum, created a remedial preparatory course, ENGL 111, later re-labeled ENGL 100, which eventually became an exit course on writing for the English Language Institute.

### CHANGE AND EVOLUTION

In the eighties and nineties the Writing Program received limited support from faculty and students. Although writing faculty were stressing critical thinking, there was limited follow-up in subsequent academic courses. A survey revealed that many faculty were giving multiple-choice tests in lieu of assigning papers. Since writing was rarely assessed in humanities or non-humanities courses, students began to perceive writing as irrelevant to their academic work. In the mid nineties, as part of an effort to bring writing pedagogy in line with US composition pedagogy, the Writing Program attempted to introduce Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). An expert consultant delivered a weeklong

workshop, but the effort was eventually dropped because there was no incentive for faculty to change course requirements or delivery. By the year 2000, the Writing Program, with little support from colleagues in other disciplines, had become a series of loosely connected required courses on a variety of themes with, as earlier, no mechanism to assure fairness in grading. Some instructors graded for “content,” while others addressed sentence-level issues, paragraph structure, vocabulary, and usage.

The next few years saw renewed attention to writing as a result of the grading question and several other needs:

- The Department of Engineering needed an advanced writing course to qualify for ABET accreditation
- Businesses reported that AUC graduates were not proficient in writing
- Writing pedagogy was not in line with US composition programs

In 2001, Faculty Senate Resolution 209 called for the restructuring of course offerings in writing to better reflect current US practices and to allow for easier integration with the credit-hour structure. This opened the way for a revision of the Program.

As the writing faculty began to move away from the influence of both TESOL and literature and toward a pedagogy that was informed by the discipline of Rhetoric/Composition, a new Writing Program began to take shape. Courses were streamlined to address differing competencies in language and thought. Classes were limited to 14 students. The curriculum was revised. ECLT 112 (four credits) and 113 (five credits) were replaced by ECLT 101, 102 and 103 (three credits each), and the name of the program was changed from the Freshman Writing Program to the Writing Program. A portfolio system was initiated. The grading system was changed from pass/fail to letter grades, with final papers graded by adjudication. New upper division courses in Business Communication, Technical Communication and Writing, and Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences were created to answer the need for more specialized writing courses. In 2004, the Writing Program was granted an independent budget. In 2005, Writing Program administrators took control of hiring. In 2006, as a result of mandated, campus-wide self studies that called for stronger and more engaged writing, the Writing Program gained department status. To our knowledge, the Department is the first of its kind in the Middle East.

## DEPARTMENT STRUGGLES

In 2007, while the university prepared for extensive restructuring, the new Department, with full support from both Provost and Dean, began to revise its identity so that the discipline and the work of teaching Rhet/Comp would be

perceived as equal to the work of other departments. When a new Provost took office in 2008, and the campus moved from its crowded downtown quarters to a sprawling state-of-the-art desert complex located outside of the city, that effort intensified. The Department proposed a Writing Minor consisting of three emphasis areas—business, academic, and creative. Eleven new courses, offered on a rotating basis, were added to the standard upper division offerings. Faculty with creative writing backgrounds tapped into a hidden need for attention to creative expression, and within one year, the minor boasted 34 students, many of whom were creative writers.

During this period, those teaching business and technical writing began to strengthen the conceptual foundation of their courses by articulating rhetorical outcomes that had always existed below the surface of their teaching. In addition, Rhetoric and Composition's business writing faculty teamed up with allies in the Business School to work on a required under-division course for business majors. New faculty with degrees in Rhetoric proposed academic writing courses that either emphasized the rhetorical foundations of critical thought or focused on rhetorical engagement that cut across the disciplines. Meanwhile, the lower-division required courses enhanced WPA outcomes by adding a stronger emphasis on rhetoric to allow instructors to build on mastery of appropriate levels of critical engagement. As of this writing, RHET 101 now focuses on voice and analysis and RHET 102 on audience and argument. RHET 103 has now become RHET 201, a sophomore level research writing course. Portfolio requirements now allow faculty to concentrate on process, with low-stakes activities and exercises buttressing partial and final drafts. Norming sessions and outcomes now assure consistency and coherence of the offerings.

To assist in this transition, faculty take advantage of AUC's generous research, teaching enhancement, conference, and semester-long tenure and professional development grants to focus on their own writing and research projects. Creative writers attend writing residencies, and academic faculty travel to research facilities throughout Europe and the US. In addition, faculty learn from each other through professional development sessions on the use of digital platforms, such as Blackboard, wikis, Moodle, and blogs, as well as new approaches to traditional writing classroom practices from fields such as epistolary writing, film studies, or public speaking.

## CHALLENGES

Our faculty faces many challenges. While department status has given instructors more authority in the classroom and on university-wide, policy-mak-

ing committees, it has also placed the Department at the forefront of attempts to introduce western pedagogy. There are few free public libraries in Egypt, and the public schools do not emphasize reading and writing. Because Egyptian culture privileges oral exchange over reading and writing, learning is primarily associated with memorization and repetition. As Egyptian society places a strong emphasis on conformity, class discussions often feature praise for those parts of a text that support student beliefs and silence during conversations or text readings that challenge those same beliefs. Even though exposure to the Internet has opened new possibilities for free-ranging discussion, progress is slow because of limited engagement with critical thinking, reading, or writing.

The shift from a Writing Program (often referred to as “English Classes” by Egyptian students) to a Department of Rhetoric and Composition was accompanied by a realization that most students (and most parents) had never heard of rhetoric and composition and were not familiar with its goals and outcomes. Therefore, one of the first duties of the new department was to inform students, parents, and faculty of the connection between rhetoric and critical thinking, and to introduce the community to the concept of writing as a form of engagement with thought. For the students, however, conversation often focused on grades. Although most AUC students come from the upper classes and have more personal freedom, better education, and greater exposure to Western ideas than their peers, they remain immersed in a culture that strongly supervises their activities. AUC students live at home and receive daily reminders of the need for high grades, which are sometimes linked to family honour rather than mastery of subject matter. For some students, the pressure can become so intense that they ignore learning. In the worst cases, students blatantly plagiarize. In the best cases, students rely too heavily on sources or turn to more accomplished friends for help with writing a paper. Even the best students negotiate to receive additional points on every completed assignment, no matter the quality.

The recent changes in curriculum and outcomes in the lower-division required courses have allowed faculty to take a different approach to issues of learning and academic integrity. Although the department has always been sensitive to plagiarism and used Turnitin software (an Internet tool that identifies plagiarized work) as a teaching tool, faculty now employ additional means to shift student attention from grades to learning. A new emphasis on voice and analysis in RHET 101 and argument and audience in RHET 102, when used in conjunction with several low-stakes assignments, now guides students through several stages of critical thinking. Constant attention to feedback through class discussion, peer evaluation, and conferencing now allows students to stay focused on learning instead of grades. And the gradual accumulation of pages and pages of writing that evidences increased cognitive awareness has helped to

convince students that they are indeed capable of the complex written thought that accompanies engagement in the writing process.

The Department also attempts to educate parents by holding occasional parent conferences. In the event that a student and instructor cannot reach a resolution during a grade dispute, we request a meeting in which we invite parents, student, and instructor to meet with the Director or Associate Director to discuss approaches and goals of the course in conjunction with the student's earned grade. Although in all instances we have tactfully refused to change a grade, there has never been an instance in which a parent did not accept our judgement or leave an office dissatisfied.

Our second challenge is to make our diversity our strength. A third of our faculty are Egyptian, a third are from Europe (mainly the UK), and a third are American. They hold different types of degrees in many different majors. They come from the corporate as well as the education sector. Many have never taken a composition course nor have they been trained to teach composition. Although these faculty have much to contribute, they face the constant challenge of placing Rhetoric and Composition knowledge and pedagogy at the core of their teaching.

As a result, the department takes outcomes, normalizing, assessment, and professional development very seriously. Course co-ordinators meet with faculty to discuss outcomes at the beginning of each term. The assessment co-ordinator "normalizes" with faculty twice each term and oversees random portfolio evaluation once a year. A professional development coordinator oversees faculty development presentations given by those with expertise in a particular area of rhetoric or composition. And an informal "Seminar/Practicum" in Rhet/Comp theory and practice supports those with little experience in teaching Rhet/Comp. Also during the last few years, the Department has hired a Chair with extensive Rhet/Comp experience and three Rhet/Comp PhDs to assist in providing a sound disciplinary focus and intellectual resonance to the curriculum.

A final challenge is to deliver creative, coherent, quality writing instruction that will keep pace with the rapid changes in the university. We are the first Department of Rhetoric and Composition in the Middle East. We are housed in a university that has witnessed the creation of three new schools, several new graduate programs, and several new professional degree departments in the last three years. In all instances, there appears to be a shift away from the liberal arts toward professional degrees.

Our Provost and our Board of Trustees want to be assured that our approach is worth the effort invested by the university. Thus, we are under increased pressure to define "who we are" and "what we do." We are currently addressing this demand by encouraging collaboration with faculty in other AUC Schools as

well as reminding officials of the strong need for training in and articulation of critical/creative thinking in all professions and disciplines. Thus far, the university has supported our efforts, but we are also constantly reminded that we are a “special” unit and must prove our worth.

## CONCLUSION

The Department of Rhetoric and Composition was created to oversee training in the generation, articulation, development, exchange, and evaluation of ideas. Working in conjunction with other departments in the university, it attempts to provide a foundation for successful civic and social engagement to students who will one day take up leadership positions in the Middle East. As the department develops a deeper understanding of the needs of the students, it works to create a level of instruction that supports critical thinking and creative problem solving. Although still in its infancy, the Department has evolved to the point that it can deliver instruction that integrates disciplinary learning and understanding with personal, social, and civic engagement, a crucial part of AUC’s mission. We now know who we are, and in order to meet current demands, we are constantly evaluating and revising what we do.

## REFERENCES

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