

Paula Johnson

WRITING FACE TO FACE

Renewed requirements and proficiency testing have grown so common in the last few years of American higher education that one more mandatory freshman composition course and one more mandatory test would in themselves hardly claim attention. But the two main parts of New York University's new Expository Writing Program—a two-semester required freshman course in composition, a writing proficiency test in the junior year—are, in hope and in practice, more than a merely formal reflection of the back-to-basics movement. Details of the faculty legislation that in the spring of 1978 mandated the new program indicate a forward rather than a reactionary direction: there are, for instance, to be no exemptions from the required course; very able freshmen, so judged at present by the scores of 650 or better on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test, are placed in Honors sections that are set at a level of challenge proper to what in most colleges would be an intermediate or even advanced course in expository prose. At all levels, the course amply deserves its title of Writing Workshop: sections are limited to fifteen students, who write constantly in a variety of modes. In the second semester, sections are grouped according to interest areas, with readings—and writing—in humanities or social sciences or natural sciences, as the student may choose. A tutorial center, to serve chiefly as a safety net for students who fail the Junior-year proficiency exam, but also to be open to students who in any context are unhappy writers, is part of the faculty plan and will come into being the fall of 1980.

That seemingly far-off date measures the scope of NYU's changed approach to composition. Until this year students in the College of Arts and Sciences and in various programs in other schools had to take a one-semester writing course unless they were exempted, followed, for education students, by a semester of an introduction to literature. Under

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the new plan, not only do these same students enroll for a full year in Writing Workshop, but so, too, do students from every four-year undergraduate program in the University. Because the undergraduate requirement has broadened while section size has decreased, the sheer number of people involved has grown dramatically—from 1200 to 1700 freshmen; from about 25 to 56 graduate assistants; from no or few regular faculty teaching composition to some fifteen. And more growth is to come, since the course requirement also applies to transfer students, of whom NYU has many. When the requirement becomes effective for them in the fall of 1979, the enrollment in Writing Workshop will be about half again what it is now. From the viewpoint of, say, the University of Texas, the numbers doubtless would look modest; from the viewpoint of a private university, they're enormous. The faculty's early vision of instant implementation has therefore gracefully clarified itself into a three-year, phased plan.

Anyone seriously involved with college composition knows that a program's administrative structure tells almost as much about it as its curriculum does, because hierarchies and interlacings of authority both affect and are affected by the perceptions the institution has of the composition program as a fiscal and political entity—and those, in turn, help to define its educational shape. At NYU the writing program has developed out of two predecessors: one, the previous composition course, wholly encapsulated, administratively, in the English department of the College of Arts and Science; and the other, a broadly representative Study Group on English Expression, which, after a year of consultation and deliberation, proposed the ambitious design now being realized. The Study Group, co-chaired by the chairman of the English department and a professor of film and television in the School of the Arts, provided for its own perpetuation, in effect, by building into its scheme an inter-school committee, composed of faculty from all schools whose students enroll in the writing program. This committee is charged with monitoring the program and advising its director, who is answerable to it on the one hand, and to the chairman of the English department, where the program is based, on the other. Faculty and graduate assistants teaching in the program may come from any school and department; nine departments in four different schools are represented in 1978-79. Appointments of graduate assistants are, however, specifically in the English department and made by its chairman; the director of the program is a professor of English, and her administrative staff is part of the same department. But when faculty members from other depart-

ments and schools teach sections of the Writing Workshop, it is the Expository Writing Program, as a budgetary unit of the College of Arts and Science, that “buys” their time from their home departments.

These interrelations may sound oddly complicated, perhaps even illogical; but they’re not chaotic nor merely political. At a university where interdepartmental programs lack good and strong precedent, a firm connection with the relevant department is essential not only to the program’s credibility, but to its day-by-day, and even more, its year-by-year operation. At the same time, where the English department has for some years treated composition as purely a service course and a way of helping to support its graduate students, it’s important that a revised and upgraded writing program have a broad, effective, and officially recognized authority extending beyond its departmental base. The term authority is the proper one in this case, since NYU’s institutional style is friendly to autocratic governance in its subsystems. That style is what balances the complex of answerabilities; to put it another way, if one is head of a subsystem, one is likely to have the power to do what one is held responsible for doing. Nowhere is this more important than in the design of the curricula; if the administrative structure is the program’s bones, the classroom teaching is its vital innards.

Except for the exceptions to allow some flexibility for experienced instructors, teaching follows detailed prescribed syllabi. The syllabi differ, in the first semester, according to the designated ability-levels of the students: Honors, Regular, or Developmental. This year, the three levels accounted, respectively, for about 15, 60, and 25 percent of the incoming students. The Honors and Developmental syllabi are variations of the Regular one, which is founded on three basic ideas about writing and about college freshmen. First is an idea about audience: the Writing Workshop’s motto is Jacques Barzun’s remark that “the only valid motivation for writing well is the desire to be read.” Now, whatever the psychological and social reasons, the desire to be read—and given a good grade—by one’s English teacher is not, for most college freshmen, the same as a desire to be read in general. The latter desire is difficult for many freshmen even to imagine, just yet, because they are only beginning to identify themselves as public people—“public” meaning as a real part of a society larger and more anonymous than one’s school, one’s neighborhood, one’s family. The more sophisticated students can conceive and write for an imaginary audience, if it is clearly identified and defined in terms of the verbal style it is postulated to expect; but even for these students a transitional audience is helpful. The Writing

Workshop teachers therefore take advantage of the blessedly small size of classes, and during about half of the class sessions, divide students into small groups of four or five, so that students can provide a face-to-face audience for one another.

What goes on in the small group meetings is closely linked to a second basic idea about writing, namely, that most college freshmen do not have much idea of how to get from a vague notion of a topic to a fully articulated and carefully edited piece of prose discourse. So, each “full-dress” paper goes through a structured series of stages, usually four during the early weeks of the course, reducing to three or two in the later weeks. The maximum, four-stage sequence goes like this: the student settles on something to write about, with more or less explicit guidance from the instructor, and puts down his first thoughts about it. Usually the first thoughts are continuous prose, perhaps inappropriately called “first,” but they may take the form of extended notes or associative jottings. This first draft the student brings to class and reads, aloud, to his response group, the members of which then comment on it in turn. Exactly how the response sessions are structured varies from one class to another, and from time to time in the same class as teachers experiment with methods; but groups have in most cases begun with a set of rules derived from Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*: reading, followed by a timed minute of silence, then uninterrupted and unanswered remarks from each group member in turn. Elbow’s formal, almost meditative plan helps to insulate students from their own uneasiness right at first; it also puts a needed emphasis on careful listening and a respect for thoughtful periods of silence. Some instructors find that rigid timing and denying the writer a chance to talk back continue to be useful to the groups; others prefer to allow interchange. All have discovered that, in a course devoted to mainly factual prose, student groups profit from various kinds of guidelines that help them understand what to listen for and how to respond constructively. For instance, a teacher may, with the whole class, present a draft of his own writing, and ask for advice about it; the teacher’s questions thus lead students to notice and try to deal with important features not only of the teacher’s draft but, subsequently, of a fellow-student’s. Or an instructor may use a duplicated set of questions to ask about a piece of writing, and go over these whenever it seems a good idea to remind students how they can be more useful critics. Typically, sets of questions begin with the whole—“What is the writer’s main point?”—and work down to details of diction and usage. Whatever the specifics of the method, the

face-to-face reading and response is one constant method of dealing with first drafts.

The writer then revises on the bases of the responses he has listened to and of his own further thinking, and presents written copies of the revised paper to the other group members, who now make comments in writing. This has been the weakest phase in the series; it's hard to say just why. Possibly it's that it seems redundant to comment in writing after one has already commented orally; possibly the process of written commentary needs to be better understood and specified. Or both; plus some other problems not yet isolated. Even at its most nearly otiose, though, the second stage gives an opportunity for interim revision which can go as far as a complete re-thinking of the topic or the adoption of a new one.

In its third version, the paper comes for the first time to the instructor; this is the next-to-final stage. At this point, *not* the final stage, the instructor makes detailed written comments on the student's work. This, all agree, seems a great improvement, given the larger context of sharing and responding, over the more common procedure in which the student hands the instructor a paper that both agree is finished. In that practice, the instructor's comments are paradoxically framed: they typically suggest revision, even though no further revision has been provided for or will ordinarily be done. For the instructor to remark on a *next-to-final* paper resolves the paradox, but potentially raises another, dramatized in the occasional student complaint, "But I did everything you said; why isn't it an A?" That such complaints have been few may testify to the care that instructors take to forestall them. One technique is not to re-write or to correct errors. Instead, one gives a reaction—not just "awk," but an articulation of one's troubles, as a reader, with tangled syntax or inconsistent diction or missing connectives. For usage, the instructor makes a reference to the handbook or a remark like "There are two comma splices on this page; correct them." Another technique of keeping the student responsible for his work is to explain, either on the paper or if it is a more general policy, in class, that one cannot, after all, mark everything; this time, one is concentrating, for instance, on adequate support for generalizations. Matters of diction, or whatever, will have to wait.

After the stages of peer response and teacher's response, the student prepares his final paper. It must be typewritten; and the explicit expectation—met more often than one might suppose—is that it be press-perfect, free even from typos. On this copy the instructor red-pencils

errors, but makes no suggestions or marginalia; only a holistic evaluation and a grade. Students, with some restrictions, choose seven such papers out of from nine to eleven written during the term to make up their “portfolio,” on which most of the semester grade is based. Obviously, the work on successive projects must overlap if each one goes through even three of the four stages. The overlapping has in this first, experimental semester sometimes become excessive; but in principle it has some advantages. If a student is going to stay with one paper through several drafts, it’s more interesting not to have to concentrate on that paper exclusively. Most of us produce better writing in the end if we have a chance to lay our work aside and do something else, even if only for a few days, before we come back to it.

Besides audience and process, the third basic idea informing the Writing Workshop course has to do with cognitive development. The common failure of college freshmen to support their generalizations is probably not the laziness or stupidity it is sometimes taken for. Rather, these very young adults have not yet fully mastered the movements of intellect that take one from general to particular or from abstract to concrete, and back again. Their immaturity in this respect is perhaps not even entirely cognitive; it has to do also with psychosocial development. Insofar as there is such a creature as a typical American college freshman, she is a young person just now becoming effectively aware of herself as a distinct but social being, upon whom others justly expect to be able to rely, but whose place and viewpoint is never fully shared by any of those others. The failure to state one’s premises or to cite one’s evidence can result both from being unaccustomed to the peculiar explicitness that abstract thought requires and from incomplete social recognition—the recognition that another person can read only one’s words, not one’s mind.

Assignments in the Writing Workshop are not always spelled out; in the shared syllabus some are left to the students, some to the inclinations of each instructor. But those that are in common ask that students exercise their thinking in the general-particular and abstract-concrete dimensions. For instance, a described observation will become the basis for particular, then for general inference. Or a brainstorming session, pre-writing, will be guided into the development of *categories* of questions and subtopics, in relation either to an initial abstraction or to a concrete object or event. Or students are asked to write a dialogue, either reported or imagined, that represents some characteristic of their group’s interaction, then to explicate the characteristic that has been represented.

This exercise may, for the sake of tact, be written up without peer response.

The Regular level course, in the first semester, has a Developmental variant, which differs principally in that students write only seven papers and more time is spent in “plenary” session—lecture and discussion involving the entire class. NYU’s Developmental level is not “remedial,” in the way that an open-admissions college understands the word; it is merely paced a little slower, and bent a little more toward traditional teacherliness than the Regular level. By the beginning of second semester, students in Developmental sections are supposed to be ready to enter Regular classes, since the Developmental level then ceases to exist. Whether this expectation is reasonable remains to be seen. Because a cut-off score of 500 on the SAT-Verbal is the chief criterion for downward placement, and because, as everyone knows, this is not the surest measure of proficiency in writing, differences between students’ ability at these two levels is frequently not apparent; so the disappearance of the Developmental sections may not be an inconsistent plan.

The Honors level continues through the year as virtually a separate course, though it bears the same catalogue number as the other two. The three R’s—reading, response, revision—inform it also; but Honors sections use a more substantial and challenging anthology, give more attention to the connections of verbal style with rhetorical role-playing, and practice defining and addressing imaginary audiences from sundry stances. The first-semester Honors course is being adapted as the second-semester Regular course in the Humanities division; Honors students in the second semester go into a more individualized course pattern, frequently working, with their class as well as with the instructor, according to personal contracts agreed upon early in the term.

The division of the Regular level into three areas of interest during the second semester demands a careful balancing of specialization with the fact that Writing Workshop must remain fairly inclusive in its approach. Students in the Natural Sciences division may be pre-med, as are the majority, or may be in nursing or accounting or mathematics or goodness knows what. Similarly, students in the Social Sciences division may be coming from business or social work or education or pre-law or psychology or whatever, just as Humanities students may be prospective majors in drama or French or film or music or English or what have you. Obviously, such broad ranges of interest would be ill-served by too narrowly defined a course; business or technical writing as such has simply to be offered to upperclassmen by departments that wish to do so.

A further reason for relative non-specialization is that the faculty and graduate students who teach Writing Workshop, though they come from several departments, are—as yet—none of them farther from the humanities than English Education or ESL. There are no scientists nor technical writing teachers on the Natural Sciences staff, no social scientists nor business writing teachers on the Social Sciences staff. That faculty members in these fields act as advisers to the graduate assistants is helpful and reassuring; but it does not change the fundamental fact. The challenge, then, is to develop courses that honestly address broad areas of interest, but that can be taught confidently and well by laymen in those areas.

The initial solutions to this problem will no doubt be revised from year to year; at present, the compromise syllabi are centered each on a general notion or set of notions. The outline for Natural Sciences makes use of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by introducing, first, readings in "normal science," then spending several weeks on the Darwinian revolution in biology, and turning finally to two or three current issues in the relation of science and society. Instead of a multiplicity of small essays, students write three more extended papers, all requiring research, and a collection of 250-word abstracts of assigned readings. Along the way, attention focuses on such rhetorical matters as the establishment of authority in discourse that purports to be factual, and on the options for sequencing and filling out semi-technical explanation. The Social Sciences course concentrates on the logic and psychology of persuasion, from formal inference to the slier ploys of advertizing and political journalism.

As we follow the calendar into second semester, a good many questions remain unanswered. Presumably most students are writing better now than they did in September; but the haste with which the writing program was brought into being ruled out the possibility of a pre-test that might have served for comparison. There will, however, be a final essay examination, which can become, among other things, a pre-test for second semester; it may help to confirm or refute scattered skepticism about the need to require a full year of composition. But evaluative study must, plainly, go much further. The most urgent needs are for a reliable placement measure, for ways to devise a consistent means of grading, and for comparative evaluation of the workshop method with other, both more and less radical, pedagogic techniques.

For the moment, evaluation of the first semester is anecdotal. Most of the teachers have moved from initial doubts and uneasiness to a degree of

faith in and comfort with student-centered instruction. Student reactions show every imaginable degree and kind of approval and disapproval. Interestingly, though, the reactions usually show careful thought; perhaps partly because the course itself puts responsibility on them, students undertake criticisms of it seriously and responsibly. For example:

If I were to describe my feelings for the course in one word I would use “frustrating.” . . . It’s not until the third copy of a paper that someone we trust will read it. . . . On certain days, we hear a lecture on rules and techniques we have learned in the past, but forget to use in our writing. Although these things are important to hear, my mind selects those things that apply to me to listen to. I think this time could be more individualized, so we’re *sure* when a rule applies to us.

Over the past twelve weeks, with the help of the rest of my group, I feel that I’ve learned more about the skills of good writing than I have over the other twelve years of my education. My group consisted of friendly and honest individuals who contributed their unbiased opinion about my work. . . . The constant improving of papers has developed my skills in communicating to my peers and hopefully others.

In the area of criticizing and annotating each other’s papers I find that we are much too lenient with each other. This is possibly due to the sprouting of friendships throughout the year. . . . The groups should indeed be more stern with each other, for it is to the benefit of all.

The constant work does, of course, help get rid of writing problems acquired from lack of writing consistently, and also improves grammar and word usage. I simply question the necessity of the constant wave of work assigned. . . . Perhaps I don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I knew most of the rules of writing when I started this course. What I need now is practice in the actual writing of an essay. In my opinion, the fact that we write so many drafts of so many essays is the greatest asset of this course.

Although I think this system [of working over essays] is very tedious, I enjoy the course sometimes. . . . My group didn’t work well until we got to know each other because we found it hard to criticize each other’s essays. We didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings so we wrote on the annotated copies statements such as “It’s nice,” or “I really enjoyed reading this.” We weren’t lying but we also were afraid to give suggestions for

improvement. After half the semester is over, we are now writing true criticisms on each other's essays since we are comfortable in our group.

I have benefitted most from this course by working in a group because I have learned to take criticism from other people and to use it to my advantage rather than become insulted Nevertheless I don't enjoy having to write one essay over four times.

There are, so far as I know, no widely shared student criticisms of the writing program, as differentiated from complaints about and praise of particular teachers, that are not represented in this set of comments. The comments are typical also in their thoughtfulness; to the anxious question about this new course, "Is it working?" the very fact that students find it worth such judicious evaluation is a strong, if incomplete, affirmative answer.

How exportable the NYU program is, however, is another question; graduate assistants who have tried its methods at, for instance, community colleges in the city, report that the relative success at NYU is in part due to NYU students' relatively high degree of motivation and self-discipline. On the other hand, peer interaction has proven valuable in a great variety of institutional settings; given further refinement and appropriate modification, the NYU syllabus may prove widely adaptable. No single component of it, after all, is original, though the combination may be so.

The students' observation that "high school English was never like this" is matched by teachers' observations that "composition teaching was never like this." Many of the fifty-six first-semester Graduate Assistants had had experience as college, community college, or high school teachers; but only two or three had ever worked in a student-centered course. The first need in September, therefore, was for a crash program of orientation for teachers. We met for three days, sometimes all together, sometimes divided into the three levels, studying and discussing course outlines, practicing comments on student papers, working out through sharing some of our anticipatory worries. The most valuable part of the orientation, by all accounts, was a role-playing exercise that took up the entire afternoon of the first day. The whole staff, including the participating faculty members, began by talking together about problems they expected to encounter and about the advantages and disadvantages that the student groups might offer. Then, very like a freshman class, the teachers wrote for half an hour about their hopes and fears for the course. A break for chatter and coffee; then the

return, this time into groups of four or five, to read, listen, and respond to one another's "in-class essays." Two of the student comments quoted earlier indicate some of what happened to their teachers, as well: we began by being very nice to each other. Only gradually, and not in every group, did we become able to listen acutely and to zero in on one another's writing. But we did learn, quickly, how it felt to engage in this kind of learning; and further discussion afterwards helped to analyze what had gone on, to predict and plan for what was for most of the participants a very new kind of classroom procedure. During the semester the staff has met fairly frequently in four divisions, to share problems and solutions and information; less frequently, there have been "business meetings" of the entire staff. Informal cross-grading of papers is frequent, encouraged by a more formal cross-grading exercise carried out in groups of three. Vagaries of judgment are more frequent than could ideally be wished; but, by and large, instructors agree surprisingly well, especially in their assessment of the *relative* merits of student essays. Supervision and in-service training, however, need to be strengthened and better organized—a virtual impossibility this year because there aren't enough people to run a program of the size of this one; a single full-time faculty member, one half-time adjunct instructor, and a secretary made up the entire administrative staff in fall '78. For spring, a second secretary and a half-time research assistant will be added; and in September '79, in further addition to this enlarged group, a full-time assistant director. Bearing in mind Parkinson's Law, we aim, beyond this, for a third faculty member in 1980—but no more. With careful organization, the regular faculty who teach sections of Writing Workshop and the Graduate Assistants who already have experience in the course can share the responsibility of a less centralized supervisory plan. Even in the first semester, the participating regular faculty have made class visitations, chaired certain meetings, and been available for advice and moral support for the Assistants.

Brand-new Assistants, for the second year now, have been required to take a graduate course in the teaching of college composition, offered in two sections, one in English and one in English Education—an arrangement that indicates a tentative but growing measure of cooperation between these two departments. Most Graduate Assistants report that the course is valuable; but its value is qualified by its need to do too many things—theory, research, and practice—all at once. Next year the course will perform a kind of mitosis, into a fall-term practicum, required of new teachers and given by professors of English Education;

and a spring term theory course (an impracticum, one might say) offered in the English department, and strongly urged upon any Graduate Assistants who lack formal course work in contemporary rhetoric. Eventually, if all goes well, it should be possible to complement teaching in the undergraduate program with an optional concentration in rhetoric as part of doctoral study in English. How far in the future that option waits—if indeed it waits there at all—and just what shape it may take, can in this early time only be guessed. Even the future of the undergraduate program may be less simple than I have presented it here, because, from the very beginning of its planning, expository writing has been conceived as a part of a revived general education requirement. The writing course has come into being first, since it was felt to be urgent, and thus was easy to agree upon. But more is to come—some of it, probably, as soon as next fall—and it isn't clear whether expository writing will remain a completely distinct entity or be integrated in some way, to some measure, with a fully specified set of distribution requirements. In any case, the writing program's continuing self-examination through both statistical and case study methods may offer useful information for other institutions and programs.