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## NOTES TOWARD WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: SOME COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Lynne is a typical sophomore at Goucher College, a small and selective private women's college outside of Baltimore. In the year's time after completing freshman English, she has written a personal essay about nature, a review of *Jaws,* a comparative study of paintings by Seurat and Van Gogh, a lab report on the growth of euglena, a sociological abstract of an article on the family, and an analysis of an essay by David Hume. A "solid college experience" at Goucher requires this kind of immersion in new ways of seeing, thinking, and writing. However, it is not surprising that no matter how well Lynne has done in freshman English, she may be baffled by what is expected of her as a writer in other courses. She must become an adept, self-taught rhetorician though she is probably unfamiliar with the conventions of language and style in the disciplines she studies and with the personal biases of her instructors.

Lynne's classmates, when asked in September of 1978 to describe their experiences as writers outside freshman English, confirmed what the faculty had already surmised: current undergraduates have a greater need of specific training in language skills than ever before. Vivian told us,

> I chose to major in economics partly because little writing was required (or so I thought). In most of my courses, I was required to write and to write credible papers. During the first two years I was more a short order cook than a writer—whipping many assignments out of the typewriter minutes before they were due. By second semester sophomore year, I realized that there was no way for me to avoid writing in my courses, not even in my major.

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According to Michele,

> Since I have been at Goucher, I have had to write some type of report for every class I have taken. The requirements have varied from ten-page term papers to two-page personal essays as the classes have varied from English to health to an accounting course. There are two things that remain the same for each class. Every professor expects something different and grades a paper in his own way.

In the fall of 1979, Goucher offered a new experimental course called The Composing Process to address Lynne and her classmates' problems. Among the purposes of this sophomore-level writing course is the creation of a team-teaching and tutoring network to assist students in the writing they do outside freshman English. The course should, in time, become the center of a writing across the curriculum program, a series of new subject-specific courses to which a writing component is linked.

The idea for The Composing Process grew out of discussions and team-teaching efforts involving faculty and students during the spring of 1979. I would like to outline the activities that led to the formation of The Composing Process before describing how it is designed and operated.

When the faculty was polled by the English Department in the fall of 1978 about the problem of literacy at Goucher, they agreed that students' writing lacked "clarity," "organization," "conciseness of expression," and "precision in the articulation of ideas." This consensus about student writing emerged despite differences in the kinds of writing students do in the various disciplines (abstracts for sociology, lab reports for the sciences, critical essays for English, etc.). Moreover, informal discussions and workshops on the question of literacy brought further agreement among the faculty and an expression of their willingness to solve the problem on a college-wide basis.

As coordinator of writing, the question for me became how the college should address Lynne's and her classmates' problems, how should we translate the College's concern with literacy into changes in the curriculum? The faculty's responses to the Fall '78 questionnaire provided me with a way to begin. I approached several faculty members[1] who had answered the questionnaire in detail and asked them whether I could work with them in or out of class to help them devise a writing component for their courses. Some of them were willing to risk working with a skills specialist who knew

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[1] Professors Baker, Horn, Jeffrey, Lewand, Morton, Shouldice, and Velder and Dean James Billet supported this project with sound ideas and encouragement.

relatively little about their subject and to weather the difficulties that experimenting with new ways of seeing and teaching might entail. They invited me to team-teach with them, to evaluate classroom activities, and to suggest a variety of writing exercises that could be added to their courses.

I attended a sophomore-level history class and observed that although many of the students had been successful in writing personal essays for freshman English, none of them were successful in producing essays on colonial women. Here their writing was devoid of their personal identities, their individual dictions and styles. This indicated to me that coming to terms with new ideas and ways of thinking about history was so difficult that it left students little time for considering their own personal voices.

Similarly, I had the impression from listening to these students discuss Spruill's *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* that the book was authorless. They talked as if the book contained "the facts of history as they were and are" rather than Spruill's mind working with facts to create a coherent narrative. None of the students recognized that a "story" is written by a person with biases. Nor did they see that a writer selects and orders details to support generalizations, quotes some sources and not others, and develops a thesis. The students assumed that language simply transmits information; they did not seem to know that language—their own writing as well as Spruill's book—shapes information and depicts the writer too.

A second set of class visits—these to an introductory mathematics course—came about when the instructor insisted that my students in a second semester writing course should be able to understand a simple mathematical process called the Fibonacci sequence if it was clearly explained to them. His math students submitted written explanations of the sequence to a group of naive readers—eight volunteers from my second semester writing course who had just written and revised a paper that required them to show the steps of a process. The success of the math students' explanations was mixed. Least successful was the following paragraph:

One obtains the Fibonacci sequence by adding two adjacent numbers. Take the following example: 1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21 . . . The next number in the sequence would be 34 since 13+21=34.

The clearest explanation read as follows:

To obtain the Fibonacci sequence one must utilize the operation of addition. The first number in the sequence is 1. Because another number has not yet been included in the sequence to add to 1, the second number is also 1.

At this point our sequence looks like this: 1,1. The third number of the sequence is obtained by adding the first and second numbers in the sequence. Therefore, the third number in the sequence is 2. Now, our sequence looks like this: 1.1.2. The fourth number of the sequence results from adding the last two elements already in the sequence (there being 2 and 1). By adding these, one obtains the number 3. Now, the sequence is as follows: 1,1,2,3. The Fibonacci sequence may be continued by adding the last two numbers of the sequence to obtain the next one. Thus, the sequence would look like this:

1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,...

Students from the writing class responding *in writing* to explanation 1 told the math student that she had "moved too quickly by giving the example and then just briefly illustrating how the sequence worked." Most of the readers preferred explanation 2. They congratulated the writer for "walking them slowly through the operation" and for "adding a diagram summarizing the explanation at the end to give the reader a second way to look at the sequence." In class, after students discussed the explanations and critques, the math instructor extended and qualified the comments of the English students in ways that only an expert reader can. Referring to explanation 1, he pointed out:

"Adjacent numbers" is ambiguous. Adjacent seems to imply some physical closeness, and since any two numbers are separated from each other by an infinity of other numbers, the word adjacent is inappropriate. A better phrase would be "consecutive numbers of the sequence."

The exchange between the math and English students suggested a format for The Composing Process; students would act as readers and writers for each other and would work with an expert reader, an instructor, who would help them develop their skills even further. The history students' problems with making connections between research and writing (finding a thesis, developing an individual voice, linking details and generalizations) led to a number of questions addressed in the new course.

In the fall of 1979, The Composing Process attracted second and third year students, two majoring in English and the others in political science, sociology, religion, economics, and art.[2] At first exclusively writers and

readers, by the end of the semester the students in The Composing Process become tutors, team-teachers, and even advisers for the writing across the curriculum program. The future tutors spend the semester working in small groups as writers and readers of each other's papers. In the first seven weeks of the term they become acquainted with strategies for composing. In the three week segment which follows, they write essays about a play and several short stories, thereby learning the conventions of the literary essay (the specialized vocabulary of literary criticism, the close analysis of texts to support a clearly defined thesis, the rhetorical purposes of metaphoric language, etc.). In the last four weeks, they apply what they have learned in the course to the tutoring and team-teaching that they do for a course outside the English department.[3]

A number of learning and teaching strategies distinguish The Composing Process. First, students practice methods of invention and revision—strategies for composing—while they work on profiles of themselves as writers. They are asked to reflect upon their past experience as writers, to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, and to identify their goals, at the same time that they learn about their methods of composing and expand them by trying new ones. In writing a personal essay, most of them—for the first time—confront their attitudes about writing, their fears and needs, and their sense of what it means to call themselves "writers"—a self-evaluation particularly useful to the instructor as she shapes the course and to the students as they work on their own writing and respond to others'.

Second, tutors are writers before they begin tutoring. That is, the participants in the seminar work in the same kind of small groups and practice the same methods of composing that are then introduced to the classes outside the English department and to the tutoring sessions. Students move from the first rough draft to the final version of the paper by asking for suggestions and formulating changes in light of the comments they receive. In other words, writers, after sharing their early drafts with peers, revise their work, responding to the critiques and cues that they receive, and to their own "re-vision" of the piece. The readers' primary responsibility is to determine how best to intervene so as to lead the writer to produce a better piece of prose. These future tutors devise methods for suggesting improvement by looking at each other's writing, by experiencing and discussing some of the anxiety and frustration that they feel, and by determining which suggestions help most.

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[3]For a full description of how a writing lab operates in which students are writers before they are tutors, see Judith Fishman, "On Tutoring, the Writing Lab, and Writing," *Composition and Teaching,* 2.

Third, students develop vocabularies for talking about composition and derive criteria for evaluating writing from the questions and problems that emerge from reading their papers in class. In early sessions, students use guidelines that I provide. These direct them first to make simple, specific observations ("Name two strong sentences," "Name two weak ones," "Put a straight line under an effective word or phrase," "Put a wavy line under a word you think should be changed"). Students are asked to re-create for the writer their experience of reading the text ("Tell what was happening to you as you read the piece. When were you attentive? When were you bored or confused? Point to specific places") and then to analyze the essay ("How was this piece organized?" "What do you think the writer wants to accomplish with the draft?").[4]

Peer evaluation not only puts the instructor in touch with the kinds of values that students have absorbed about good writing and the criteria that they use to discuss each other's work, but it also helps the instuctor make comments that reach students.[5] After listening to the ways in which students actually discuss writing, the instructor is likely to put aside her specialized vocabulary for critical evaluation, often meaningful to English teachers alone; labels like "coherence," "precision," and "conciseness" are better paraphrased or illustrated until students understand this "short-hand" in the context of their and her concrete responses to the papers they review. The vocabulary of critical evaluation—a specialized language—is then built inductively by the teacher's adapting the language of criticism to the students' reading of a particular piece of prose.

When urged to put together their own guidelines, students argue in class about how to "clean up" unfocused questions, develop new ones, and establish a sequence of questions. Reviewing their first drafts of every new piece of writing seems to sprout new questions that they have to investigate and then add to their growing list. The assignments are set up to demand of students increasingly more complex responses. As a result, new, more complex questions about, for instance, diction, syntax, voice, and audience are added to their initial ones.

Fourth, in The Composing Process, tutors themselves write for a particular discipline—literature—so that they can anticipate the problems

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[4]I am particularly indebted to Kenneth A. Bruffee for his work on the student-centered writing class as described in "Peer-Tutoring Writing Centers," in *Basic Writing: A Collection of Essays for Teachers, Researchers and Administrators,* eds. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel Hoebner (*NCTE,* forthcoming), and John Clifford of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, who invited me to participate in a study of collaborative learning as an approach to the teaching of basic writing when we were graduate fellows in English at Queens College, CUNY.

[5]For an insightful discussion of this process, see Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 40.

that their tutees face. For four weeks the writing class is transformed into Critical Approaches to Literature, and the students struggle to control a vocabulary and form that are foreign to most of them since only two members of the class are English majors. By their attempts to write intelligently about literature, they are once again aware that students fresh from English composition are expected to master the conventions of writing that belong to academic disciplines.[6]

The students quickly realize that the skills that they have acquired in English composition cannot be automatically carried over to their writing about literature. Most of them stumble through the first drafts of their literary essays, because they can not go beyond the "I" of the writer about personal experience to the "I" of the writer about literature without falling into the trap of "themewriting."[7] Unwittingly or consciously, the writer sacrifices the characteristic syntax, idiom, and tone evident in her personal essay written earlier in the term and tries to approximate a "professional" voice without as yet having control of the new ways of analyzing literature to which a specialized vocabulary is attached. All that may be evident in her prose is her attachment to the new vocabulary which is to her the most visible mark of the literary essay.

Some students take an easy route, choosing to write a voiceless prose full of predictable generalizations and safe assertions. Others venture into new territory but invariably bump up against the constraints of the literary form they are working with; they may also complain of the instructor's expectations that they be able to skillfully use in their literary essays their newly acquired critical vocabulary for analyzing literature. Novice critics, how can they write about literature without simply aping the language of the critic? Is it fair, they ask, to expect them to have incorporated in their writing new habits of thought and new ways of inquiring about literature?

There are obviously no simple solutions to the students' problems. Writing about literature does, however, precipitate the kinds of questions about form, concepts, and language that are central to every kind of specialized writing. As a result, when students critique each other's literary essays, serving as both writers and readers, they are also being prepared for the tutoring they will do and for the particular limitations and biases of the specialized writing their tutees will be engaged in.

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[6]See Mike Rose, "When Faculty Talk About Writing," *College English,* 41 (Nov. 1979), pp. 272-279 for a consideration of how the biases of faculty members and the conventions of writing for specialized subjects affect the student writer.

[7]William E. Coles, Jr. demonstrates this dilemma faced by students in a fictionalized account of one of his writing classes presented in *The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

By the end of the term students in The Composing Process are ready for a "trial run" as tutors. They respond to papers written by students in a macro-economics class who are asked to explain the problem of inflation to a group of college-educated readers who have little or no background in the discipline. First, the tutors work together discussing the papers and locating a number of problems shared by the writers. For instance, the economics majors assume too much knowledge on the part of the reader; they use jargon without defining terms for the non-specialist. Their papers are also too ambitious, conveying many concepts whereas a single one among the many dotting the pages of their essays would serve as an appropriate subject for a three-page paper. More than a matter of vocabulary, the overuse of jargon is a conceptual problem: Technical language, the tutors see, is a convenient shorthand for expressing complex ideas when one is writing for other specialists as the tutors themselves did when they used words like "tragedy" and "comedy" in writing about literary themes. The tutors also surmise that the economics majors are probably accustomed to using graphs and formulas to communicate information and ideas to one another, because these are prominent in most of the papers; on the other hand, most of the tutors agree that "Farmer Gray" anecdotes and stories that speak to their personal experience would make the economic analysis more accessible.

Second, each tutor is assigned a tutee and prepares a written evaluation of her paper. Tutors are asked to view the paper as a draft and to make suggestions to help the writer revise her essay. Here are some representative responses:

Cindy,
There were a couple of times when you lost me. Part of the confusion was due to my unfamiliarity with some of the jargon used by economists. For example, what is "targeting" an economy? Is it the emphasis upon some action taken by the Fed? And is it a synonym for focus?

Terry,
Paragraph 1: Because this paper is written for a naive audience, the first sentence should catch their attention and serve as an introduction to the entire paper. Since the discussion of consumer response to inflation is complex, advanced theory could be addressed in a later section of the paper. It would be helpful to elaborate on the interrelatedness of interest rates, prices, supply of goods, wages and inflation, and to describe how different factors lead to an ever-accelerating rate of inflation. The first paragraph is nonetheless well constructed, and your description of the self-perpetuating inflationary cycle as "vicious" is very effective.
Paragraph 2: President Carter's voluntary price and wage control program is a very convincing example of how attempts of the government to

control inflation have been ineffective. Why did his attempts fail? How do decreases in the money supply affect the rate of interest? What is the relationship between interest rates and inflation? During what time period did inflation grow 14 per cent? This paragraph is your strongest, and it could be more effective as your first paragraph. It would catch the reader's attention and serve as a forceful introduction.

Susan,

Examples or anecdotes (not "Dick and Jane" types, but something relevant) would enrich your cut-and-dry explanations. Also, instead of making the paper "technical sounding," try to loosen it up. Imagine that you are describing the situation of inflation to someone who knows nothing about it.

A few terms need to be defined, especially for the layman. It seems that you assume the reader has a background in economics: p. 1, line 9: "ceiling price"; p. 2, line 6: "non-price methods" and "ration coupons"; p. 6, line 1: "rationing device."

Toby,

You did not seem to expand some of your supporting ideas enough, and I wanted to know more. I think you should ask yourself the why and how about a number of your statements. For instance, why do you say, "Inflation encourages consumers to purchase at a faster rate"?

I realize that you have chosen a problem with many facets and have tried to explain this problem in only three pages. I think you are trying to tackle too many aspects of a very complex problem without going into depth about any one of them. You have chosen a popular subject and one which is of concern to many business people and government officials, but you have not answered the question of how high interest rates will control inflation.

The tutors are also asked to introduce their written review by briefly outlining for the tutee their own profiles as writers (strengths, weaknesses, experiences) so as to put the tutee at ease and to give her a realistic picture of her tutor's abilities as a critic.

Finally the tutors attend the economics class to comment as a group on their reading of the papers. To prepare for the session, they work out their ideas about the following questions:

-How do we view peer evaluation of our papers and how can we introduce other students to this process?
-How can we demonstrate to the tutees that writing is a matter of revision and that the final drafts they submitted are really rough drafts? How can we make them see the benefits of revising?
-How should we introduce the three major criticisms that we have of their papers: their overuse of graphs and formulas to explain concepts to readers

who learn best by being presented with examples and anecdotes that speak to personal experience; their reliance upon technical language that sometimes obscures meaning; their need to limit the topic they discuss.

As the joint meeting of this English and economics class demonstrates, collaboration and experimentation are the dual theses of Goucher's initial efforts to establish a writing across the curriculum program in 1979-80. The Composing Process with its focus upon the exchange between student and student, faculty member and faculty member, students and faculty, is one of a number of tentative designs for the program. Several other experiments are also underway. Students in an introductory history class make up questions for a final exam as a way of determining the major and minor themes of the course and of actively learning how their choice of questions indicates their way of thinking about the subject. Working in groups of four, these students review a list of twenty questions, choose those they would like to answer on an exam, and revise the questions for clarity of thought and expression. Freshmen studying ethics write about a moral judgment they have made and discuss preliminary and revised drafts of their papers in small groups that include other student writers. By reversing the process—that is, by writing a personal essay on the topic before doing relevant background reading—the students are then able to do a critical reading of Plato's *Euthyphro* and to revise their personal definitions of "moral judgment" in light of their research. Instructors in two lecture classes encourage their students to write responses—evaluations, summaries, questions—to the major points of the lecture and to read their responses to the class.

If the writing across the curriculum program is to thrive at Goucher—or at any college for that matter—faculty, students, and administration must continue to welcome change and to take institutional risks. Some risks promise as yet unknown rewards through the re-definition of curriculum and of the relationship between students and faculty, faculty member and faculty member, student and student.

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