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CINDERELLA TO HERCULES: DEMYTHOLOGIZING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

At colleges and universities that have committed themselves to writing across the curriculum, instructors in all disciplines teach the writing skills appropriate within their fields, and they purposefully use writing assignments—both formal and informal—as a way to teach concepts in their courses. At these institutions the English department shares with all other departments the responsibility for helping all students to attain a high level of literacy—a literacy that is broadly-based, inclusive, and appropriate to students who would call their education liberal.

Writing across the curriculum is not a fad, although there are some in the academy who suspect so. Especially at large urban institutions, many faculty members believe that any idea dependent on trust, cooperation, and commitment can be implemented only at friendly little private colleges that receive big foundation grants. The scoffers may be right to the extent that the recommitment to a fundamental principle may have a more dramatic impact at a small college. But the point of this essay is that the idea of writing across the curriculum is fundamental to teaching at institutions of all sizes and shapes. The purpose of this essay is to present some suggestions that may help English teachers who want to establish an institution-wide program.

The first step is to remind ourselves and then others that the teaching of writing and reading is essential to teaching in all fields. To say that scholars write is to say the obvious. One might as well add that teachers teach. Scholarship in all disciplines—across the curriculum—is defined by

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written texts. Scholars who offer students an apprenticeship in reading and in creating written texts in their fields are in that sense teachers of writing, experts in the rhetoric of their own disciplines. This notion of the scholar in any field as an expert rhetorician is deeply rooted in the history of the liberal arts. The medieval trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—was the foundation of all liberal learning. The foremost scholars in the classical, medieval, and Renaissance worlds were all rhetoricians—scholars and teachers of the writing as well as the ideas in their disciplines. We need only a quick look at Edward Corbett’s “A Survey of Rhetoric” in his *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* to find the names of leaders in diverse disciplines—Aristotle, Erasmus, Francis Bacon, John Quincy Adams—listed among his noteworthy rhetoricians.

Unfortunately, the world of twentieth-century American education has become so fragmented that teachers can delude themselves into thinking that they teach something called “content,” while specialists teach reading, writing, and even thinking. Getting back to the basics ought to mean a return to a fundamental principle—a renewed commitment to teaching students to write, to read, and to think about content. Then all scholars, experts in the academic discourse of their own disciplines, would guide apprentices, not merely to know, but to express knowledge and thought first to themselves, then to each other, and finally to a wider audience. “Writing across the curriculum,” “writing as a cross-disciplinary endeavor,” “cooperative efforts to teach writing” would then be perceived not merely as the new phrases of last season, but as essential working principles for all of us in the academy.

But just because an idea is fundamental, it is not consequently easy to implement in our complicated academic institutions. As the chairman of sociology at my own institution put it: “I’ll come to your damned writing workshop, but remember—I never promised you a prose garden.” It is in the nature of fundamental ideas that they often lie buried under the debris of myth and misconception. At institutions large or small, private or public, we who would institute a program of writing in the total curriculum undertake a large task, one which requires freeing ourselves from myths and misconceptions, if we would not fruitlessly multiply our efforts. It cannot be overemphasized that the success of the enterprise depends on the capacity of everyone at the institution—faculty, administration, and students—to perceive that writing across the curriculum does not mean grammar across the curriculum or even verbal skills across the curriculum but more generally an emphasis across the curriculum on composition—the arrangement of parts into meaningful wholes.

Administrators are particularly susceptible to a narrow definition of writing. They are usually happy when they hear that the idea of writing

across the curriculum is abroad in the land, and they respond, sometimes too quickly, by asking the coordinator of freshman composition to develop a simple list of competencies so that all instructors at the institution can be held accountable for their designated part in the teaching of writing. This story may be apocryphal, but I have heard of one administrator who thought that semi-colons could be the special responsibility of the social science division, while commas might belong to the scientists. The philosophy department might teach subordinate clauses, while the English department alone would teach the gerund, since no one else—except the foreign language people—would know or care about the gerund.

This apocryphal administrator believes in the Myth of the Simple Rules—the misconception that writing is defined strictly in terms of its surface features. He may believe that the English department can and should instruct the rest of the faculty in these simple rules of grammar and mechanics, thus enabling all the faculty to teach writing, and suspect that any resistance to this idea merely reflects fear of losing faculty lines if everyone gets into the act.

This definition of writing in terms of its surface features is more pernicious and complicated when it is shared by members of the English department. Within the English department this misconception has another name: the Myth of Cinderella. Many literary scholars tend to see the teaching of writing as a menial task, with the English faculty in the role of Cinderella. According to this version of the story, the beautiful, literary princess is forced to live in rags and to serve instructors in other departments, those ugly step-sisters who loll around, giving only multiple-choice exams.

The English department Cinderellas know that there is no simple way to teach writing. But many of them, in their despair over teaching what they consider an art, may believe that the only teachable part of the writing process is defined in terms of fixing up the surface infelicities of a finished product. These English professors trap themselves by their limited definition of teaching composition. By defining writing as a mechanical skill, they guarantee that their teaching of composition will bore them inconsoably and embitter them as they consider how the light of their graduate education is spent. Yearning to teach literature, they will be impatient, frustrated, and unhappy with their composition courses. When blamed by their colleagues for the *Newsweek* writing crisis, these literary scholars will tactlessly demand that everyone had better help with the dirty work or shut up. (“We stay up half the night correcting themes, while you do nothing but add up the number of true and false answers.”)

These Cinderellas are forgetting the lesson of Tom Sawyer and his fence:

If English department professors think that the teaching of writing is a menial task, so will everyone else. If English department professors think that the teaching of writing is a stimulating intellectual activity, others may think so, too. Without the help of a fairy godmother, English department Cinderellas must transform themselves into scholars of composition. Even a common pumpkin can become a golden coach, if English teachers learn to see that the teaching of writing is “scholarly, not scullery.”¹ A scholar of composition can also present more articulate arguments to deans and others who persist in believing in the Myth of the Simple Rules.

When instructors outside the English department espouse the Myth of the Simple Rules and define writing in terms of its surface features, they have a predictable but illogical reaction to the idea of an institution-wide writing program. On the one hand, they object to doing “the English department’s job,” while on the other hand, they fear that rejecting a cross-disciplinary emphasis on writing will give disproportionate power to the English department. A new myth—the Myth of Empire—is born. Since the Myth of Empire is based on irrational premises, it can be a particularly stubborn misconception. Well reasoned arguments may have no impact. But it might be advisable for those working to establish a cross-disciplinary writing program to point out that any institution that is committed to producing graduates who write adequately has two clear choices: (1) a required course in writing taught by the English department for every undergraduate every semester from freshman through senior year—a requirement that would give students needed practice in writing and that would also produce English department elephantiasis; or, (2) an institution-wide commitment to the study and practice of the writing appropriate to each discipline. Only the second option is sensible, and, paradoxically, the institution-wide commitment may realistically provide a safe-guard against the disproportionate expansion of the English department guaranteed by the first option.

The Myth of Empire can sometimes be dispelled by good will and good works within the English department. If an institution has any composition requirement at all, even a single semester requirement, then the English department should make that course truly cross-disciplinary. Rather than taking a “we-know-best” attitude and making unilateral selections of reading and writing assignments, the composition staff could seek suggestions for reading and writing tasks from colleagues in other fields.

¹This phrase was coined by Professor Norman Johnston, chairman of the Beaver College sociology department, the same person who never promised me a prose garden. Sometimes people deliver more than they promise.

No one expects English instructors to teach sociology and biology (just as no one expects sociologists and biologists to teach English), but English instructors can help students to prepare for the writing and reading requirements in all disciplines, not excluding English literature. If the composition syllabus includes Lewis Thomas and Philip Reiff along with James Joyce, English instructors will not so easily be accused of empire-building.

Also, colleagues in other disciplines express surprise—and sometimes open gratitude—when English instructors show even a little respect for the writing done by people other than literary artists or critics. Dating from their days as impressionable undergraduates, many social scientists and scientists (and even a few humanists) are accustomed to the disdain of English teachers. When we in the English department assume that scholars in fields other than English know little or nothing about good writing, we feed a misconception—the Myth of Inadequacy. If our colleagues perceive that we regard everything in their professional journals as jargon and gobbledygook, we won't have much luck in convincing them to incorporate more writing in their courses. In fact, we may unwittingly convince them that they are not really competent to assess anything other than multiple-choice and short-answer tests.

Admittedly, there is plenty of writing in *The American Sociological Review* that we do not want our students to emulate, just as there is plenty of writing in *PMLA* that exemplifies much that we want our students to avoid. Scholars in the social sciences have been known to produce gobbledygook, but they have also produced the pellucid prose of a George Miller. We must help our colleagues outside English departments to break out of the Myth of Inadequacy. Then they can guide their own apprentices to distinguish between the wheat and the chaff in the prose in each field. If we approach our colleagues with respect rather than with condescension, we can even work together to make these discriminations. Scholars in English are experts in language, while scholars in other fields have a particular sense of what is appropriate and what is not in those specialized genres that we never studied in graduate school: the laboratory report, the philosophical argument, and the case study, for example. Our colleagues can teach their students—and us—more than they realize about the nature of evidence in their own fields, about the expectations of specialized audiences, and about conventions of form in their own disciplines. If we respect and draw upon what our colleagues know about writing, we will be in a better position to influence them positively in matters of syntax and lexicon.

Because colleagues need to trust each other if they are to learn from each other, it is essential for us to dispel the Myth of Inadequacy. The key to an

institution-wide writing program is a commitment to learning together, to what administrators call faculty development. This scholarly enterprise of sharing ideas about writing can go on formally or informally, in faculty writing workshops or over lunch. The first step is to practice the rhetoric that we teach by talking about the teaching of writing whenever we can get colleagues to listen. Even at large institutions, we occasionally run into people in other disciplines at the faculty club or on the tennis court. Even better, we can talk about writing during some of the deadly time spent on university-wide committees, especially those newly established committees formed to revise the General Education requirements. We might even be able to guide that committee discussion to the idea of writing as fundamental to general education.

We should also seek more formal opportunities to present our research in composition to our colleagues. Most institutions sponsor a series of research reports by faculty members, and those of us involved in composition studies should use these occasions to communicate the growing intellectual excitement in our field.

The composition staff can encourage faculty development by measures other than public performance. We can send colleagues in other disciplines a list of the reading assignments for freshman composition, and we can ask for their suggestions and comments. If we require a grammar handbook in freshman composition, we can offer to order desk copies for instructors in other disciplines whom we have convinced to add the handbook to the required list on their syllabi. These faculty development activities are appropriate at large institutions and at small; they can be undertaken with or without funding. The more intensive the commitment—monetary and otherwise—to faculty development in writing, the more dramatic the results. In smaller institutions, the change will be more perceptible, but even in the largest and most impersonal institutions faculty development in the teaching of writing is not wasted.

At institutions that have funds designated for faculty development, we should lobby with the administration to spend some of that money on a faculty writing workshop. The appropriate design for such a workshop varies from institution to institution. At some places, faculty members need to be gradually eased into a workshop situation; at other places a core of instructors are ready for an extended period of study after which they will stimulate others to seek the same experience. Instituting formal faculty development activities requires an incisive analysis of a particular institution's traditions, strengths, prejudices, and problems. If at all possible, it is probably advantageous to invite an outside expert to lead the first workshop. People in house could probably do as well or better, but we

cannot underestimate the mystique of the outsider. At the very least, workshop participants will be more polite.

Whether the workshop is planned for several weeks or for several hours, three essential topics should be covered:

- the design of clear and productive writing assignments,
- ways to respond helpfully and fairly to student papers at various stages of the writing process,
- the use of short, ungraded writing activities that make writing an expected and inevitable part of the teaching and learning process.

In longer workshops, ideally, participants should be encouraged to share their own writing.

If an institution does commit itself to conducting a workshop on the teaching of writing, no one should be surprised to see all the aforementioned myths surfacing, along with at least two others that I will call the Myth of the Magistrate and the Myth of the Martyr. According to the Myth of the Magistrate, all examples of student writing must be graded, evaluated, or otherwise judged by the instructor, who is the only certified magistrate of such activities. These instructors also believe in the Myth of the Martyr: the idea that it is necessary to suffer in order to teach or learn composition. But a painstaking and painful assessment of a student's first draft may overwhelm both the reader and the writer and teach nobody anything but despair.

Martyrs and magistrates can profit greatly from faculty workshops, especially those that encourage participants to share their own writing in draft stages. From this process, every prospective teacher of writing is reminded of the solid benefits received from a preliminary response to his writing, a response that addresses concepts, meaning, and intent in the formative stages, well before the piece is ready for meticulous editing and final assessment. As instructors respond to the writing of their own peers, they may even come to see that the students in their classes can be enlisted to serve as readers of early drafts of their classmates' papers. Students who might justifiably resent being assessed by a classmate can learn to welcome the active response of peers to a project that has not reached its final form. Kenneth Bruffee of Brooklyn College, who has developed the most sensible procedures that I know of for the collaborative learning of writing, writes as follows, "If in our insecurity bred in ignorance we learned best collaboratively, then perhaps our students in their insecurity bred in their ignorance might find it easier to learn collaboratively, too."²

²"A New Intellectual Frontier," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 1978, p. 40.

When a faculty development workshop focuses on writing, the potential pedagogic benefits are enormous. Not only do faculty members practice techniques that they can use directly in their classrooms, but they also focus their discussions on issues less abstract than “educational theory.” Theoretical issues thus develop from well-defined situations, and those issues are explored for their pragmatic implications.

Faculty members in all disciplines soon see that each classroom, inside and outside the English department, must provide more opportunities for students to write. In fact, writing must become once again an unavoidable part of each academic day. All students will profit from the additional practice in writing, but the students whom Mina Shaughnessy designates as basic writers may not be able to survive academically without this consistent, inevitable reinforcement of their writing skills in all their courses. As Shaughnessy says, students who must expend enormous effort to recode speech into writing need much more practice than they can ever get simply in their composition classes. Shaughnessy calls for ways “to increase students’ involvement with writing across the curriculum. This does not mean simply persuading more teachers in other subjects to require term papers but making writing a more integral part of the learning process in all courses.”³

In faculty workshops participants share ideas to make writing a more explicit feature of the teaching and learning process. Many of these ideas seem so obvious once they are stated that it is amazing that they are not practiced more widely. Even in a large lecture class, for example, the professor can leave five or ten minutes near the end of the period for students to write a summary of the main points covered during that hour. Then one or two students can be asked to read their summaries to the class. Further, as Shaughnessy says, instructors in all disciplines “can encourage in countless ways the habit of writing things down (but not necessarily ‘up’ as finished products).”⁴

When instructors share these obvious and less obvious pedagogic strategies, they also begin to develop a broader perspective on themselves as scholars. A successful faculty development workshop begins to break down the barriers separating disciplines in a way that liberates each scholar from isolation without compromising his or her identity. In fact, scholars who study academic discourse in a number of fields, including their own, find that they understand more clearly the *sui generis* elements in their own disciplines. A faculty writing workshop may even result in a collaborative

³*Errors and Expectations* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 87-88.

⁴*Errors and Expectations*, p. 88.

research project shared in by participants who have learned so much about their own scholarly identities that they are that much better able to cooperate with others on a problem—perhaps even one related to composition that requires the expertise of people trained in a variety of disciplines.

A program of writing across the curriculum cannot be introduced by a lone Hercules. The various myths and misconceptions—Simple Rules, Cinderella, Empire, Inadequacy, Magistrate and Martyr—can be confronted only if we get the cooperation of the rest of the faculty. We can achieve such cooperation when our colleagues in all departments realize that a focus on the improvement of writing leads in general to better teaching and more productive scholarship for all those involved in an institution-wide program.

When instructors in all disciplines understand that writing is a complex process that is integrally involved with the subject matter which is written about, they will not find it so astonishing to be asked to teach the writing appropriate within their disciplines. Since writing requires the active involvement of instructor and students in the learning process of each discipline, students in classes where writing is emphasized cannot passively watch lecturers perform like figures on a television screen. When writing is emphasized in all courses, students cannot passively allege to know things; they have to express what they know, first to themselves and then to others.

At one writing workshop at my own institution, the chairman of the fine arts department asked the group to consider the plight of the student whose primary cognitive style is visual rather than verbal. It was during that discussion that I realized that perhaps we had finally broken through the original myths and misconceptions. We were no longer talking about grammar across the curriculum, or even about verbal skills across the curriculum, but instead about composition in the larger sense: how the mind works in different media—music, art, numbers, words—to arrange fragments into meaningful wholes. By composing ourselves into a liberal arts faculty concerned with writing, we had gone beyond writing to a renewed vision of the liberal arts and the fascinating ways that each discipline puts together and expresses the common vision of minds making meaning. We had given institutional form to John Gerber's prediction: "Seeing ourselves as teachers of reading and writing makes us a community again."⁵

⁵"Suggestions for a Common Sense Reform of the English Curriculum," *College Composition and Communication*, December 1977, pp. 312-13.