



Writing Advisory Councils: Trading Expertise for Ethos in WAC

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Historically, university advisory councils have been thinly disguised fiscal development tools. Prominent citizens and members of the corporate sector give token input into programs while providing them with much needed funding. Employed in this manner, such councils pose little threat to the integrity of university curricula, something university personnel usually do not wish to invite. Yet, these local constituents are becoming expert in curricular matters because they often serve on more than one council over long periods. They have also been over-tapped while being thus undervalued, so are understandably leery when approached by university programs to participate in yet another advisory capacity. But those of us involved in university writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs could be making effective use of the substantial qualifications these community figures bring from the workplace, especially since most of them are proven communicators and highly articulate. We could also repay our debt to them with our own expertise and actually effect some larger workplace changes through their influence, instead of overtaxing them. As I see it, writing advisory councils provide us an opportunity for education to go both ways—from community to university and *vice versa*.

Even though we face the almost universal perception by people who are not writing theorists that composition is a field without a content, we ourselves often forget that composition *is* a theoretical content, and composition programs and WAC courses are the only place where this theory is directly taught. Not only do our students need to understand the process and principles of composing in writing, but professional people in work settings also need to understand these concepts because they, too, do very real teaching of writing in their professional practice. They refer to it as *training* because it is hands-on and pragmatic. But as a corporate trainer myself at one time, I know that what they are really doing is situated rhetorical analysis, for which on-the-job trainers and peer mentors have had to develop their own vocabulary because they did not have our theoretical grounding.

For example, in a study of the rhetorical practices of both engineering faculty and working engineers, I discovered that the practicing engineers not only did extensive rhetorical analysis for every document they composed, but they had developed an elaborated vocabulary for what they were doing. Engineering faculty, on the other hand, appeared completely unaware of their textual adaptations for meeting their particular rhetorical constraints. In fact, they often chose to submit their articles to different professional journals, rather than adapt their texts to fit the ones they had originally chosen. Rhetorical practitioners on the job are also hungry for theoretical principles to shorten the apprenticeship time for new writers in their workplaces. Time costs money, and the more quickly new employees can begin writing effectively in their positions, the less costly they are to hire and train.

Writing across the curriculum was languishing in 1994 when I came onto the University of Arizona Composition Board as assistant coordinator for writing in the disciplines. To give it a jump start, I recruited an external advisory council, primarily to breathe some life into our internal Intercollegiate Writing Committee (IWC) and give it a focus¹. It had not met in two years, lower division courses had become too large for effective writing practice, and the writing emphasis courses had undergone several generations of new faculty, which had diluted their theoretical content. From the beginning, I saw that my job as a writing educator went in both directions. The faculty for whom I was grooming the council needed to understand the council's very real workplace requirements for our graduates, but these workplace experts also needed our theoretical framework to apply in pragmatic rhetorical settings.

Here was an opportunity to repay the community with our expertise for the valued loan of their ethos. We needed to prepare prospective employees for real-world writing, and community employers needed our theoretical knowledge in order to help their co-workers perform rhetorical tasks more effectively on the job. My experience has been that workplace writers are much more receptive to our theory than are our university colleagues. In conversations with both groups, I find faculty to have the more reductive view of writing. This narrow view probably accounts for the fear among some university writing personnel that composition instruction is in danger of being reduced to a mere skill in service to others' content. I think this is largely an imaginary bogeyman, however. We have the theoretical knowledge to teach writing, and our classes are the only ones that have the luxury of teaching this theory. Both our colleagues in other disciplines and our constituents outside the academy need our expertise. We can reach the former through writing advisory

councils' ethos, and we can provide a real service to our community members by showing them how to do what we do in their own workplaces.

What I would like to do now is show how the documents produced by the University of Arizona's Writing Advisory Council provided sites for this two-way learning experience, in which we traded our expertise for their ethos, to accomplish specific WAC tasks on our campus. By supplying the council with the theoretical language of writing, I was able to help them articulate how writing was actually done in their rhetorical contexts. We can now use their contribution to *our* knowledge to help disciplinary faculty prepare students, not just to perform discrete written language acts, but to give them a tool for becoming adaptable writers who have the necessary virtuosity to address the multiple rhetorical contexts in which they will find themselves. I will then briefly summarize what the council has accomplished and tell how it is constituted for those who would like to create similar councils for their writing programs.

Exchanging Rhetorical Theory for Social Construction of Knowledge

The first document drafted by the council was done using the traditional writing-to-learn strategies we find ourselves modeling in workshops for our colleagues. At the first meeting of the council, I posed the question "What is the importance of writing to the practice of your profession?" I then gave them fifteen minutes to write and followed that with small group discussion, resulting in composite written statements of common writing philosophy (see Figure 1). Does this sound familiar? Each group then reported out orally. I collected the combined written statements, worked them into a single comprehensive statement, and sent it out for their feedback and revision. At each point I shared the rationale for the activity to make them consciously aware of how rhetorical theory informs our teaching of writing and facilitates the composing process and the social construction of knowledge.

Having this philosophy stated has been enormously helpful for persuading faculty to use more writing in disciplinary classes. It has also frequently uncovered the implicit assumption that we are preparing students for careers in academe, rather than for the outside work world, an unrealistic and erroneous assumption, which when surfaced can be directly addressed. Since many faculty have not spent time working outside the university, we sometimes have little understanding of the larger world's writing realities and unconsciously think in terms of our own disciplinary discourse communities when looking at student writing. Of course, there is much in the philosophy statement that applies to academic writing. But one of the most difficult things those of us in

Writing Advisory Council
Position Statement on Writing

If professional success is a lock, writing is a key. Writing is critical for communicating, learning, recording, persuading, marketing, generating business, and presenting a visible statement of professionalism and quality of work. Writing encompasses all language uses, not solely formal or written professional communication. The ability to analyze an audience, situation, and purpose for communicating is critically important to all writers and speakers, who must make effective decisions about content, format, tone, style, organization and language based on them.

- Writing is an analytical tool that clarifies thinking.
- Writing communicates ideas and allows the writer to expand the audience.
- Writing provides the reader an image of the writer. The image is good or bad, depending on the quality of the writing.
- Good writing is clear and efficient. It saves communication time and focuses attention on the key ideas.
- Good writing speaks directly and interestingly to its readers. It addresses their needs, identifies with their values, and uses their language.
- Good writing requires thorough command of the mechanics of language.
- Good writing requires logical structure of ideas at the sentence, paragraph, and document levels.
- Good writing requires knowledge of the conventions and accepted genres in the various fields--letters, proposals, reports, etc.
- In nearly all professions, good communication is key to advancement.

FIGURE 1

Philosophy Statement of the University of Arizona
Writing Advisory Council

writing have to explain to fellow academicians is the need for thorough rhetorical analysis in order to produce effective written texts for different writing contexts, something I've found successful professional writers outside the academy to be exceptionally quick to understand and adept at doing.

What the council members gained from this experience was confirmation of their actual practices and a theoretical rationale for it. Collaborative writing in most professional careers is a fact of life, so the advisory council members were able to work efficiently together to produce a single document they had socially constructed, even though they had very different backgrounds. They were familiar with the process because they do it all the time. What they learned were the terms for elements of the rhetorical context--audience, situation, purpose--and how analysis of these elements becomes a heuristic for textual invention. *Document design and format* are comprehensive terms used in the workplace to cover all the areas of writerly concern we know as *content, organization, style, format, tone, and mood*. These concerns are directly and self-consciously addressed by workplace writers, and knowing more precisely the categories for textual decisions can help them write more efficiently.

They are also accustomed to relinquishing "ownership" of their ideas as those ideas become subject to peer review and revision, a concept that is often neglected or resisted by university faculty. Peer review and revision are practiced far more rigorously and regularly in the workplace than in the academy. Working professionals value collaborative effort, as we all know from phrases like "team player." They value it because they believe that knowledge constructed collaboratively is quantitatively and qualitatively better than only one view of a phenomenon. In the academy knowledge is power, and we tend to hoard it and protect it from co-optation. We also assiduously credit our knowledge sources to avoid accusations of dishonest scholarship and plagiarism. These concerns are important to workplace writers as well. They too must provide appropriate acknowledgment and documentation. But wide circulation of ideas is a good thing in work settings, and individual ownership of ideas is merely the starting place for more valuable knowledge collaboratively constructed to achieve common goals.

Documentation acquires an additional meaning in the workplace: "how one performs a task appropriately for the situation," a new and important concept for writers in the academy. Unless faculty members are specifically writing instructions for new technology or procedures for their peers to replicate, they generally don't write instructions with the same care and attention to rhetorical constraints that writers outside the academy do. Of course, writing often serves more instrumental pur-

poses in the workplace, but attention to language potential and the subtleties of its use are very important to working professionals, who understand that they practice rhetoric daily. *Appropriateness, or propriety*, has the same meaning to them as it did to Aristotle. Saying the right thing in the right way at the opportune moment is critical to persuasive workplace communication, and workplace communicators consciously cultivate this skill as practical rhetoricians.

An example of how working professionals have had to invent their own vocabulary for the composing process appears in the particular philosophy statement "Writing communicates ideas and allows the writer to *expand* the audience." What they meant by this choice I ascertained to be "make accessible to multiple readers," which I also discovered was a high value to these writers. They identified "good writing" with the kind of clarity that enabled multiple readers with different backgrounds and information needs to understand. Unlike many academicians, they are often acutely aware of the negative consequences for not foreseeing the response of some particular reader who was not originally intended. Some of us in the academy, on the other hand, value exclusionary language that guards disciplinary "territory" from non-specialists. We have yet to elevate above independent thinking the socially constructed knowledge derived from cross-disciplinary conversations that working professionals routinely participate in. For workplace writers, democratization of ideas is reflected in the democratization of the language in which these ideas are inscribed.

The time appears to be ripe for us to give more than polite acknowledgment to what we can learn from people who use writing to accomplish extraordinarily varied and complex tasks with real readers, readers who have equal investment in the conversation. The sense of urgency for us to collaborate more effectively with our communities' employers was clearly exemplified by this year's WAC Conference keynote address. Judith Sturnick identified two national trends that favor the use of writing advisory councils: changing student needs and pressure from the corporate community to respond to demands in the workplace through university/corporate collaborations. She explained the latter pressure as deriving specifically from corporate needs for better prepared writers. Though we should not accept the requirements of the workplace as a narrow mandate to teach vocational skills, we do have a mutual obligation with the public sector: we are obliged to provide versatile and proficient thinkers and writers, and employers are obliged to provide us support to do that and to hire our graduates. Writing advisory councils establish a site where an on-going theoretical dialogue can take place in which our two areas of expertise can be exchanged to the benefit of both.

Theorizing the Writing Process

The same writing-to-learn strategies served to produce a second document collaboratively written by the advisory council and the Intercollegiate Writing Committee. Once each group had derived its own philosophy or mission statement, I brought them together to articulate specific objectives for the undergraduate writing program and strategies to achieve them [See Figure 2]. They spent an entire day working in mixed small groups to pool their ideas, which again taught the council members vocabulary for ideas with which they were already familiar, and to teach the faculty that these were not only familiar concepts to workplace professionals, but concepts they needed to teach their students in every discipline *before* they arrived at the workplace.

Though I mediated by providing some of the wording, Figure 2 shows that both council and faculty agree on writing's role as an exploratory act performed in stages to address particular rhetorical constraints, not just a one-step demonstration of completed thought. Though faculty actually practice writing in this way themselves, they don't value it as "writing," almost never share this aspect of their writing process with students, and rarely give students the opportunity to practice it. Working professionals practice it more consciously, but aren't quite sure what to call it. They do, however, model it and recommend that their co-workers use it. Thus the collaboration proved instructive for both groups.

The strategies section of Figure 2 also shows the council's and the IWC's awareness of the need to teach writing processes in all disciplines. Articulating clear ideas about particular subjects evolves through numerous iterations that require adequate time and intervention points. Throughout the recommendations, we can see the need to teach rhetorical analysis overtly and to support the writing process with the kind of review and revision real-world writers have to do in order to achieve successful workplace documents. Impressing faculty with the importance of allowing adequate time and instruction to the writing process is one of the best ways we can use real-world writers' ethos.

Accomplishing Writing Goals with Advisory Council Participation

Writing advisory councils are extremely valuable when we conceive of them as working groups. My experience with ours has shown me that having a direct effect on undergraduates' learning is something that even extraordinarily busy professionals can find the time to do. After the second year of its existence, our council had worked with the writing program and the IWC to accomplish the following activities toward meeting their stated objectives:

Improving Undergraduate Writing at the University of Arizona**Objectives**

- I. To change student and faculty attitudes about writing by instilling
 - * An appreciation of the importance of good writing for communicating, thinking, and exploring, and
 - * A recognition that good writing adapts all aspects of the text to the audience, purpose, and situation for writing and follows the expected conventions of specific disciplines.
- II. To provide opportunities for students to practice the process of writing, specifically
 - * Opportunities to read models of disciplinary writing and to speak about them, focusing on both the ideas and the disciplinary conventions
 - * Opportunities to write collaboratively for real-world audiences and to revise writing based on feedback.
- III. To take advantage of existing resources for improving writing in the disciplines, specifically
 - * Opportunities in all courses for students to practice both formal and exploratory writing
 - * Opportunities for faculty to share and improve their own writing and to learn writing pedagogy with the help of the Intercollegiate Writing Committee and the University Composition Board.

Strategies

- I. To change faculty attitudes by
 - * Supporting faculty through symposia, writing centers, and rewards for using writing pedagogy
 - * Showcasing successful classroom strategies.
- II. To change student attitudes by
 - * Supporting students with models, feedback, and writing centers
 - * Providing for the process of writing through real-world assignments, discussion, peer review, and revision.
- III. To allow for the writing process by
 - * Building time into the course structure to allow for writing to evolve over time
 - * Using real-world projects that involve interviews, group work, and multiple documents and drafts.
- IV. To use existing resources by
 - * Employing community professionals for presentations to deans and department heads about writing and for sharing their work and writing with students
 - * Employing IWC and UCB members for presentations to deans and department heads about writing.
 - * Encouraging faculty to share their writing with students and to team teach disciplinary writing with community professionals.

FIGURE 2

Collaboratively Written Objectives and Strategies by the Advisory Council and IWC

1. Implemented a writing requirement for all general education courses
2. Approved expansion of the writing center into college-based satellites
3. Reinforced the necessity of discipline-specific writing instruction in the majors
4. Participated in a first-year composition speakers' series
5. Underlined for faculty the importance of peer review and revision as important components of actual professional practice
6. Described for faculty and students the multiple steps in professional writing practice: interviewing, researching, analyzing audience and purpose, proposing, note taking, generating ideas, planning, drafting, peer reviewing, and revising
7. Met with the director of graduate studies in rhetoric and composition to discuss workplace rhetorical analysis
8. Presented their writing values to the provost for undergraduate education
9. Presented the requirements for workplace writing to a conference of university, community college, and high school English teachers
10. Responded to business and technical writing students' work in classroom visits

Several of the activities the advisory council has performed have now become annual or regular voluntary services, such as responding to student papers, participating in the first-year speakers' series, and addressing the conference for English teachers. Each year, the council reviews and updates its public recommendations for the university's undergraduate writing program, and these recommendations are sent to the IWC, the college deans, and the provost for undergraduate education. Their current recommendations include providing opportunities for students to do on-site observation and internships with professional writers, raising faculty standards for evaluating writing in all disciplines, and teaching cross-disciplinary writing skills in every class, such as writing under pressure and writing to summarize, analyze, interpret, solve problems, propose or recommend courses of action, and market ideas--all important to multiple endeavors and fields.

They have also recommended that faculty be supported with stipends for in-service training to learn effective ways to improve student writing. But the most significant thing they have recommended is that faculty and classes give students many opportunities to use writing as a thinking tool, necessary for their acquiring usable knowledge that they can apply. To do that, the council recommends that students be given opportunities to pursue projects in which writing accomplishes actual

tasks that have value for them in settings other than the classroom. They recognize that our students will only value and learn good writing when it gives them something they want or does something they feel is important. As course director for our business and technical writing classes, I immediately used their recommendations to turn these courses into service learning courses, which have since produced very complex and socially altruistic goals.

Implementing a Writing Advisory Council

Having spent four years as a writing consultant to businesses and governmental agencies, I had personally witnessed the mismatch between academic preparation and workplace requirements. Since I had previously worked with many corporate managers and training directors, I decided to reconnect with them and recruit articulate and credible spokespersons for the needs in their fields. Thus was born the Writing Advisory Council. To give it a high profile immediately, I invited our university president to address its first meeting. He responded well to coaching and publicly recommitted the administration to writing improvement, at least in theory. Once given this official stamp of approval, the council went to work generating its philosophy statement, which I felt essential to any conversation between them and university personnel.

In order not to over-extend the individual members of the advisory council, we ask that each provide only three “services” in an academic year. Thus to cover the several events taking place throughout the year, we attempt to maintain twelve to eighteen active members on the council. Generally each member has been willing to serve at least two years. Only one-third to one-half have needed to be replaced each year, providing year-to-year continuity. Members are not asked to serve any particular length of time, but we ask them to nominate and approach their own successors when they elect to leave the council, and we follow up to recruit their nominees. Each member recruits from within his or her field to maintain a representative membership balance, but we may not have a full complement in any given year. I continue to recruit throughout the year, and we usually have one or two mid-year vacancies to fill.

Even though these people lead extremely full professional lives, they have proven incredibly willing volunteers and always find new ways they can contribute to our program. Their contributions have not included fund raising because we have not asked them to do this. We feel that not doing so has encouraged them to respond willingly to our other requests. Limiting requests for individual members’ services has also had a positive effect. I keep the calendar of the activities each chooses and do

not allow other university units direct access to them, in order to keep control over their time.

We are able to benefit financially from our advisory council indirectly by keeping our development officers aware of the council's activities and recommendations, so they can use the council's high community profile to solicit funding for writing initiatives in the individual colleges.

We keep the college deans aware of the council activities by rotating a request among the colleges for hosting the annual Fall and Spring meetings. At the Fall meeting we map out the year's calendar of events. Together the meetings count as one service, but most members have chosen to do three voluntary events in addition to the meetings because they sometimes have to miss meetings. We hold an end-of-the-year meeting for those members unable to participate in all of their services, at which we recap the year's activities and re-enlist for the ensuing fall. Most of our planning and document drafting takes place by mail and e-mail.

Conclusion

Though our advisory council appears to provide a stable structure for putting continued pressure on the university to improve student writing, it requires constant maintenance. But the benefits cut both ways, so it's well worth the trouble. The erratic performance of our internal writing committee has taught us that strong, consistent leadership and institutional support are also required. Without them, the Writing Advisory Council and the many good things *it* supports would also rapidly disappear. These are some of *our* realities that the council has come to understand through our new medium for university/community communication. Realizing them has tempered the council's impatience to see their recommendations put into immediate practice.

We can't accept their recommendations uncritically either. But we need to give them credit for a broader understanding of writing than we are accustomed to assuming. In the workplace, writing is a collaborative endeavor, accomplished in stages and requiring conscious rhetorical analysis. It is also viewed as demonstrated thinking in much the same way as academic discourse is viewed. Effective workplace writing requires interventions that entail collaboration and relinquishing ownership of ideas. Knowledge constructed socially is valorized because it accomplishes goals shared among conversants. Workplace writers understand perhaps better than academicians that writing is always situated within a specific context and that the writer overtly assumes a stance in relation to the subject and the reader.

The academy has waited too long to open itself to what it can learn from the people who put our theory into practice--people who would welcome our theory if we only made it accessible to them. Universities need to realize that our educational mission extends well beyond our ivied walls and goes both ways. When we accept time, energy and largesse from our community, we need to repay it in the currency we have--the theory for accomplishing socially valuable goals our research provides.

Notes

¹ The make-up of the advisory council is intended to reflect the principal employers in Southern Arizona: the mining, medical, high-technology, bio-technology, and financial industries; the legal, architectural, governmental, environmental, and artistic professions; large commercial employers; and independent consultants.