DEVELOPING A WRITING FELLOWS PROGRAM IN A TIME OF SHRINKING BUDGETS AND EXPANDING CLASS SIZES

Actor Jane Lynch gave the commencement address at Smith College last month, and some of the advice she gave the graduates rang true in the world of WAC. She highlighted the life transformation that occurred when she got hired at Second City and began working for the first time in improv comedy, where she learned that

> 'YES AND' is the vital and only rule of improvisation. Never deny your fellow actor. You should
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> be willing and able to accept whatever your fellow improviser throws at you. Use that as your
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> jumping off point and expand it. 'Heighten and explore,' as we call it. For instance, if I say to you
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> 'Stick 'em up!' and you say 'That's not a gun, that's your finger!' We've got nowhere to go.

Take what life throws at you, she told the graduates: " If you embrace what is happening, instead of denying it, you can make it your own. If life gives you lemons, grab it by the horns and drive." She also gave good advice on "when to engage the awesome power of "NO WAY."

Our WID mentor program (our term for writing fellows) is our own attempt to say YES AND to the familiar pressures in American higher education: slashed budgets, rising class sizes, rising interest in improving students' writing—as well as our attempt to say NO WAY when needed. Despite professors reducing the amount of writing in their courses in response to larger classes, we said YES AND to create a writing fellows program. We said YES AND in order to experiment with a more flexible, affordable, and contextual model for a fellows program. Rather than decide on only one way that writing mentors could be used, we have worked with participating faculty to create several variations that allow mentors to support student writing in classes of varying size.

Today, we want to focus on one particular example: a mentor placement in a 40-student political science class taught by an experienced professor with a long track record of WID involvement. All of the "best practices" we encourage were in place. Professor M. had worked very closely with our WID Program. She had clearly articulated goals for the assignment and assignment directions. The

assignment was scaffolded, with two check-in points along the way. There were carefully developed rubrics for each step. She had used a mentor twice before, and this particular mentor's role was clearly defined: to conduct required small group peer review workshops at 3 points-- over the proposal, annotated bibliography, and an introduction to the final paper. Because Professor M. was teaching two sections of the same class—one with a mentor, and one without—she suggested that we take the opportunity to study the effectiveness of the program. With eventual IRB endorsement in hand, we set out to explore how and why the mentor's work seemed to affect student writing.

But when we compared the paper grades from the two classes, we found they were almost identical. And Professor M. was disappointed with the papers in both classes. She gave few A's and B+'s, and many B-s and C+'s. In a follow-up interview several months later, she described her disappointment—which you'll see in the first quotation on p. 1 of your handout (and we've included all the subsequent quotations from Professor M. on that first page):

> My big disappointment was that I thought so many students really really failed to understand
> *what a research paper was*, which I thought I had spent so much time and effort working on,
> that it was just deeply frustrating. Which is to say, to my mind I had done everything I could, but
> really I hadn't gotten through to them.

So we ended up with a different research question: Why hadn't our plan to provide effective support in a time of diminishing resources worked?

One clue is present in that first comment—that Professor M. wanted students to understand *what a research paper was*. When we asked her what she meant by "research paper," she responded:

> I actually told them very specifically at several points, that one goal of academic writing, and I
> talked about how there's totally a place for persuasive writing—but one thing you're trying to
> do when you're at a university, is that you're trying to find the answers to things that you don't

already know the answers to, and that's by and large the *kind of paper I wanted them to write.* I wanted them to find the answers to something they didn't already know the answer to.

Here, we see Professor M describing *a type of academic thinking*—trying to answer a question the writer doesn't know the answer to—and viewing that as *a kind of paper*.

Later in the interview she again described the research paper as introducing students to a type of thinking, but this time she narrowed from general academic thinking to thinking in the social sciences. In discussing a paper that received a B+ because of its poor introduction, she explained:

she has a lot of substance as I recall that's really good here, but it's not written in the kind of way that I was trying to push students— into *thinking in a disciplinary specific fashion*, or I should say, not in a [strictly] disciplinary-specific fashion, because I would think *that sociology papers would look similar.*

Once again, we see Professor M's conflation of a particular way of thinking with what a paper will look like. When we pressed Professor M to say more about what the papers should look like, she noted the variety of possibilities in her field:

Because I allow students to write so broadly, traditionally I end up having to read up on a lot of their sources to make sure they get it right. And my general sense is this field is so broad and there are so many ways you can study it—[my approach is:] here, let me give you some ideas, and then go.

Similarly, when asked if it mattered whether the papers were organized inductively to lead readers to the conclusions or deductively, with main ideas in topic sentences highlighting the paper's points, she again emphasized variety:

The introduction has to be big in the social sciences. You're not going to see a paper that doesn't have a big introduction, unless it has subsections. . . . But then once you're in there, you can do it several different ways.

Even the extent to which the paper is supposed to be persuasive is not clearly defined. In several of her written responses to students' proposals, Professor M. cautioned against writing a persuasive essay, distinguishing it as a different genre from a research paper:

> At the moment, though, you're not really proposing a *research paper*. You're proposing *a persuasive essay*. That is, you already know what you think; you're going to try to convince me that you're right. Writing a persuasive essay is an important skill, but it's not the one I'm trying to foster in this class. *Instead, I'm pushing students to pose, research, and answer a question for which they don't already know the answer.*

At times in the interview, however, Professor M suggested that she actually was looking for a persuasive essay:

> . . . I think the best research papers are persuasive essays. just persuasive essays that look carefully at both sides of arguments or for the weaknesses . . . The trickiest part is to go where the evidence leads you, and not just look for the evidence that takes you where *you* want to go.

She mentioned several times that she was hoping the assigned class readings would model the type of thinking she was looking for in the research papers, and what she emphasizes in these readings is argumentation, along with the writer's motivation for the piece:

> we had tons of papers, articles, book chapters, that are largely well –written and accessible…so I work really hard to put together a set of materials that I think college students can get, so this is a pattern that they have seen over and over and over again and we spent time talking about, "So what's the argument," and "why did the person write this paper?" and "the reason you write a paper is not necessarily what your argument is". . . so the goal is not just to do substance in class, although substance clearly matters . . . but to step back.

To summarize Professor M's approach, then : her scaffolding is directed toward the set-up of the project: she gives students freedom to choose a topic that is personally compelling, she provides guidance in framing the research question and finding sources, and she carefully selects readings that model social science thinking. With this scaffolding, she expects that students will be able think like social scientists. This, in turn, will lead them to frame and construct their paper in a way that is appropriate for their topic and findings. In this model, all the work that goes into crafting the research question should create a waterfall effect that cascades throughout the project, shaping everything from the organization of the piece to the sort of thinking the student applies to finding and working with source materials or evidence.

So with all the emphasis on the creation of the question and method, it's not surprising that when we turn to look at the assignment on pp. 2-3 of the handout (note: the professor's assignment and rubric are not included for the conference proceedings as it is not our intellectual property), we find few specifics related to genre—to the type of paper and what it should look like—and that there is no information related to rhetorical stance, to the position of the speaker in relation to the audience, topic and context. On p. 4, you'll find the rubric which students were given along with the assignment, and which, like the assignment, is framed as a list of criteria to check the paper against, with no mention of genre, purpose, audience, or voice. We suggest that it's partly this absence of considerations of genre and rhetorical stance—of any information that would help students imagine what the paper they're to write should look like— that resulted in the papers that disappointed Professor M.

In hindsight, we can see how it sabotaged the mentor workshops. For each of the 3 group workshops—over the proposal, annotated bibliography, and introduction--a stage-specific rubric focused the mentor's and students' attention on whether the draft was fulfilling the criteria. And this in turn resulted in students making revisions simply to address the criteria, without any sense of creating parts that contribute to a whole. Consider Lily's Introduction to her paper (p. 5 in the handout). She

brought the exact same introduction to the WID Mentor Workshop, minus the elements in brackets. The notes from the workshop are on the back.   The workshop apparently focused Lily on how well the draft introduction matched the criteria in the assignment:

- does it include the significance of the topic, and how it relates to central course themes;

- does it integrate existing literature;

- does it explain what the paper is going to do, here somewhat mis-translated into, "go more into what you'll specifically be talking about"

When we go back and look at what has been added to the introduction in the brackets, we can see the writer addressing these criteria, as separate items. She begins, "In this paper, I seek to better understand the portrayal of transgender people in the media in order to evaluate whether they have become more or less accepted as a social group in recent history." To address significance, she's added in ["this is an important topic because the acceptance (or lack thereof) of a social group is telling of the larger society it is situated within. The involvement of the media is also important because its control over the acceptance of a group shows how much power American culture is willing to give to the media.'] These two statements of significance are very broad, and don't articulate the particular significance of the research question and of the paper.

This is what we saw again and again: the workshops seemed to encourage writers to add surface features to match the assignment criteria, rather than providing writers with input to assess the deeper features of their planned papers or strategies to do more global revising. No wonder the students who attended these workshops didn't end up with better papers than students who didn't attend.

In the same way that a lack of clarity about the purpose and genre of the paper as a whole impeded the success of the workshops, the professor's comments also often ended up focusing

students' attention only on revising at the surface level. While Professor M no doubt hoped that her comments would create a waterfall effect, with, for example, a suggestion for a change to the research question resulting in subsequent changes in the sources used, the conclusions reached, and the framing and organization of the paper, often students just added in a few sentences to address the comment without considering the implications for the rest of the paper.

Consider the case of Sam (see p. 7 in your packet) . In his proposal, Sam's question was: "To what extent should the federal government have control over a person's right to access and/or produce pornography?"—which his peer reviewer Sean had apparently rephrased and found interesting. And at the beginning of the second paragraph, we see his thesis, the argument he wants to make: "Although pornography does contain imagery that may seem offensive to some groups, it is not within the power of the government to restrict access to such material as it would negatively affect a person's First Amendment rights." In her comments on this proposal (on the back), Professor M first makes her point that Sam needs to change his question entirely and write a research paper, not a persuasive essay. Then she offers 4 alternative research questions. Note the fourth one: "If you're interested in modern political battles, you might try to figure out why tensions over pornography have waxed and waned in recent years."

If we look at Sam's introduction to his final paper on the next page we see at the top that he hasn't changed his research question at all, though he has adopted the rewording suggested by his peer reviewer. As he continues, he does weave in (see the underlined portion further down) a variation of the research question suggested by the professor: "it is these volatile changes from prohibiting the distribution of porn to allowing it which will be explored. How were these changes possible, who fought for them and who didn't." But in fact, he never does address this question. Instead, he sticks with his original topic but frames his paper as a report rather than a persuasive essay, giving a chronological account of the various government decisions which have protected the right to create and view

pornography. This is already known—there's no argument, no synthesis, no new insights—just a report. Not surprisingly, Sam received a C+ on his paper.

Of course, this simplistic notion of revision—that it means addressing issues at the surface level rather than considering deeper changes involving meaning and structure — is something we're all familiar with as writing teachers. What we saw happening here is that the project scaffolding—the workshops, rubrics, and teacher comments—all seemed to encourage this approach to revision by focusing students and mentors on the match with a list of criteria. Indeed, without clear guidance about what sort of paper to develop, it appears that students may have defaulted to what they knew about research papers from their past experiences. Several students, like Sam, ended up writing reports, drawing on multiple sources to explain a subject, but not doing what Professor M wanted—answering a research question that required synthesizing information from multiple scholarly sources to arrive at a new insight.

Another student, Anne, apparently thought of the research paper as an extended annotated bibliography. If you turn to p. 12 of the handout, you'll see Anne's research question, again, not her own original question but the one suggested by Professor M in her comments on Anne's Annotated Bibliography: "This paper will work to examine the reasons why public opinion of interracial relationships is still a very touchy subject matter and why people are still hesitant in entering interracial relationships." But Anne's paper doesn't address this question. Instead, she uses a series of sources reporting on studies of American's attitudes toward interracial relationships, arranging them in chronological order. She writes one paragraph on each source, first reporting on the study and then offering her opinion on the findings, as in the underlined section at the bottom of the sample paragraph from her paper.

In contrast, the few papers that did receive A's all were written in a particular genre that did happen to fulfill Professor M's goals of posing a question that can be answered through

consulting scholarly sources: that of a literature review. I copied Tracy's introduction for you—the final two pages in your handout. Note that she writes a two-page introduction, not the one paragraph that other students seemed to think was appropriate.

- Paragraph 1 clearly outlines the problem being addressed

- Paragraph 2 sets the issue in a context

- Paragraph 3 begins with a carefully framed research question, followed by a discussion of the difficulty of measuring efficacy of sex education programs

- And Paragraph 4 describes how efficacy will be defined and measured in the paper.

Consider her confident, assertive "expert" voice in the final paragraph of her introduction:

Because conservatives agree with the aims of a risk-reduction model, and for the purposes of having a single definition of "efficacy" in order to review programs objectively, effectiveness of sex education programs will be operationalized as programs associated with delaying the age of first sexual intercourse, preventing the spread of STIs, and preventing teenage pregnancies.

There was nothing in the assignment or rubric that identified this genre or helped students understand how it works, what purpose it serves, what the role of the writer is.

Tracy, a senior, was in the class that didn't have a mentor attached, but it was clear that she didn't need much help. She received a 95 on her proposal, with no comments, and an A on her Annotated Bibliography, with the sole comment "Terrific sources, well annotated."

So what does this experiment in improvisational writing fellow work tell us? For starters, saying YES AND is a good idea: because we moved forward with placing fellows in medium-sized classes and agreed to the professor's suggestion to pursue some research, we

ended up understanding some reasons why students weren't able to be more successful, and why the mentor workshops themselves had seemingly had so little effect. In some ways, this isn't a new story: problems in student writing are often the result of students not understanding assignment or genre expectations, or not having experience with deep revision. Why didn't we catch the lack of clarity in the assignment, the absence of guidance in relation to genre and rhetorical context?   How did this get by us?

In hindsight, we see that there was nothing in the process of developing mentor plans that involved faculty in assessing how their assignments conveyed rhetorical and genre expectations. When faculty members request a WID Mentor, they aren't thinking of signing up to revamp their assignments; time to do this hasn't been built in to the workload of the faculty member or Writing Center Director. Can we say YES AND to this looming workload problem? One immediate step could be to include an assignment review sheet as part of the planning process (such as the one on the last page of your handout). This would be a starting place for conversation and assignment revision—and would allow us to say NO WAY to faculty who aren't interested in committing significant time to assignment redesign. And this could get the WID director as well as the Writing Center director involved in the planning process, spreading out the workload.

If we had gone through this process with Professor M, we might have come up with a very different assignment and mentor plan. Professor M. said in the interview that she couldn't imagine what else she could do to help students write better papers. But now we *can i*magine what might have happened with some intensive discussion with Professor M about where students might run into problems with her current assignment and how the assignment might be redesigned.

Imagine if

- the assignment had included a lengthy explanation of what a literature review is, why someone would write one, and the role of the writer in creating one, thus providing students with a clearer idea of what their paper should look like and why

- Or if students had considered the class readings in connection to more specific expectations for their own papers, discussing their features more explicitly in connection with the criteria outlined in the assignment and rubric for the introduction, body, and conclusion

And instead of a mentor plan that focused on helping students to match their work to the assignment and rubric criteria, imagine

- a mentor workshop that began by asking students what they think a "research paper" is, and then examined those notions in light of the assignment, and

- a mentor workshop that examined some sample literature reviews, looking at their features from the point of view of the writer, imagining the process that led to the paper, and only then turning to look at the students' draft proposals and introductions

As we are a WID Program without much of a budget or any kind of curricular mandate, the insights provided by this research project are actually a wonderful surprise. They suggest that we could enhance the effectiveness of our mentor placements simply by focusing more of our efforts on the front end, on working with participating faculty more intensely on assignment design before mentors begin their work with students. The cost for this would be in time and energy rather than dollars, and it would provide us with much clearer guidance than we've had in the past as to when to say YES AND and when to say NO WAY to applications for WID Mentors. Looking at the mentor program with a focus on how it supports faculty developing assignments, and how it supports mentors who themselves work with faculty on implementing those assignments, we see much potential for progress here.