

Agonistic Deliberations II

Neil gave you a short history of writing program development at our school. I'd like to talk about where we are now. I think one of the things you'll notice is that, for all the history and lessons learned, we find ourselves starting from square one – and then slowly whittling back that square to a manageable size that will fit the not only the needs of the writing community, but also the administrative and budgetary realities at Slippery Rock.

I will begin with the Writing Outcomes developed by SRU's Writing Across the Curriculum committee; then move to the more recent process for developing these outcomes; consider the varied response to the process from the campus community; note the necessary role of assessment and support – particularly as regards our writing center – in the current program; finally, I will consider our more recent proposals for support and development for instruction to WAC outcomes.

The WAC Committee was a university-wide committee working over the past few years to shape the graduation writing requirement offered at the end of the timeline (slides 10-13). According to the committee's mission statement, "the purpose of [the committee was] to create and propose a writing across the curriculum program and/or guidelines that would help all departments on campus to design or strengthen the design of a writing requirement within their disciplines." The committee ultimately created the latter: a set of guidelines to develop and assess a writing requirement.

But that is not all we created. Especially during a stage in which we solicited feedback from departments and programs about their expectations for this development and support, we created a rich and differentiated set of statements from across the university about what exactly they wanted from writing instruction, how they constructed the act of writing, how they

identified “problems” in student writing, and how they requested help (or did not) in the creation of rubrics, lesson plans, and assignments.

The development of and response to the guidelines writing outcomes both suggest and address familiar questions – though some in more tacit than explicit means. When faculty control curriculum, they require (and request) support for writing, but different programs and teachers have different ideas of what is important (the “basics”) to “good” writing; through what mechanism can a common idea of proficiency emerge? Who “gets” to do the teaching, and does this teaching focus on skills or disciplinary content? Should we consider concepts such as research and disciplinary development as necessary elements in proficiency? Who has oversight of writing in a program?

So beyond the questions of *what* and *who*, it’s important to add a couple axes upon which to plot the development of programs and outcomes. The “what” and “who” of writing may be important in curricular development, guidelines, and to assessment, but the location of writing in our curricular history and its present is also important. Also, the point at which students enter into or encounter writing as a primary instructional content is an important consideration for a university that has a FYC course that all students must take. The distinction between “writing across” and “writing in” (WAC vs. WID) noted by Christopher Thaiss, does suggest a distinction between disciplinary boundaries and curricular community. Where programs establish credibility and competency in writing through *presence*,¹ WAC also suggests that a campus can function as a writing community, moving towards depth and dynamism through support functions and well-structured use of facilities and non-faculty members of the community (student/peer groups,

¹ Thaiss, “Theory in WAC: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?” Zawacki & Rogers 94.

instructional technology staff, non-curricular entities like SRU's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Educational Technology).

What we had to consider were the above questions, but without a dedicated administrative structure or teaching staff. Every program has its circumstances and constraints; at the end of my presentation, we'd like to return to some of those questions (and I hope I will be mindful enough to maintain an engagement with the questions during my prepared remarks) and ask you to think about how you might answer them if they were addressed to your outcomes, your WAC/WID program, or whatever stage of development you're in.

1. Writing Outcomes

The handout you've received contains the most recent recommendations for the writing program. The first item outlines the recommended methods for meeting the outcomes:

1. Student written work could be assigned in multiple courses in a program, as selected by program faculty; these selections would add up to a number of credit hours in designated writing courses;
2. Programs could designate courses within and outside the major, and students would have to complete the courses to attain competency;
3. Faculty might incorporate writing outcomes through all courses in a program, with student work presented as a portfolio;
4. Any combination of the above methods.

The second item deals with development and oversight, as implied by the above: that program faculty, and not a dedicated administrative entity, would determine outcomes for their own majors, and that program faculty would conduct their own assessment. The third item does provide for some standardization in this assessment and reporting structure, asking the

university's assessment core committee to incorporate these outcomes into its normal annual reporting structure. Programs would then have specific elements included: a rationale based on disciplinary standards or best practices, a description of outcomes, a copy of the curriculum, a rubric to judge the curriculum for coherence with university/disciplinary standards (Neil has provided such a degree coherence matrix in the handouts), course outlines and, finally, for programs with portfolios, a rationale for student demonstration of outcomes in the final portfolio.

The last item deals with campus support, and I think this will be crucial to the success of cross-curricular writing in the coming years. This item seeks to outline the general idea for writing support and provide possibilities for the location of that support in existing campus entities. The item focuses on three areas of support: implementation, assessment, and faculty development. What the support plan establishes is an assessment mechanism that will allow a writing across the curriculum program to meet outcomes without the administrative work of integrating coursework into a specialized and discrete Writing Program structure.

Where we see areas of concern for future work is when these agencies, particularly the Writing Center, that have a mission or function and limited maneuverability in funding and staffing, are asked to take on new responsibilities or respond to the newly-voiced concerns of faculty across the campus regarding standards of practice and the philosophies that are foundational to those standards. But these I think are familiar demands for support from across the campus – the distributed field wherein this “writing” is supposed to take place – and it suggests that structural credibility, a credibility noted by the external evaluator's call for an entity with credibility and clout, was a problem of ethos that could not be surmounted by a single department, such as English. Still, the English department is the institutional home (at least in the sense of oversight and staffing) of important entities and locations for support, and I think this is

true of a lot of universities, such as Writing Centers. Reaction and request from other disciplines was varied, as is likely inevitable, and based on what departments perceived as their students' most pressing needs, both in the development of a disciplinary voice and in the development of core skills. What they reported back to the committee about what they wanted, and what they already had, tells a story of departments that feel they have sufficient writing outcomes in place and do not want outside interference, and a good number of departments that feel very unsure about how to create and sustain a useful set of principles and practices that will lead to a satisfactory and sustainable approach to establishing writing outcomes in individual programs.

What I'd like to do now, then, is look at the shorter history of the "agonistic deliberations," and the contested space in which the deliberations occurred, by going into more detail about the development of our Writing Outcomes statement over the past two years.

2. Recent process: 2010

So, when we started, the recommendations were very different. The guidelines included in the first proposal, to be circulated among departments, consisted of limits on class sizes, and explicit rendering of writing outcomes in each course syllabus. New courses would go through the normal curricular process. Finally, these courses would be designated with the familiar "writing intensive" (WI) designation, and should occur at "varied levels" (one in the sophomore year and one in the junior year). In order to be designated a WI course, the course would:

1. Include 3 assignments of 600 words or more, or one large research paper;
2. Have syllabus content that explicitly identified the relevance of writing to the discipline, and identified resources helpful to completion of writing assignments;
3. Identify how assignments met course objectives;
4. Create in 2 of its 3 assignments the elements of persuasion, research, and documentation;

5. Provide rubrics to the students along with the assignment;
6. Add peer/instructor review to the assignment process;
7. Cap enrollment at 30 students;
8. Be approved by the WAC Committee.

The initial proposal also includes provision for a program director (and an Assistant Director!) tasked with assisting departments in creating the rubrics, courses, and outcomes. The director would not be an outside hire but a faculty member granted reassigned time, and then (after departments no longer needed support), eased into the role of WAC Committee chair.

These suggestions were short-lived. But some very useful information emerged from this process, in the form of real feedback on what programs needed, and what programs didn't want. Neil referred to the survey information returned by departments, indicating that 18 out of 23 responding departments identified program outcomes that included writing, and 18 out of 21 identified course outcomes. Overall, departments used a variety of methods to publish outcome information: syllabuses, departmental webpages, program requirement descriptions, brochures, specific assignments, among others. They had similar means of delivering them to students, a variety teaching methods to produce the outcomes (both in WI courses and "regular" coursework, and via exit instruments such as exams or portfolios), and a variety of assessment methods. Implementation of practices and methods, already left to the departments, did not suggest any sense of "best" practices; the ability for programs to either stick with what they had or ask for support in finding their way would become one of the hallmarks of the program's incubation period. The approaches and ideas were just so varied, and tied to teaching practices and disciplinary needs, that no one clear strategy emerges from the questionnaire.

The questionnaire also indicated some dissatisfaction with the writing abilities of majors both assessed against the outcomes and encountered in coursework. Nearly the same proportion of faculty who expressed dissatisfaction is represented in curricular response to such outcomes: almost half were not satisfied by their major's writing according to outcome statements articulated by the faculty, and exactly half reported changing vs. not changing curriculum accordingly. This is perhaps understandable, as action items in university assessment reports do not necessarily indicate wholesale curricular change so much as they offer incremental action for departmental committees. And it could be that the set of departments dissatisfied is conterminous with the set of departments changing their curricular offerings in response to writing outcomes. But, as representatives of the Exercise Science and Dance departments noted, they were often frustrated by students who lacked core skills, and wondered if the support offered by the writing center couldn't address these "basics" in student writing more directly and prescriptively.

And I bring up the two departments in particular because their responses indicate something about the nature of the process itself. In this case we have two programs asking for the same kind of support, and yet they are in different stages of developing their approach to writing in their discipline. One program had outcomes and structures for writing on the books, while the other did not, and had what I thought was a usefully honest approach to the procedure: it was essentially a good way to ask for help. What this suggests to me is that our philosophy of writing support, the stuff that happens outside the classroom, could be better advertised to our university partners so that these sorts of questions about what the writing center is doing, and whether that activity is what's best for students, might be avoided, or at least discussed more consistently.

If this weren't a familiar conversation, I suspect fewer writing centers would have to establish, loudly and often, that their mission does not include copyediting. The writing center

should have an essential role in building, supporting, and reporting in the writing program. But if the faculty establishing a WAC program has fundamental misunderstandings or misgivings about the ends and means of an entity they wish to seek support from, if not emulate in practice, then the way forward must seek to invite those faculty into the support structures themselves.

Departments were asked to identify support structures that could aid development of student skills. Most indicated that they needed help with the act of assessment itself: designing rubrics, responding to student writing, and having access to writing resources (located, per the questionnaire, in an “electronic Writing Resource Center,” which would allow instructors to access a reliable library of documents from which they can pick and choose according to their needs. Predictably, there was a sense that any virtual instruction library would compete directly with the brick-and-mortar writing center, and soon the committee began to ask departments to take on the challenge of an association with writing as an instructional content. This seemed acceptable to the departments, provided “a faculty member or two” would consult with departments to get practices and materials together, and to adapt courses while creating others.

3. 2011

So, after comment and debate about where these outcomes might be generated and how support for the departments might be handled, the next year saw significant development of core ideas that would form the foundation for the outcomes we ended up approving. These ideas focused on graduation competency, but the defining feature of each proposed route to competency was the power of the department to define both coursework and incorporation of outcomes. We could then think of these outcomes as a programmatic gesture: all programs would report back on how they were meeting these outcomes, and hopefully review them,

focusing ever more on writing as a disciplinary outcome that they could measure. The initial suggestions for continuing work in developing these competencies were:

- A number of courses that could incorporate the outcomes would be chosen, at the discretion of the department;
- These courses may be chosen from a program's major courses, or from courses outside the major;
- Alternately, all courses within a major could incorporate writing outcomes, with a portfolio (to be graded, or filled with graded work) requirement;
- No "outside the discipline determination of quality" would apply; any assessment outside of the department would "verify coherence" to university, accreditation, or discipline-based outcomes.

The first three are true suggestions, incorporating the use of "could" strategically to offer considerable leeway in the integration of these outcomes at the departmental level. The final one reflects the resistance to the imposition of requirement upon the separate departments and programs.

Still, the committee felt the need to establish what specific university support might be valuable to programs, which led Neil to query departments for this information. The information was collected informally, several respondents around the campus happily emailing back their perception of what they needed. The results, much like the results on the initial questionnaire, were varied; they reflected both considerable assurance among programs about the nature of their disciplinary writing, and sometimes deep unease about support, as well as the random dismissal of English as a discipline able to teach technical writing. Some programs thought their offerings did the job – Communication, for instance, provided a lengthy explanation of their

academic and professional writing commitments, Math provided a shorter but similar explanation, Biology detailed its structure and rationale., and Geology dispensed with the need for non-technical writing completely. Many programs lamented the problems with time for both grading and development: when could they sit down and just work on developing courses without some course relief? Who could assure them that class sizes would be capped at a point where grading would not be impossible? Who could they work with to improve their class offerings, and when?

The responses did indicate a few ways we might move forward. Some programs wanted to develop standalone courses through the English for their majors (music and physics – music had identified another course with a liaison from the English department, and a portfolio system reviewed by panel).

Departments also required support for their own work. They requested help creating rubrics (Psychology and Exercise Science), and wanted to establish faculty workshops for pedagogical techniques and student workshops for both basic skills and genre-based instruction. Having working professionals in the writing center was suggested, as well as creating online tutorials – a virtual writing center.

4. Conclusion: The Necessary Role of Support and Assessment

We had many suggestions for purchasing help, in other words, but what we lacked was buy-in from faculty. Faculty, seeing the budgetary reality would like point to in-house solutions for creating pedagogical content and support solutions, wanted to know who is going to give them the time (and limit the class sizes) in order to do this work. They worried about who is going to provide a consistent and ongoing set of platforms for training in a skill outside of their

disciplines, and how existing support structures are going to grow and change to better support the new needs of a writing program. So the “who” questions emerge as a primary concern.

And that’s where familiar discussions emerged about how different disciplines view writing. Departments want the focus to be on technical and professional writing, which we offer in the English department; they want the Writing Center, and the end of writing support in general, to be utilitarian. Just as representatives of the English department reminded the committee that the variety of stylistic approaches to writing prevented them from addressing every potential in student writing. Here, also, the “what” becomes central.

The discussion is important because it was associated with, but I don’t suppose tied explicitly enough, to the role and function of the Writing Center in our WAC program (a consideration, by extension, of the “where”). Budget crises since 1993 had affected our Writing Center in much the same way as our writing program. The committee also recognized the writing center is currently underused; but the responses I report earlier indicated that programs had a conflicted sense of what that use might be in the first place – much less a philosophy of a writing center program that was built with a WAC/WID program in mind.

And, perhaps in the view of faculty outside of English, our student-led Writing Center is less credible than centers staffed exclusively by grad students. Some faculty indicated that the Center should be run by professionals. Putting management in the hands of specialists, as opposed to faculty working on course relief (an amount of reassigned time, I might add, that is associated less strictly with running the Writing Center as it is with our department’s Assistant Chair position, so being in charge of the Writing Center is not even so much as a defined position as an accepted duty), is a difficult suggestion to put into practice in this budgetary climate.

But we might now take this structure, and other such entities around campus, such as those dedicated to instructional technology and pedagogical development, and use them to do the things other instructors want: create materials they can access on the school network, provide some video lectures or other such instruction they can use themselves, develop seminars and training sessions for teachers who need it, and help with assessment and rubrics and assignments.

Proposed solution:

This can be done perhaps by summer contracts that would allow WAC committee members or leaders to be compensated for such work while maintaining a full course load commitment during the academic year. Reassigned time is, also, the economically feasible approach to WAC Committee leadership; but that role should devolve to caretaking as programs become more proficient in their writing pedagogy and teaching practices. Overall, there is a sense that SRU has few means to assess writing support functions. So when we ask what the Writing Center is doing, or where the writing programs are in their development, we do not have the means to quantify that.

And because we had no funding to pursue an administrative program, a point that minimizes the reluctance of other programs to have a centralized authority control this area of teaching, the role of university-wide assessment became the principal means by which the mandate would be evaluated. Early in the process the Assessment Coordinator participated in the committee meetings. Currently, assessments are conducted by program and by a core committee, who collect assessment information from departments and directly, in the case of our liberal studies courses, from committees based in the department. For the purposes of reporting, then, that process would not change; the reports would be modified slightly to include the graduation

writing outcomes in university-wide assessment. The important point that came out of committee was that the assessment would have to be based in the department.

Further, the campus trust in writing support has to be strengthened while broader participation in writing support must be developed. This is a bit trickier, but coordinated efforts by writing classes and the Writing Center to develop visible roles in the community should be considered. Like many campuses, SRU has yearly symposia that highlight student work – here is a place for coordinated action in classes based even on first-year writing. Writing Center staff might also be active in these presentations, and so creating a credible, authoritative and involved staff from diverse departmental commitments is also a key possibility for expanding the Center’s profile across the campus community. Between the student leadership programs and the vibrant student governance community, there is likely an untapped source of student enthusiasm for peer-support roles in writing support.

Early on, essentially, we will have to find people who are willing to devote time to produce more support content, and disciplinary partners both in faculty and in the student body will be key to this effort. We have to hope that the reassigned time is there, and that support for the writing community on campus will help the assessment process reach a state of equilibrium so that support does not become a time-consuming *de facto* assignment for instructors carrying full courseloads.