

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speakers: Sue Luck, Lorain County Community College, Ohio
Lou Suarez, Lorain County Community College, Ohio
Jan Harding, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Introducer/Recorder: Gayle King, University of Akron, Ohio

Sue Luck began the session by briefly describing two models frequently used to introduce Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) into college programs: the "faculty workshop" approach (used at Lorain County Community College) and the "curricular changes" approach (used at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst). The first model works informally through a process involving faculty workshops, and the second works more directly by instituting courses requiring writing. Lou Suarez then described the evolution of the program at Lorain County Community College.

In 1981, the commitment of the administration to writing and to students with poor writing skills was very small. Instead, the emphasis was on developing skills for employment. Writing was not encouraged in classes and it was not required on entrance and exit exams. Furthermore, the faculty expressed great resistance to writing requirements in their courses: they perceived the Developmental Department as a service for, yet separate from, their own departments; they believed that they did not know how to teach writing, that it was the responsibility of the English Department and that the grading would be too time-consuming in any case. Many faculty members believed that objective tests were the best form of measurement, thereby overlooking the facts that writing conventions differ by discipline and that writing is an effective way to learn and synthesize material.

The first step for the WAC team, therefore, was to raise faculty consciousness. In 1981, they held an afternoon workshop for faculty in all disciplines. About twenty administrators and faculty attended, many of whom already required writing in their courses but were interested in better ways of teaching it. The WAC team challenged writing myths and made suggestions for better writing assignments, for using journals, and for commenting on and evaluating papers. The key points stressed by the team at the workshop were (1) that writing in each discipline is a social behavior of that discipline, (2) that writing skills diminish when not supported, (3) that writing is not just a means to test students but to help them learn, and (4) that classroom writing need not be the standard report and research assignments.

In the years following the workshop, faculty members began to use the WAC team as a consulting service. In 1984, Luck took a sabbatical leave to study models for WAC programs and to visit schools with such programs. After receiving the go-ahead from a steering committee composed of representatives from four departments--engineering, counseling, health, and language and humanities--she began the first stage of the project. She interviewed faculty using a survey questionnaire which focused on three areas: (1) kinds of writing assignments and criteria for evaluation, (2) perceptions of student writing, and (3) attitudes toward WAC workshops. Luck interviewed two faculty members from each division, two counselors, and a librarian, with each session lasting about one and a half hours.

Based on the information gathered from the interviews,

the second stage of the project, a series of two workshops, was designed. On a Saturday morning in February 1985, twenty-five representatives from eight of the nine divisions of the college voluntarily attended a breakfast/luncheon, the first workshop, which stressed two premises: that WAC is a national movement and that writing is a tool for learning. Two consultants, Leonard Podis from Oberlin College and Joanne Podis from Dyke College in Cleveland, helped address the tremendous groundswell of questions that arose. Participants asked for practical suggestions on techniques for setting up assignments, for evaluating writing, and for using journals. On the workshop evaluation form, participants requested another workshop with the same consultants.

The second workshop, held in October 1985, was again attended by representatives from all but one division. It was a three-hour afternoon workshop with twenty participants (many of them new) and the same two consultants. The emphasis was on strategies for teaching writing: how to respond to student writing, how to use writing as a learning tool, how to encourage drafting and peer evaluation. The response was positive, and participants were intrigued by new approaches to teaching writing. Another workshop is being planned, and this one will be more individualized than the previous two, in part to provide resource materials to disciplines which have very little material to aid in writing instruction.

Yet several concerns about the WAC program remain at this point: Will the responsibility for the project be moved from the Faculty Development Committee to the English Department? How will the project continue to be funded? What will be done with the present general education writing component?

Jan Harding described the writing program at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Its approach to WAC is quite different from Lorain's. Instead of informal faculty workshops, it implemented formal changes in the curriculum. In 1984, the six-hour freshman writing requirement was changed to a three-hour freshman writing course and a three-hour junior-level writing course offered by individual departments. The freshman writing budget was divided between these courses. In 1985, the University Writing Committee reviewed proposals from every department for these courses, noting their philosophical implications and writing emphases. Furthermore, through student evaluations of the classes, and interviews with instructors, a list of exemplary programs was compiled, providing consultants for other departments within the university.

Harding noted that currently there is a problem with the general education requirement due to its heavy emphasis on writing. Also, the hiatus between the required freshman and junior writing courses disrupts the continuity of the writing program. However, in an effort to evaluate the program and these problems, an advisory committee composed of administrators and faculty from each department is surveying students and interviewing faculty.

Harding concluded her discussion by noting that the best feature of the WAC program is its use of teaching assistants. Many have published short stories or poems and are therefore accustomed to hard work and even failure (rejection slips), which make them sensitive to the process of writing and very patient with student writers. Furthermore, teaching assistants review all writing assignments to ensure that they are do-able, and they are skilled at helping students, who are often reluctant in a competitive climate, to share papers. ■