
TEACHING AND TESTING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Speakers: Penny Dugan, Stockton State College,
Pomona, N.J.
Jerome Paris, New Jersey Institute of
Technology

Introducer/Recorder: Robert E. Lynch, New Jersey
Institute of Technology

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Programs are developed and shaped to match the history and structure of the institutions in which they operate. Methods for evaluating the impact of WAC programs on students, faculty, and curriculum must, therefore, be devised with an eye toward the specific characteristics of the institutions involved.

Penny Dugan emphasized the recent origin and experimental nature of Stockton State College in her discussion of Stockton's Writing Program, which she directs. Founded in 1971 as an "alternative" approach to

public higher education, Stockton has no academic departments and places heavy emphasis on cross-disciplinary activities. Originally there was no required composition course at Stockton--in fact, no required course of any kind--and so from its very beginning Stockton has been committed to teaching and evaluating writing in a wide variety of content courses. Although College Writing has now become a requirement for all Stockton students, they are also required to choose two courses from a list of writing intensive courses and at least one course designated for Writing Across the Curriculum. Beyond this requirement, students are encouraged to take one course from either list each term.

Stockton has recently initiated a Junior Writing Test, which students must take after they complete 64 credits towards their degree. They are asked to choose one of four topics of current interest, all of an expository/persuasive nature, and are allowed two hours to write their essays. Faculty and staff members from programs across the college come together to review holistic assessment methods and to score the essays under Dugan's direction. Each essay is read by two readers using a scale of 1 to 6, with the two scores being added. When the scores are not identical or contiguous, additional readers become involved. Essays receiving combined scores of 8 to 12 are deemed proficient, those with 2 to 6 not proficient. Essays with a combined score of 7 are read by a third reader to determine proficiency. This year, about two-thirds of the essays were judged proficient. Students whose essays were judged not proficient are given the option of another testing within a few weeks. Unless the second test reverses the result of the first, these students are required to complete a Writing Intensive Course in the following semester.

Dugan stressed that although the college administration advocated the Junior Writing Test, presumably to guarantee proficient student writing in upper-division courses, it has been inconsistent in its support of the Writing Program. The impetus behind the Writing Program and the reason for the success of the writing test, she concluded, continues to be the involvement of a large number of dedicated faculty from many disciplines.

Jerome Paris reviewed the progress of New Jersey Institute of Technology's two-year old program in Writing Across the Curriculum. NJIT is a public technological university best known for its engineering, computer science, and architecture curricula. A survey of faculty in 1984 indicated recognition of the importance of effective writing in the curricula and broad support for a cross-disciplinary writing program. In 1984, Paris applied for and received support for a Writing Across the Curriculum project at NJIT through the state's FICE program (Fund for the Improvement of Collegiate Education).

The program committee held a two-day, off-campus workshop in January, 1985, attended by thirty-five volunteer faculty representing every department of the university. In addition to allowing the participating faculty to share views on student writing and how best to improve it, the retreat atmosphere prompted frank discussions of other matters of common pedagogical concern, which tend to be overlooked,

Continued on page 14

at least on a cross-disciplinary level, in the day-to-day press of campus activity. By the end of the workshop, all participants had developed a plan to incorporate student writing in their course, even for the most specialized technological subjects. At the end of the following semester, Paris surveyed the group to determine the degree to which they had been successful in implementing the ideas from the workshop. It was clear that although few individuals had unqualified success in their efforts, the experience had reinforced their commitment to writing as enhancing student learning in their courses.

Continued funding allowed for a second WAC workshop in September, 1986. Whereas some of the original workshop faculty returned to help conduct sessions, most of the participants were new to the program. As a component of program evaluation, Paris surveyed the students who had been in the classes of those teachers during the term. The results showed that student resistance to writing is often superficial, especially when the course writing projects are directly related to overall course goals and objectives. He advised others conducting or planning WAC programs not only to rely on pre- and post-tests of student writing to evaluate the success of their efforts (since evidence of writing improvement is difficult to detect over short periods of time), but to include the more affective elements, such as changed attitudes toward writing, as well.

It was clear from this workshop that Dugan and Paris have effectively formed an on-campus network of teachers dedicated to good writing as an end in itself and as a tool for learning in all disciplines.◊