

PRESENTING A UNIFIED FRONT IN A
UNIVERSITY WRITING AND TESTING PROGRAM

Speakers: *Lana Silverthorne*, University of South
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Introducer/

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How can we foster institutional consensus about undergraduate writing in a university? Lana Silverthorne and Patricia Stephens answered this question by focusing on university-wide participation and dialogue. They described a multilateral commitment to undergraduate

writing that has grown incrementally over the past seven years at the University of South Alabama. The primary agent of this progress has been the continuous participation of faculty from various disciplines, especially in the construction of an upper-level writing across the curriculum (WAC) program.

The impetus for ongoing development of the upper-level WAC program has been a week-long summer seminar for faculty across the disciplines, including one representative from each of the undergraduate departments. It has been repeated annually since 1981. The seminar work is guided by Director of the University Writing Program and by an outside consultant. The participants write and talk about the purpose of writing in their junior and senior courses. They get acquainted with the practice of continuous "writing-to-learn" and with its potential uses in their courses. They put together a proposal for a sequence of "writing-to-learn" assignments to be tried and revised in their own courses over several quarters, and they review each others' WAC proposals. They learn ways of responding to students' efforts to "write-to-learn."

According to Silverthorne, the WAC seminar, first conceived as a means to convert, has by now become a forum for faculty leadership. Participants become the teachers of upper-level content courses designated as writing courses. By now, at least half of the faculty are teaching such courses. (Students are now required to take two such courses, one in their major, and there are now about 70 such courses available each quarter.) WAC-experienced faculty influence the criteria by which a content course can be designated as a writing course. They give precedence to continuous writing in content courses over production of the "one-shot" term paper, and they sanction "discovery" writing which encourages students to "bring their own experiences to bear upon subject matter."

Silverthorne noted that holistic assessment of essays composed by transfer students who have had Freshman English elsewhere has provided a second opportunity for building consensus at the University of South Alabama. Piloted in 1983, the test has recently become a requirement. The test prompt mirrors the emphasis on personal writing in the University's first quarter of lower-level composition and on the exit test given at the end of this first quarter of writing. Students are given a choice of three prompts. They have two hours to write with dictionaries and handbooks. Students are informed of the general criteria by which their essays will be judged. Each paper gets three readings, and the evaluation determines whether or not a tested transfer student starts in the first of the University's writing courses. Since 1983, about 75 percent of the students have passed the test. The transfer test essays are assessed by cadre of faculty readers from various disciplines who teach the upper-level content courses designated as writing courses. Their decision is to pass or fail an essay. If an essay arouses irresolvable ambiguity in one reader, it is passed on to two additional readers for the pass/fail decision.

Records on this assessment process bear out the claim of active university-wide participation of faculty. Between the fall of 1986, fifty-six faculty have served as readers, about 71% of them from the professorial ranks. Their distribution by department or discipline shows variety: 7% Business; 34% English; 9% Humanities and the Arts; 18% Medical Sciences and Nursing; 14% Natural Sciences and Engineering; 18% Social Sciences and Education. The records also show high inter-reader agreement. Figures over twelve quarters between the fall of 1983 and the fall of 1987 show the average rate of agreement to be 87.2% in the first year. The local reading was tested against the judgment of external readers. With the help of the NTNW, a study was conducted to compare the assessments of five local readers to that of three readers at CUNY. The rate of agreement between the two groups overall was nearly 80%.

Patricia Stephens took up the matter of the reasons for the high degree of consensus in this assessment process. She cited the quality of the WAC seminars, the credibility of the program director, and administrative support and incentives. Faculty who are developing a new upper-level writing-designated content course are released from teaching one course, and the enrollment in their writing-designated content course is reduced to 25. A participant in the week-long WAC seminar is paid \$400; a reader for the transfer test essay who, on an average, judges 35-40 papers, receives an honorarium of \$50. Stephens stressed the importance of the faculty's common concern for students' development as effective writers, underscoring Silverthorne's contention that drawing upon faculty from various disciplines creates a university-wide sense of responsibility for the quality of students' writing and fosters a continuing university-wide dialogue about writing standards.

The continuing dialogue is crucial. Stephens described "calibration sessions". In these sessions, readers consider their common purpose of helping students to improve their writing and discuss the general criteria or qualities by which they decide to pass or fail a test essay in relation to this common goal. There are four qualities, a number kept small on purpose, to head off a penchant "read for everything we know in our various disciplines." The naming of the criteria, too, is kept simple and true to the holistic assessment principle of reading for general impression: Invention (Has the writer of the essay been thoughtful, reflective, candid?) Arrangement (Has the writer achieved wholeness, made a piece of it?) Development (Has the writer recognized and fleshed out the point of the essay, giving it credibility and validity?) Style (Does the essay have clarity, give evidence of the writer's own voice, the writer's own crafting, and editing?).

The dialogue amongst faculty continues through instructional use of carefully kept records. Results of inter-reader reliability and validity studies are shared with readers to help them evaluate their own reading performance in relation to that of the others. Readers are

given detailed information about the results of their own decisions, a statistical summary of each reading session, and a cumulative summary of all reading sessions. In addition, the readers are rated and their ranking reported to them. They are rated on three bases: experience, reliability, and validity (or the fit between their judgments and other information about students such as GPAs and ACT scores). In short, readers have regular, informed opportunities to reflect upon the relative fit of their judgment with the consensus.

One last piece of information about the consensus reported by Silverthorne and Stephens is that the membership of the transfer-test reading group is stable, the chief movement being the addition each year of two new members from the summer WAC seminar. Once having assumed the role, very few have ever repudiated it. Stephens pointed out that it is in the faculty's interest to be involved: reading the test essays serves as a useful means by which faculty who teach writing-designated junior and senior courses can gauge students' readiness to deal with the "writing-to-learn" orientation of their courses.