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## ***In Situ* Workshops and the Peer Relationships of Composition Faculty**

Rebecca M. Howard

Recounting his experiences at Michigan Tech, Toby Fulwiler notes that a writing-across-the-curriculum program must begin with cross-curricular faculty support (113). But as he details the problems he faced, Fulwiler does not comment upon the difficulty of gaining this support in the face of institutional traditions which view composition instruction as remedial or at best normative, composition students as the unfortunates who do not meet institutional standards, and composition teachers as miscellaneous literati unable to secure jobs teaching literature. Facing these obstacles at our institution, Colgate University, the new writing program found *in situ* workshops—wherein a writing professor offers occasional composition instruction in courses across the curriculum—a valuable tool for teaching composition strategies to students and composition philosophy to their professors.

When the new writing program was beginning at Colgate, the faculty, administrators, and students characteristically discussed writing instruction as the correction of error, in terms consonant with the rhetoric of liberal culture or current-traditionalist rhetoric (see Berlin 36-46). Many assumed composition to be best taught through the indirect agency of literature instruction. They advocated restricting direct composition instruction to the cultivation of genius in selective “advanced” classes taught by literature professors or to the correction of errors in “remedial” classes taught by adjuncts. Meanwhile, our new writing program undertook to build a diverse pedagogy, including composition classes available to all students as well as writing instruction incorporated into syllabi across the curriculum. Gaining support for such a curriculum required that we challenge the dominant model of writing instruction as remedial error correction and offer instead an epistemic model of writing as an academic discipline whose instruction can sharpen the learning and communications skills of all writers, facilitating their interactions with professorial readers, assigned texts, and their own belief-systems.

Although cross-curricular faculty workshops have become a staple of writing across the curriculum, they are not an effective opening move in such a campaign. We were concerned, first of all, that faculty workshops would provide an environment in which disagreements would become

entrenched. In addition, especially in a young program, writing faculty need to learn from their colleagues as much as they need to teach them, but the environment of the cross-curricular faculty workshop generally assumes writing faculty to be teachers and their colleagues learners. Yet another obstacle to early faculty workshops is that professors in the various disciplines must be willing to attend the workshops and be taught new concepts, which is hardly likely in the environment of liberal-culture and current-traditionalist rhetoric. Most problematically, that environment of liberal culture and current-traditionalism was not one in which writing faculty were esteemed peers. Corollary to the vision of writing instruction as a mechanical exercise was the tendency to characterize writing instructors—those who taught the “remedial” classes—as mechanics.

For these writing faculty to initiate curricular change and urge a new institutional vision of composition instruction required their gaining credibility among their peers. Replacing a mechanistic vision of writing instruction with an intellectual one required that writing professors themselves be regarded by other faculty members as intellectuals not mechanics.

This is an indelicate issue to raise in the pages of an academic journal. Yet because ours is surely not the only writing program to encounter these problems, it behooves writing program administrators to develop practical models for demonstrating the academic integrity of the discipline of composition and its faculty. Elaine P. Maimon declares the “first job of the WPA” to be promoting the scholarly exchange that enables curricular change: “Conversation about writing is a prerequisite for a program of writing across the curriculum” (10). Since it is the writing faculty, however, who must instigate that conversation, perhaps an even more preliminary job of the WPA is to demonstrate that the writing faculty are participants in an academic discipline.

In our program we needed a subtle way of communicating new ideas about ourselves, our discipline, and our pedagogy. Our first step was sufficiently successful that I now offer it as a technique for placing writing faculty in a position to promote the heuristic value of composition instruction: *in situ* writing workshops—offering composition instruction in “content” courses across the curriculum, not just in scientific and technical subjects. Many writing programs have already demonstrated that *in situ* pedagogy teaches students distilled principles of composition and facilitates more productive use of the writing center (Covington, et al.; Griffin; Haviland; North). But this pedagogy extends past the students to include their professors as well. The experience at our institution suggests *in situ* writing instruction as a forum for subtle, non-confrontational modification of colleagues’ ideas about writing

instruction and instructors—the crucial first step from a writing program on the fringes of the academy toward a centrally involved program of writing across the curriculum. To enable our workshops to accomplish this dual purpose, we have developed certain procedures for their conduct, as well as general tenets, principles by which we conduct them.

## Procedures

### (1) The invitation

Our *in situ* instruction begins with a written invitation issued each semester to all faculty: a writing professor will visit any class to teach principles of composition applicable to an assigned paper or an essay test. Instead of asking colleagues to attend a workshop in which they will themselves be instructed, the *in situ* invitation volunteers instruction to colleagues’ students. Thus writing faculty are established as helpful rather than demanding colleagues. And because the *in situ* opportunity comes in the form of an invitation, no unwilling professors are forced to participate. The writing program, therefore, receives no complaints.

The successful invitation must detail certain information:

a. Types of workshops that have been offered in the past, with the suggestion that the writing professor will work to adapt these to the individual class. This reassures course professors that they need not have their own inventive ideas about what should take place in the workshop.

b. An indication that the writing professors are ready and willing to devise new kinds of workshops for course professors who want them. This indicates that the workshops are not a stale dog-and-pony show, and it also invites colleagues to be imaginative about what might work well in their classes.

c. The procedure for requesting a workshop, so that no one worries about what to say in a phone call or note.

d. The explanation that the *in situ* workshops are part of the routine of the writing program; otherwise, course professors hesitate to impose upon their colleagues. (We have experimented with *in situ* instruction as part of our service component and as part of the teaching component and have found the latter far more satisfactory. Once the *in situ* program becomes established, the demand for workshops is too heavy to be met imaginatively and energetically by faculty who are already teaching a full load. Therefore, we give load credit for *in situ* instruction.)

## (2) Caveats and Cautions

a. Because we have found that students pay greatest attention if the principles being taught are pertinent not just to their writing in general but also to their grade for the course, we give presentations only when they are tied to an assignment. Some faculty will initially ask for context-free instruction but then agree to have it linked to an assignment.

b. In addition, our presentations take place only in regular class meetings, with the professor present (some colleagues hope the writing professor will act as substitute teacher while they are out of town); otherwise, the *in situ* dialogue would reach the students but not the course professor. Our written and oral conversations with colleagues discreetly focus on the students' benefits from *in situ* instruction, yet the course professors are, in fact, an important part of the workshop audience (as, indeed, are the writing professors themselves).

## (3) Planning the session

Usually faculty ask that we help discern what type of workshop would be best for their students. Sometimes the answer comes from the type of assignment given in the class, such as a laboratory report. Our most common types of workshop, however, are more generic:

- a. Analyzing the assignment and developing a thesis
- b. Developing logical evidence
- c. Organizing the essay
- d. Stylistics

We have conducted successful workshops on prewriting before an assignment is due. For almost any other topic, however, the workshop often functions best when it takes place after an assignment has been turned in. Then we use anonymous writing samples supplied by the course professor and distributed to all the class members, who are led through techniques for revising their prose. This is most effective when the course professor then offers the students an opportunity for a graded revision.

Stylistics workshops are the most troublesome. Faculty will ask us to teach students a specific stylistic or mechanical technique, such as how to use the apostrophe or how to achieve parallel construction, but it is difficult to conduct a lively workshop on such topics. Our customary response, therefore, is to explore other possibilities with the professor. The relation of transitional devices to the thesis, for example, always animates the students. Using anonymous prose samples, in the

workshop the writing professor asks the students to establish the logical relationship between each sentence and the thesis and to suggest ways of making that relationship clear.

## (4) Conducting the workshop

Most of our "workshops" are actually discussions wherein the writing professor explains a principle or set of principles and then begins posing problems for the students to solve, problems involving their own writing, typically in their anonymous prose samples. Identifying and classifying thesis and evidence, for example, are usually successful in involving the whole class, even when the writing professor finds herself in a classroom full of reticent students. It is important for this type of workshop that the writing professor not over-prepare. The workshop should challenge the students to identify the issues and explore options, rather than having the writing professor point out one example after another of the principle in question.

The extent to which the course professor is involved in the preparation for the workshop and in the conduct of the workshop itself can vary widely from one workshop to another. Some professors feel most comfortable as observers to the procedures; others will stand with the writing professor in the front of the classroom and join in fielding questions and leading discussion. The writing professor planning the workshop must be sensitive to the inclinations of the course professor while encouraging the most active role that he or she is willing to adopt.

## Principles

Our experience has demonstrated three tenets essential for the success of *in situ* workshops that not only offer meaningful instruction to the students but also promote mutual respect between writing professor and course professor: scholarly context, theoretical integrity, and collegial approach.

First, *in situ* writing instruction, while focusing on a specific writing event or assignment, must also address its general scholarly context, the context of communication among scholars. Otherwise, the instruction would be only a service tutorial for the assignment, and not discipline-based instruction. A workshop on essay introductions, for example, explains the structural elements of the introduction and also discusses their rhetorical context, the conversation between student writer and professorial reader. Both students and faculty respond positively to the workshop that depicts the act of academic writing as a learning experience and its written product as a communication from one scholar to

another, one human being to another, rather than as a fiery hoop through which the obedient dog jumps at the trainer's command.

Second, while the workshops are offered in cooperation with and at the behest of the course professor, they must maintain theoretical integrity, that is, be couched in a rhetoric consonant with the aims of the writing program. This theoretical framework must not, however, be proposed as a competitor with but as a modification of or even companion to the course professor's own views. Our epistemic writing program, for example, depicts the students' goals in academic writing as intellectual growth and personal satisfaction with that growth. As we began our *in situ* workshops, I was concerned that colleagues in the departments might not share this vision but might, on the contrary, adopt an approach like that of Les Perelman: "... a student doesn't need to believe what he or she writes, but only needs to give the appearance of believing it" (474). Fortunately, although I have heard this idea from students (the familiar "give-the-professor-what-he-wants-to-hear" approach), I have never heard it from colleagues. As I offer my vision of the scholarly enterprise as an interaction of one's own ideas with those of others, the course professors characteristically enter into the conversation eagerly, adding their own perspectives about the scholarly stance crucial to successful academic writing. The students are intimidated by the prospect of making their academic writing more than a ceremony and allowing their academic endeavors to influence their personal beliefs; many students do, indeed, labor under the conviction that their academic writing needs no conviction. But as they come to realize that their professors' ambition for them is not limited to mere restatement of others' beliefs, they willingly begin the transition. And as we explore these ideas in the workshops, we professors may be reformulating and clarifying our ambitions for the students.

Finally, writing professors conducting these workshops must foster a collegial approach, exchanging expertise with colleagues rather than thrusting ideas upon them. When we first began *in situ* teaching, I braced myself for opposition from the knowledge-as-information adherents described by Knoblauch and Brannon: "Instructors both in English and other fields often assume that knowledge is a stable and bounded artifact, a collection of information, a set of facts and ideas to be delivered to students through lectures and course readings" (467). I have, indeed, conducted *in situ* workshops for professors who teach solely by the lecture-and-assigned-reading method; but none have expressed anything but approbation for my process-based vision of writing and learning. Apparently they see no conflict between my epistemology and theirs. And certainly I make no effort to persuade them that a conflict does exist. Nor do I try to change their point of view. If a colleague asks my opinion, I give it. But I do not tell any professor that I consider his or her opinion

wrong. The greatest mistake that a writing program could make would be to polarize the faculty into two armed camps: the information-based versus the process-based. Many teachers do, indeed, "preserve notions about the nature of knowledge and learning which limit their ability to recognize the heuristic value of composition" (Knoblauch and Brannon 467). In our composition theory it is important that we recognize this truth. But in our program development it is important that we effect change diplomatically. When we encounter epistemologies apparently in conflict with our own, we must not thereby assume ourselves in a corollary conflict with their holders. On the contrary, we must question the extent to which the epistemologies are actually in conflict: are process and information really polar opposites, for example, or are they points on a continuum, goals that may even be encompassed to varying degrees in one sane theory of education?

As the new writing program at Colgate develops, increasing numbers of our colleagues at this liberal-arts institution are asking writing professors' opinions on pedagogical matters. Finding us open-minded and willing to learn, they are responding in kind. Greater numbers of faculty in the other disciplines are coming to see writing faculty not as technicians from the Academic Fixit Shop but as full participants in (and sometimes enablers of) the liberal arts traditions. They are increasingly willing to set aside counterproductive visions of writing instruction as inherently normative or remedial. They are realizing that writing faculty have a content for their instruction—that we are working from a disciplinary base, the discipline of composition, which itself facilitates learning in the other disciplines of the university. We have striven to be good listeners, willing learners, and tactful teachers, and we have earned increased respect from our peers. We are gaining support for a full-scale program of writing across the curriculum, including faculty workshops and innovative curriculum development.

Although these changes are gradual, far from completed and subject to predictable setbacks, they are nevertheless taking place. A writing-across-the-curriculum program must begin with the faculty, and *in situ* pedagogy can provide for pedagogical cooperation between writing faculty and their colleagues, establishing the mutual respect necessary for subsequent mutual endeavors. *In situ* workshops are a concrete model for implementing the principles described in Joseph F. Trimmer's "Rhetoric of Compromise" for writing program development:

1. To recognize that faculty members will change only when they can transfer their commitment from an original image to a more compelling image.

2. To show our understanding of and respect for that original position by restating it in terms faculty find acceptable.
3. To explore possible compromises between contending positions. (17)

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