

What freshman directors need to know about evaluating writing programs

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For the past 15 years I have been a teacher of writing and a teacher of teachers of writing. For four of those years I was Director of Freshman English at the University of Texas at Austin, and for two of them I have been Associate Dean of Humanities at Texas. In all of these roles I have been involved in evaluating writing programs and in evaluating writing teachers. In retrospect, I think I have probably done a fairly good job. But during these years as I have read more, thought more, and talked more to people about the evaluation of teaching, particularly teaching writing, I have realized how haphazardly I and, I think, most administrators have been judging our writing teachers and our writing programs. We operate too much by hunch and impression, and we base many of our judgments on anecdotal evidence or on evaluation instruments that have never been validated for writing courses.

Not that we've always been wrong. Good instincts, dedication, and energy count for a lot, and many of us have been able to run successful programs simply because we believe in what we are doing and because we have zealous teachers working for us. I think, however, that it is time for administrators at all levels to take a more professional and objective look at teaching writing than we have ever done in the past. The discipline itself is becoming more sophisticated and mature, and we're beginning to realize what a complicated and difficult teaching process we're involved in. All administrators, from program directors to deans, need to realize that evaluating the teaching of writing is as complex as the teaching of writing itself, that it demands sophisticated procedures and instruments and a kind of professional expertise that we have not brought to it in the past. We need to take a more systematic and rigorous look at what we are doing. And all of us need to expand our vision beyond our own departments and institutions in order to see where our programs fit in the larger context. Only if we move in these directions are we going to be on solid ground when we try to improve our programs or try to defend them against critics, internal and external.

Because they are in such a critical decision-making and policy-setting position, freshman writing program directors especially need to learn more about evaluating writing programs and the problems and issues evaluation raises. Pooling and comparing insights we have gained during the eight years we have run the freshman program at Texas, Jim Kinneavy and I have identified the following issues connected with evaluation, that we think writing program directors should be informed about.

1. Placement tests. When a department chooses the placement test that it will use for credit, exemption, and placement in writing courses, it implicitly says it values

the skills that instrument tests. Accordingly, the writing program director needs to know if the skills the test is designed to measure are the same skills taught in freshman courses. That is, when students have successfully completed freshman composition, can they reasonably be expected to show significant gains if they take the placement test again? If not, how is the director going to justify the content of the freshman courses?

This is a sticky issue, one fraught with dangers no matter what one does. For economic and administrative reasons, as well as educational ones, most institutions use machine-scored placement tests. But people who have had long experience with machine-scored tests tell us that unless such a test is coupled with a writing sample, it won't tell us much about an individual's writing ability. Machine-scored tests will probably predict how well that individual will do in a writing class, however, and that predictive accuracy makes it difficult to say that such tests are worthless. But a director who is serious about enforcing sound placement procedures and making sure that poor writers do not place out of composition must insist that departmental and college administrators authorize writing samples for at least those students who score in the middle range on placement tests. The writing program director also needs to educate the faculty about what placement tests actually measure so that instructors won't assume that students with high scores already know how to write. Those who do make that assumption are likely to be badly disappointed.

2. Research design and reliable evaluation of a writing program. Because almost all writing program directors come from English departments, they are usually uninformed about statistical methods and often hostile to any proposal that smacks of quantification. They don't know how many variables may be involved in trying to compare different methods of teaching writing, they don't know how to set up controlled experiments, they know little about the precautions one must observe in giving and scoring pretests and posttests, they don't know what kind of data can be obtained from a computer and what kind cannot, and so on. They also do not realize how much it costs to make almost any kind of evaluation, whether it involves comparing the writing development of students taught by different methods or simply the cost of paying someone to read writing samples for placement purposes.

Probably most freshman directors cannot take the time to become experts in statistics, psychometrics, or computer programming. But if they hope to evaluate their own programs or want to gather reliable data on which to base requests or proposals, they need to learn the basics of research design, and they should recruit for their faculty at least one person competent to set up and supervise evaluations. They also have to figure computer time into their budget and confer with the computer people on their campus to find out how they can use those facilities.

3. Hazards of experimental programs. In the interests of flexibility and growth, most freshman directors and committees invite their faculties to submit proposals for using new approaches and materials for teaching composition. Almost no one would urge that we keep our composition program a closed system, however committed to a particular philosophy we may be. But directors who solicit new ideas should look at them carefully with several considerations in mind.

First, if experiments are going to benefit the department, the department must

be able to duplicate them. If a so-called experimental approach to teaching writing depends on the knowledge and skills of one particular teacher, then it should not be considered a real experiment. It is a variant. A few students may benefit from it, but the whole program will not. And too many variants having no long-range value can splinter a program.

Second, if the department wants to learn from an experiment, it must be able to evaluate the experiment. Evaluation not only raises the problem of research design that I just mentioned and the cost of making the evaluation. It also raises the question of evaluation criteria. No one can judge how well an experimental component in a program is doing unless its goals are the same as those of the traditional components. To establish evaluation criteria, therefore, the writing director or committee must spell out the goals of the program as a whole. Experiments should be judged by the same criteria, against each other and against the norm.

Perhaps the chief problem lies in getting the people who propose experiments to agree to participate in an evaluation that is designed and controlled by the writing program director or committee. Creative people who have the initiative and energy to propose a new system of teaching are apt to be zealots who believe so strongly in what they want to do that they can scarcely tolerate anyone who questions their methods or philosophy. Often they do not cooperate willingly with evaluators, and they resent and contest any negative judgments made on their projects. Yet no department can afford to allow individuals or groups to initiate major changes in its program unless those changes are going to be monitored and judged. For that reason, a writing director needs to outline the evaluation procedures that will be used to assess experiments before those experiments are authorized. We learned the hard way at Texas.

4. What it costs to improve a program. Writing program directors and department chairs need to know what improving a writing program costs; unless they do, they cannot set realistic goals for that program nor bargain intelligently with the people who allot money and set priorities for the institution. Watching deans and vice-presidents at work has convinced me that they have neither time nor sympathy for high-minded department chairs and program directors who have not done their homework. Good ideas nearly always cost money, and people in charge want to know how much. Should the size of all writing classes be reduced from 25 to 20? Almost everyone agrees that they should, but in a program the size of the one at Texas, that reduction would instantly create 50 new sections of freshman English. Who would teach them? Can the department hire 25 more half-time instructors? Are there qualified people available? Should 50 faculty members each be asked to teach an extra section? The director who recommends such a change must have answers to those questions.

Should departmental standards be raised? That's always a popular proposal with those who find that some students who placed out of first semester composition don't meet their standards for good writers. But the director who would propose increasing the cutoff score for exemption from first-semester composition should first look at the distribution of those scores. In the department at Texas, for example, raising the ECT cutting score for exemption from the first course from 550 to 600 would instantly create 80 new sections of freshman

English. Once more the issue of who would teach those sections would come up, as well as the problem of finding hours and rooms for those new classes.

Should a department require a writing sample from all entering freshmen? Almost everyone agrees that students should not be placed solely on the basis of machine-scored tests. But last year we admitted 4,900 freshmen to the University of Texas at Austin; this year we expect several hundred more. If we suggest that all those students submit writing samples, we need to know where, when, and under whose supervision they are going to write them, who is going to grade them, how those graders are going to be trained, supervised, and paid, and how the results are going to be processed. One could ask similar questions about the ramifications of setting up a writing lab, requiring more hours of composition, or adopting an English proficiency test for all graduates.

By raising these kinds of questions I am not suggesting that writing program directors or chairs should just give up and decide that there is no point in trying to reduce class size or raise standards. Not only do I think they should try, I think they should nag, preach, wheedle, and generally make a nuisance of themselves with the higher administration. But when they do approach administrative officers, they should be sure they know the cost of what they are asking for and be able to defend that cost. They must also figure out their priorities. If they can get only part of what they ask for, they should decide ahead of time which change will benefit their program most. And they should remember that telling the dean, "If the university can afford to spend fourteen million dollars adding on to the football stadium, it can afford to reduce the size of writing classes," is both pointless and not very bright. In the first place, the dean probably agrees, but can't afford to say so in public. Second, for a faculty member to imply that the dean has access to nonacademic funds is naive.

5. The pitfalls of evaluation methods. A writing program director should know some of the problems of evaluating teaching, especially teaching writing. Reading Richard Larson's *The Evaluation of Teaching College English* (New York: Modern Language Association/ERIC, 1971), is the first requisite. In this monograph, Larson outlines several approaches to evaluating a teacher's performance and points out the limitations of each. A director who realizes those limitations and understands that a conscientious effort to judge writing teachers must include a variety of methods can, with the help of some people who are knowledgeable in the field, try to devise a system of evaluation that will be fair to his or her teachers and yet will yield information from which both the teachers and the program can benefit.

One step a director can take is to establish a committee to draft a student evaluation form designed specifically for writing courses. Another step is to put together a set of guidelines about what observers should look for when they visit writing classrooms. Still another is to establish criteria for judging a teacher's writing assignments or grading of papers. Drafting these tools for evaluation is a formidable responsibility, but directors who allow their programs and teachers to be evaluated by instruments and procedures set up by outsiders who know virtually nothing about the process and problems of teaching writing are not taking care of their own best interests.

6. What's going on at other institutions. Finally, directors of writing programs

should know how their programs compare to those at similar institutions. It is easy to get so immersed in our own problems that we no longer see them in proportion. When we begin to fantasize about some ideal institution where money is plentiful, administrators are enlightened, students are highly motivated and well prepared, and teaching writing is respected and rewarded, it's time to come down to earth and find out some facts. What is the average class size in other composition programs? What do their T.A.s get paid? What kind of training program do they have for their teachers? Who runs it? What is the average teaching load? What is their composition requirement? What is the average SAT or ACT score of their freshmen, and how many are exempted from freshman English? How many are enrolled in remedial courses? How are those courses funded?

Directors can get the answers to some of these questions from the new MLA publication, *Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978). They can also learn about writing programs through such journals as *WPA* and from reading regular and special issues of the Association of Departments of English *Bulletin* published by MLA. In Texas, we formed a state Association of Directors of Freshman English, which also helps. This group meets and presents a program each fall, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the South Central MLA, and in the spring, when the Texas Council of Teachers of English meets. The programs deal with ways to improve freshman English courses. And association with peers helps directors to get to know each other and strengthens their informal network of communication.

Finding out what is going on at other institutions benefits program directors in a number of ways. First, they can get some idea of how well their own programs measure up and what kinds of changes might be possible. Often they will find that they're doing better than they thought. Second, they will realize that their problems are not unique or even unusual, and therefore that other directors can provide good counsel and lots of reinforcement. But perhaps the greatest advantage of learning as much as one can about other writing programs is that the information is invaluable in negotiating with the upper administration. To be able to tell one's chair or the dean or the vice-president of academic affairs that the University of Iowa has an eight-hour composition requirement is useful when one wants to persuade the administration to reinstate the second required semester of composition. To argue that the cutoff score for exemption from first-semester composition should be raised, it helps to know that the ECT cutting score at Ball State University is 600 and that in the University of California system students who score below 600 must take remedial English. And in pleading for smaller classes, it's useful to know that at the University of Virginia, composition classes are limited to 18. Administrators are competitive about other institutions, and the writing program director who can substantiate the claim, "Everybody else does it," makes a powerful impression.

I have focused my comments on administrators at the freshman level because I believe that they are the ones who are closest to the problems of evaluation of writing programs and that they are the ones who can have the most influence on chairs and deans. A well-informed and astute freshman writing program director can establish good relations with top-level administrators by keeping them informed about the departmental writing program, what its successes are, and

what its needs are. That program director can cultivate the good will of both the administration and the general public by publicizing the goals of the program and by showing how the program is trying to meet problems that are everyone's shared concern. And the freshman writing program director who can evaluate his or her own writing program objectively, intelligently, and professionally is most likely to be able to strengthen that program.

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