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Patterns of Composition Instruction¹

Linda Polin and Edward White²

This article is the second in a series of articles based upon findings from our federally-funded research on effective college composition instruction. In our first article, and in this article, we describe results from a detailed questionnaire sent to all composition instructors on each of the nineteen campuses of the California State University. From 418 faculty responses we were able to construct thirteen "factors" describing attitudes, perceptions, and practices related to department composition programs and instructional practices of individual faculty. Our earlier article discusses the seven factors bearing on composition faculty attitudes toward teaching and students, with particular attention to differences between tenure-track or tenured faculty and part- and full-time contract instructors. In this article, we again draw upon findings from the questionnaire data, but focus upon the six factors describing preferences in instructional practices as reported by the 418 faculty respondents. We describe below some of the ways different groupings of faculty approach the teaching of remedial and regular composition classes.

The fact that our questionnaire generated six distinct instructional factors is testimony to the coherence and logic of our approach to the problem of describing common practices in writing instruction. Though these factors seem "obvious" to many, our data provide statistical evidence for confirming or disputing a number of widely accepted beliefs. Contrary to some approaches to this issue, we did not begin with presumed groupings or categories; the statistical operation of factor analysis provided patterns of responses on questionnaire items and we proceeded inductively to attempt to understand, name, and explain the meaning of the patterns so generated. This procedure provides not only a description but also a measure for assessing who holds which instructional beliefs in each of three instructional contexts: remedial, freshman composition, and other lower-division writing courses. Of the 418 respondents, 233 choose to report on their freshman composition course instruction; 74 reference their remedial coursework; and 64 describe instruction in other lower-division writing courses they teach. Forty-seven neglected to mark their course referent and are excluded from analyses reported here.

Of the 74 who reference their remedial coursework, the majority, 43, are contract (not tenure-track) instructors. Of the 233 describing their freshman composition course, more than half, 132, are tenured/tenure-track. Of those 64 teaching "other lower-division writing courses," the majority, 44, are tenured/tenure-track.

A Multi-faceted View of Writing Instruction

Most of the items on our questionnaire asked respondents to reflect on their instructional practices in teaching remedial writing, first-term freshman composition, or some other lower division writing course. After indicating course referent, all respondents answered the same set of items on their classroom instructional practices and goals.

In constructing the questionnaire items on instruction, we wanted to avoid relying upon one or two answers to a multiple choice item to make judgments about what was going on in composition classrooms. We decided upon a multi-faceted approach, partitioning instruction into six categories in which faculty make instructional decisions: (1) themes underlying the organization and sequence of writing class instruction, (2) materials used in writing class instruction, (3) classroom teaching arrangements in writing classes, (4) kind and number of writing assignments required of writing class students, (5) frequency of various kinds of response to student writing, and (6) proportion of in-class time spent in each of a variety of activities.

Themes. We provided eleven theme statements for respondents to rate in terms of importance to course instruction ("very important" to "not important at all"). These theme statements represented a variety of perspectives, from "expose students to good literature" and "allow for practice in writing activities necessary for success in other college courses," to "teach invention skills, such as planning, prewriting, clustering, heuristics" and "allow for in-class writing in a workshop setting." Many respondents rated more than one theme "very important."

Faculty also indicated the source or reason for their ratings: department policy, informal faculty agreement, course tradition, personal preference, experimenting with new ideas (and "not applicable"). Unexpectedly, items on the source or reason for instructional decisions did not show much variation of any sort (among faculty status, from campus to campus, or among course referents). For the most part, faculty consistently checked department policy *and* personal preference as the reasons behind their instructional practices, a curious combination in the light of the variety of practices normally used by so many faculty in the same department.

The most likely reason for this combination, in our judgment, is that many department policies may be general enough to be all things to all people; in such a case, there is a policy supporting every teacher's practices, whatever those practices may be. Some faculty may have checked "department policy" as an influence even when there is no policy at all, since no policy suggests general approval of whatever may occur. We suspect that the faculty and the department in most cases give so little attention to alternatives for classroom practice that most composition teachers simply imagine that what they do is department policy; it thus becomes possible to be an autonomous teacher who conforms to department rules no matter what one does.

Materials. We offered faculty a list of eleven kinds of materials that could be used in support of writing instruction. These varied from grammar handbooks to students' own writings. As with instructional themes, respondents rated importance of each item.

Classroom Arrangements. In this section we offered four items describing interaction between the instructor and the students, and asked respondents to rate the frequency with which they engaged in each. Types of interaction included small group and individualized work, formal lectures and guided discussions (for example, "simultaneous small group activities, during which I circulate among the working groups.") Choices of frequency ranged along a four point scale from "almost always" to "rarely or never." Again, we queried faculty on the underlying reason for these choices, and again we found most faculty selecting both department policy and personal preference.

In-class Activities. We provided a list of fourteen in-class activities that might reasonably occur in support of writing instruction: writing "on a given topic" or "topics of their own choosing," or "free writing or journal writing;" "discussing upcoming assignments," or "mechanics and standard usage," or "linguistics"; and others.

This section required us to combine measures of emphasis and frequency. We recognized that particular class activities might be concentrated at the beginning of a term or dispersed across the term, recurring on and off as part of a class session. We managed to devise a rating system that took these differences into account and yet provided some sense of range from "not done in class" or "not done at all" to "a major activity in every class."

Assignments. Oddly enough, we found very little variation among faculty in their reports of their writing assignments and of their responses to student writing. This lack of variation in answers made it impossible for us to find distinguishing "patterns" of responses, and, thus, impossible for these items to be strongly linked with one or another of the patterns of instructional themes, materials, arrangements, or activities.

Six Patterns of Instruction

Responses to themes, materials, teaching arrangements, and in-class activities combined to form six instructional factors. We refer to each factor as an instructional "approach" to teaching writing. We selected specific factor names to represent the broad instructional theme characterized by the items the factor encompasses. The six patterns of instruction represented by our factors are listed on tables 1 through 6. They describe the following approaches to writing instruction: (1) Literature, (2) Peer Workshop, (3) Rhetorical Modes, (4) Basic Skills, (5) Writing Lab, and, (6) Service Course.

Interpreting Factors. The numbers in the Item Weight column of each chart represent the relative strength of each questionnaire item as a member of that factor group. The higher the weight, the more confidence we have in it as a characteristic of that trait. Items with lower weights are relatively less reliable indicators of the trait. We have included in our factors all items whose weights indicate at least a moderate influence (weights at and above .35). For example, of the six questionnaire items comprising the Literature Approach (Table 1), "analyzing literature" has the highest item weight (.82) which indicates it is the most stable and, therefore, most characteristic element of the trait.

Factor Scores. We have generated scores for individual faculty respondents on each of the six factors. These scores describe the degree to which an instructor's teaching is characterized by the trait embodied in each factor. Individual scores were accumulated into group averages which we used to describe (1) status groups made up of tenured and contract instructors, and (2) course groups made up of remedial composition, regular freshman composition, and other lower-division writing courses. (We cannot contrast the nineteen campus groups because they each contain a different ratio of contract to tenured instructors. The average of one campus might represent largely the responses of tenured faculty, while the average score of another campus might reflect its greater number of contract lecturers. Thus, we would end up comparing tenured instructors with contract instructors instead of campus with campus.)

The Literature Approach. The main thrust of this approach is classroom analysis of literature (weight = .82). Class activities and instructional materials also emphasize the use of literature in writing instruction.

The Peer Workshop Approach. Small group activities and arrangements are the critical elements of this factor: students working with other students, in small groups, discussing or scoring their own writing. Instructors committed to this approach provide prewriting activities, allow for writing on a topic of one's own choosing, and use student writings as instructional material in such activities as peer criticism and scoring.

Individualized Workshop Approach. At first glance, this factor seems to describe the same instructional environment as the "Peer Workshop" factor, though only one questionnaire item is shared between them: "to provide regular in-class writing in a workshop setting." In the context of items comprising the "Peer Workshop" factor, the notion of "workshop" describes a variety of small group activities. On the other hand, the items comprising the "Writing Lab" approach reflect an emphasis upon the individual, providing a setting in which the course instructor or a tutor works with student writers by themselves. This factor does not include questionnaire items describing in-class discussion or instructional materials. Instead, most items emphasize "doing" writing in class.

The Text-Based Modes Approach. This approach to instruction relies heavily upon rhetoric textbooks and what publishers call "rhetoric readers," that is, anthologies arranged according to rhetorical categories. These provide models of writing and style guidelines, and they are used to generate class discussion, generally in the form of analysis of prose models. This factor does not include items which mention writing in class. Instead, students spend a good deal of class time reading and analyzing other peoples' writing, learning from increasingly sophisticated examples.

The Basic Skills Approach. This factor describes a perspective on writing as "correct" expression and a desire to establish in students the fundamentals of sentence and paragraph construction.

The Service Course Approach. This factor describes a perspective on college composition as a general education requirement which prepares students for writing in their other college courses. Writing assignments and in-class activities revolve around the term or research paper.

Differences in Instructional Practices

We used group scores in statistical analyses to discover whether instructor status and course referent groups differ in their instructional behaviors and preferences.

We expected instructional approach to differ according to the goals of the class. That is, freshman composition and remedial composition courses would seem to require different instructional strategies, regardless of the rank of the instructor or the campus on which the course is taught. For example, we expected the Basic Skills perspective to be generally repudiated by freshman composition writing instructors, though perhaps not by remedial writing instructors.

In fact, our sample yields no such course-related differences in practices, methods, and goals. At first startling, this lack of distinction between skill levels can be interpreted in terms of an individual instructor's general approach to writing instruction. Perhaps an instructor embraces a general set of methods and goals in regard to writing instruction generally and varies the level of difficulty or sophistication of specific class tasks and content to suit the student group. That is, the instructor perceives the change in level to be no more radical than the customary variation in ability among different class sections of the same course.

This interpretation suggests that particular theories we hold about teaching writing operate as stable guidelines affecting changeable classroom practices. Thus, differences in any one instructor's remedial and regular composition instruction may not be as accurately measured by

questions about theories of writing as by pace, content, grading criteria, and other day-to-day elements of teaching that express instructional theory.

Results of data analyses show more instructional variety within the ranks of freshman composition than between freshman composition and remedial or other lower-division composition courses. We also find variation within the ranks of contract lecturers according to the campus on which they teach, regardless of whether the course they teach is remedial or regular freshman composition.

Tenured versus Contract. We used the analysis of variance statistical test to examine the six instructional factors for differences between contract and tenured/tenure-track faculty in their preference for or dislike of each of the six instructional factors. We found differences for only one factor, the Text-Based Modes approach. Our analyses indicate that contract people, as a group, respond more favorably to this approach than do their tenured and tenure-track colleagues ($p = .05$).

Further analyses reveal that this difference is particularly strong between contract and tenured/tenure-track faculty teaching first term, freshman composition. Contract lecturers show greater enthusiasm for this approach than do their tenured and tenure-track colleagues who generally reject this approach to freshman composition ($p = .001$).

This may reflect greater inexperience or anxiety among contract lecturers, resulting in a preference for what they believe are widely accepted instructional materials and methods. Or, it may be the inevitable result of the late hiring practices often associated with the use of contract lecturers; in such cases, text book choices often need to be made by the composition chair in advance of the actual hiring of the instructor.

Variations among Contract Instructors. The tenured and tenure-track faculty are a statistically homogeneous lot; however much any one tenured member may disagree with another, the patterns of responses of that group are much more similar than dissimilar. The contract faculty, however, display greater variety within their ranks. Oddly enough, this variation does not correspond to the level of writing course instruction they offer. Rather, these lecturers prefer different instructional approaches according to the campus on which they teach.

Three of our instructional factors show this inter-campus variation among contract lecturers: the Text-Based Modes Approach ($p = .02$), the Individualized Workshop Approach ($p = .05$), and the Service Course Approach ($p = .01$). Preference for or dislike of these approaches appears to be a function of the campus on which the instructors teach, not the course they teach.

At first glance, this too seems an odd finding. However, when we look at which factors yield this finding and if we consider the world of the "contract" instructors, we find clues to help us unravel this mystery. Inter-campus differences might include such matters as enrollment size, institutional emphasis, department policy, student characteristics, all of which would be expected to affect all faculty. However, we do not find inter-campus differences for the tenure-track and tenured faculty, so we must look further to uncover inter-campus differences that affect contract but not tenured/tenure-track faculty.

Composition coordinators interviewed for this study reported they have far more influence in every way upon contract faculty than upon their tenured and tenure-track colleagues. This often includes a central role in hiring, training, evaluating, and retaining of composition instructors. At the same time, they report little or no influence over or knowledge of what tenured composition instructors do.

Our findings confirm the potential influence of the composition coordinator over the kind of composition instruction received by students. It is natural and inevitable that the coordinator will suggest or order materials and propose classroom practices that reflect his or her own sense of the best way to teach composition. The contract lecturer is in no position to treat those ideas with the kind of skepticism typical of those more secure in their position. Or, put more positively, the coordinator's superior knowledge of composition instruction is more readily accepted by those of lower status than by peers or those higher in rank.

So why do contract instructors differ along these three instructional perspectives according to campus? We suspect the major reason is in the hiring and training of contract lecturers. Where some campuses hire the same contract lecturers over and over again, there may be few differences in instructional practice between tenured and contract instructors. On those campuses where lecturers are hired late and where there is a fair amount of turn-over in the lecturer population (as lecturers find tenure-track employment or more lucrative professions), the lack of preparation time may dictate reliance upon one of the three instructional approaches listed above. Together these approaches (Text-Based Modes, Individualized Workshop, and Service Course) are the most appropriate for late hiring. The Text-Based Mode makes selection of a text fairly easy; non-fiction anthologies and rhetoric texts are ubiquitous and allow instructors to make individual selections from a wide variety of reading material. The Individualized Workshop and Service Course perspective do not rely upon textbooks, but upon the interpersonal skills and common knowledge of library research which contract lecturers typically possess.

While there are many possible explanations for our findings, all tend to suggest the composition coordinator's severely limited influence on

the tenured staff and opportunity to influence the contract staff. Should the composition coordinator desire to exert influence over the composition faculty, the six basic approaches to composition described here may provide an opportunity to survey those tenured faculty and develop a departmental policy. Of course, some departments may be perfectly happy to maintain their present variety of approaches since there is as yet no clear evidence that one approach is necessarily better than the other. We will be addressing the relative effectiveness of these approaches in later articles that report on student performance.

Notes

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²Other members of the research team are Ron Basich, The California State University Chancellor's Office, Office of Analytical Studies, and four English department faculty from four different campuses of The California State University: Kim Flachmann (Bakersfield), Charles Moore (Sacramento), David Rankin (Dominguez Hills), and William Stryker (Northridge).

TABLE 1. The Literature Approach

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme:	
to expose students to good literature	.70
Instructional Materials:	
poetry & fiction anthologies	.68
poetry, fiction, & non-fiction anthologies	.64
individual works of literature	.71
Class Activities:	
analyzing literature	.82
analyzing prose models of composition	.35

TABLE 2. Peer Workshop Approach.

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme:	
to teach invention skills, such as planning, prewriting, clustering, heuristics	.42
to provide regular in-class writing in a workshop setting	.37
Instructional Materials:	
students' own writing	.42
Classroom Arrangements:	
simultaneous small group activities, during which I circulate among the working groups	.66
Class Activities:	
free writing or journal writing	.52
students discussing or scoring their own writing	.72
students working with other students	.82

TABLE 3. Writing Lab Approach.

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme:	
to allow for frequent in-class writing	.79
to provide regular in-class writing in a workshop setting	.59
Classroom Arrangements:	
individual work, permitting me to circulate among working students	.47
Class Activities:	
writing essays on a given topic	.50
working with tutors during class	.41

TABLE 4. The Rhetoric Approach.

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme: to proceed developmentally through discourse modes from, e.g., description to persuasion	.51
Instructional Materials: non-fiction anthology	.63
rhetoric text or style book, without handbook	.49
rhetoric text or style book, handbook included	.56
Class Activities: working on or discussing material in texts on composition	.61
analyzing prose models of composition	.56

TABLE 5. The Basic Skills Approach.

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme: to teach for competence with basic units of prose, e.g., phrase, sentence, paragraph	.51
to teach correct grammar and usage	.69
Instructional Materials: grammar and usage handbook	.46
Class Activities: discussing mechanics and standard usage	.65

TABLE 6. The Service Course Approach.

Questionnaire Item	Item Weight
Instructional Theme: to practice writing activities necessary for success in other college courses, e.g., term papers	.65
Kinds of Writing Assignments: writing a term paper or research paper	.74
Class Activities: discussing techniques for writing research papers	.76

NOTE: Of all the variables in the factor analysis run, only those with item weights equal to or greater than .35 are included on these tables.

