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The WPA on Campus

The Transformation of Instruction in Writing: Implications for Class Size[1]

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Talk of enrollment reductions or budget cuts in higher education makes those of us who teach writing nervous. All too often, cost-conscious administrators translate such cuts directly into increases in class size. Packing 25 more students into a lecture course in, say, introductory biology that already accommodates 300 students is serious enough; but we believe that three or even two more students in every section of freshman composition is potentially even worse.

Class size has long been an issue for writing teachers. In 1912 Edwin B. Hopkins published an article in *English Journal* entitled "Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under Present Conditions?" His answer, a loud "No," was partly based on the problems of class size. More recently, The Association of Departments of English and the National Council of Teachers of English have published guidelines for class size; the current recommendation is a maximum of 20 for regular freshman composition sections and 15 for "developmental" or "basic" writing courses (see, for example, "Statement of Principles and Standards"). Few colleges or universities actually adhere to these national guidelines now. Enlarging writing classes would, therefore, exacerbate a teaching situation that is already far short of ideal.

The writing instructor's constant struggle with overwork and burnout are legitimate concerns. We want to emphasize, however, that the issue of class size in composition today is not simply a matter of self-interested academics trying to keep their workload manageable; it is a function of a fundamental shift in the way writing and the teaching of writing are understood within the profession. Simply put, we have shifted attention from students' final written products to the maturity and flexibility of the process that leads to those products.

The new approach to teaching writing grew out of developments after World War II, which reached a crescendo in the last two decades and transformed writing instruction at every level, elementary through college. Behind this shift were research from linguistics and cognitive psychology, the revival of classical rhetoric, changes in literary criticism, and perhaps

most importantly, detailed research into how writers actually compose—tempered and complemented, as always, by the classroom experience of veteran teachers (Berlin).

The new model for teaching writing emphasizes the act of composing --the process--especially how writers generate ideas and revise them through a series of drafts. Students are taught to find appropriate forms as part of the struggle to adapt a particular idea to a particular audience, rather than being given standard models to imitate, such as the "five-paragraph theme." Teachers still respond to final products and to traditional concerns of correctness, but they also try to intervene at strategic moments in the process of composing when their advice will do the most good.

Maxine Hairston, former president of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, characterizes the new writing pedagogy as follows:

- It focuses on the writing process; instructors intervene in students' writing during the process.
- It teaches strategies for invention and discovery; instructors help students to generate content and discover purpose.
- It is rhetorically based; audience, purpose, and occasion figure prominently in the assignment of writing tasks. . . .
- It views writing as a recursive [looping back on itself] rather than a linear process; [planning], writing, and revision are activities that overlap and intertwine.
- It is holistic, viewing writing as an activity that involves the intuitive and non-rational as well as the rational faculties.
- It emphasizes that writing is a way of learning and developing as well as a communication skill.
- It includes a variety of writing modes, expressive as well as expository. . . .
- It views writing as a disciplined creative activity that can be analyzed and described; its practitioners believe that writing can be taught.
- It is based on linguistic research and research into the composing process.
- It stresses the principle that writing teachers should be people who write. (86)

What impact do these ideas have on actual instruction? As Ann Ruggles Gere (University of Michigan) puts it, we are no longer concerned exclusively with "writing to show learning" but also with "writing to learn." Writers sometimes know exactly what they want to say before they start

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writing; but just as often, in the act of composing, they perform more careful analyses, forge new syntheses, and otherwise stumble into ideas that simply were not there before they put pen to paper. In fact, the idea of writing as learning is the foundation of the "writing-across-the-curriculum" programs that have flourished nationwide during the last fifteen years. Writing teachers have realized that teaching writing is in fact teaching thinking.

Unfortunately, we cannot simply issue students a set of instructions for effective thinking. Instead, we must assign and discuss provocative readings, craft writing assignments to promote critical thinking, teach strategies of "invention" (exploration or discovery), and respond to multiple drafts with text-specific comments to encourage substantive revision. We have learned that students do not respond well to the kind of rubber-stampable comments ("awk," "dev," or "vague"–itself a vague remark) that used to be the writing teacher's stock-in-trade.

As a result, we must individualize instruction more than ever before. While many of us encourage students to take more responsibility for their writing, responding to each other's drafts in collaborative "peer response groups," we nonetheless spend an extraordinary amount of time through conferences and written commentary responding to individual drafts of individual students' papers.

More than ever, we are confident that we can guide students through the writing process. We can help them develop as thinkers and writers. We can help them find their respective voices. Our hope is that, by helping them become articulate, effective members of the larger community, we can empower them, but we do so one student at a time, one draft at a time.

We do not envy administrators as they attempt to maintain high standards in the face of enrollment reductions or budget cuts. We believe, however, that when they stop to consider the implications of the far-reaching changes in writing instruction, they will not wish to solve their (and our) problem by enlarging composition classes.

Note

1. This article was originally written at the request of the Oregon State Composition Advisory Committee (a group including all the WPAs in the state). When budgetary woes prompted administrators around the state to begin talking about enlarging writing courses, the group felt that some such position statement was necessary--on the theory that if administrators, legislators, and even the public had a better idea of what writing teachers actually do now, they would be less inclined to tinker with class sizes. Perhaps you, as a WPA, find yourself in a similar situation, in which case you may find this statement, addressed to laypersons, useful. An earlier version of this article appeared as "Don't Increase the Sizes of Oregon Composition Classes." Copyright © 1989 by the *East Oregonian*, Pendleton, Oregon, December 16, 1989. Reprinted by permission.

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