

Alternative Models of First-Year Composition: Possibilities and Problems

Betty Bamberg

In the lead article in a 1995 collection of essays entitled *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, Robert Connors observes that the freshman composition course "has been at the heart of a continuing series of arguments about its worth and standing" since the requirement was adopted at Harvard in 1885 (3). He then reviews both the primary objections to the course and alternative solutions that have been proposed during recurring cycles of reformism and abolitionism over the past 100 years. Referring to recent challenges to the first-year composition course as the "New Abolitionism," Connors points out a critically important difference between today's critiques and those in the past: historically it has been outsiders who attacked the freshman course, but today it is composition insiders who are debating the merits of the separate first-year writing course and recommending that it be abolished or radically restructured.¹

Although the "New Abolitionism" may ultimately have no more impact on the existing pattern of first-year writing instruction than the "Old Abolitionism," current challenges could prove more powerful than those in the past. Economic pressures in higher education have resulted in continuing demands to reduce budgets and reallocate resources, and writing programs and courses are an obvious target for administrators who are faced with difficult decisions about institutional priorities and inadequate resources to meet competing demands. For example, a 24 June 1996 *Los Angeles Times* article reported that UCLA "administrators say they are intrigued by the idea of integrating writing so fully that courses that focus only on writing could become obsolete" (Wallace B3). The article makes clear that the impetus for eliminating separate writing courses grows primarily out of administrators' desires to free up budgetary resources to replace faculty lost since 1990 as a result of a 13% decline in state funding. In addition, many colleges and universities are currently engaged in General Education reform. During this process, writing courses and programs at some institutions are being substantially restructured or eliminated. Calls to abolish first-year writing courses on theoretical and pragmatic grounds by highly regarded teachers and researchers within the field of Rhetoric and Composition Studies are, therefore, likely to give credibility and further impetus to administrators or university committees who are seeking to radically change or to eliminate first-year composition instruction. Although the New Abolitionists have raised serious questions regarding first-year writing instruction that merit consideration, they have not examined the extent to which the alternatives proposed will resolve the issues they have raised. In this article, I will examine the theoretical and pragmatic objections to first-year composition courses raised

by the New Abolitionists and then assess several frequently proposed alternatives, evaluating them from the perspective of a WPA's dual (and sometimes conflicting) roles of curriculum designer/innovator and day-to-day administrator.

Pragmatic and Theoretical Objections to First-Year Composition

One line of New Abolitionist criticism has focused on institutional structures and conditions associated with administering writing programs. Such concerns led Sharon Crowley to advocate eliminating the requirement (although not the course) in her 1991 *Pretext* article which Connors identifies as a "founding statement of the New Abolitionism" (21). Connors characterizes Crowley as arguing that "eliminating the requirement would get rid of admissions exams, prevent any sort of indoctrination of first-year students, offer administrative control over enrollments, and control teaching assistantships more effectively" (Connors 21). At a 1993 CCCC presentation organized in response to Crowley's proposal, Charles Schuster raised other pragmatic objections when he described freshman composition programs, in Connor's words, as the "Third World of English studies . . . in which faculty are underpaid and overworked" and concluded that the course should be eliminated if departments and institutions were unwilling to acknowledge and support the teaching of writing (22).

However, more recent challenges to first-year composition have been based on theoretical issues: the role of content in writing instruction and the question of transfer. In "Writing in the Content Areas: Some Theoretical Complexities," David Kaufer and Richard Young characterize typical first-year writing courses as "writing with no content in particular" or "Writing-WNCP" (77), and contrast them with courses in which content serves more than an instrumental function, that is, "writing with a specific content or Writing-WSC" (82). They contend that Writing-WNCP courses emphasize "personal expression in interpersonal rhetorical transactions" (79) because they assume that "pretty much the *same* skills of writing will develop no matter what content is chosen" and, therefore, typically prefer contents that "do not require so much time and effort to learn—lest instruction in writing be compromised" (78). In Writing-WSC courses, on the other hand, students are engaged in writing about a subject matter, which Kaufer and Young define as a "content that has been discussed in recurring and public rhetorical situations," and students must, therefore, "first engage in learning its history and theory" (79). Kaufer and Young draw heavily on the work of Bereiter and Scardamalia who postulate that "expert" writing involves moving back and forth between two separate problem spaces—rhetoric and content. They argue that only in Writing-WSC courses do students contend with these dual problem spaces when composing. As a result, Writing-WNCP courses cannot give students instruction or practice in negotiating between the demands of these dual problem spaces, a skill which will be necessary in virtually all other university writing (99).

New Abolitionist critics also object to the goals of first-year writing courses which they label as “general skills writing instruction” (Petraglia, ix). Drawing on examples from Writing Across the Curriculum programs and research on Writing in the Disciplines, they point out that general skills writing courses do not teach the complex genres and subtle rhetorical practices that college writers must learn to write papers in their major fields because such knowledge can only be learned within the context of a discipline.² Because research on learning general cognitive skills shows limited transferability from one learning task to another (Hill and Resnick), some critics have concluded that most skills are best learned *in context* through a “cognitive apprenticeship” in which novices and experts collaborate on meaningful tasks (Freedman 134). David Russell, who uses activity theory to analyze writing instruction in general skills writing courses, asserts that “there is no autonomous, generalizable skill or set of skills called ‘writing’ that can be learned and then applied to all genres or activities” (59) and claims that “to try to teach students to improve their writing by taking a GWSI [General Writing Skills Instruction] course is something like trying to teach people to improve their ping-pong, jacks, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, and so on by attending a course in general ball using” (58).

These theoretical issues regarding the relationship between content and writing and the problem of skills transfer are important, and WPAs should consider them carefully as they attempt to develop and improve writing courses and programs. But does it follow that general writing skills instruction can no longer be defended as having any genuine purpose or value and should therefore be abolished or radically reformed? In the next section, I will review four content-based curriculum models proposed as alternatives to the general skills writing course, assess the extent to which each model eliminates or mitigates problems identified by New Abolitionists critics, and then analyze potential benefits and constraints of each alternative.

Alternative Models of First-Year Composition

1. Eliminating First-Year Composition: The Writing Intensive Course

The writing intensive course, which integrates writing instruction into a broad range of existing content courses, has been one of the most widely adopted curricular structures in Writing Across the Curriculum programs. In most programs writing intensive courses have been required in addition to first-year composition courses and, therefore, continue and extend writing instruction beyond the first year rather than replace it. However, in 1986 SUNY-Albany, eliminated its first-year writing course when the faculty consciously rejected a “skills” concept of writing in favor of one that emphasized the socially constituted nature of literacy and that made writing instruction a broad faculty responsibility. As a result, students at Albany currently “take a minimum of two writing-intensive courses, at least one of which must be upper division, preferably in the student’s major” (Brannon 240). A variation on the writing intensive

model integrates writing into an existing course but does so by attaching a separate writing "component" using the lecture/discussion structure. At the University of California, San Diego, for example, all first-year students attend weekly writing/discussion sections in conjunction with an interdisciplinary, team-taught lecture course. The sections are led by graduate assistants who provide instructional support for writing papers assigned in the lecture course (Graham 114).

2. Replacing First-Year Composition: The Freshman Writing Seminar

Freshman writing seminars retain some features of the first-year writing course in that they are designed specifically for freshmen and are required during students' first year. However, they differ in that each seminar is, in effect, a special topics course. As a result, students are presented with a smorgasbord of content choices, all clearly identified so they can select a topic that interests them. Instructors (usually regular faculty members) choose topics based on their academic expertise or interests, and the readings and class discussions not only develop students' knowledge about the topic but become the basis for all writing assignments.

Cornell's program, for example, offers freshmen over 100 writing seminars on a variety of topics with faculty and graduate students from more than thirty disciplines designing and teaching the content of the seminars (Gottschalk 3). At Vanderbilt, faculty across the university offer writing seminars on varied topics, and students must complete two seminars during their first three semesters (Neel). As the term "seminar" implies, these classes are limited in size (usually 15-17 students) to encourage extensive student-teacher interaction and individual attention and response to students' writing.

3. Modifying First-Year Composition: Writing Links and Adjuncts

Writing links and adjuncts offer another approach to joining content and writing in first-year composition. In this model, writing courses are linked to existing content courses, usually a medium-sized or large General Education lecture course, and students enroll concurrently in both courses. The writing link carries the same number of credit hours as the content course while the adjunct usually meets fewer hours and carries less credit (Graham 112). In linked writing courses, instructors draw on the subjects and topics in the lecture course to develop writing assignments, a strategy which enables them to make use of students' developing knowledge in the content course instead of having to build the background knowledge for assignments within the writing course. Under ideal conditions, the linking will be synergistic: writing in the composition class helps students learn and understand concepts and content in the lecture class while topic knowledge and perspectives from the lecture class enable students to write compositions that have greater depth and critical insight than can usually be developed in the more limited discursive context of a general skills writing course.

At the University of Washington, whose Interdisciplinary Writing Program is a long established and highly successful example of the writing link model, 20 to 22 writing courses are linked each quarter to large lecture courses in a number of disciplines, usually with one or two links per course. Although requirements and assignments in the writing courses vary so that instructors can maximize linkage with individual lecture courses, most instructors require one "joint" paper (initially assigned in the lecture class) and design two other assignments that draw on the content and rhetorical forms of the lecture class.³ The attractiveness of this model lies in its apparent ability to join writing with content while maintaining an equal emphasis on writing and content instruction.

4. Reforming First-Year Composition: Specifying the Content

This model, which is reformist rather than abolitionist in spirit, limits the content or approach to content in first-year writing courses. In effect, it does away with the seemingly arbitrary selection of writing topics based on instructors' current interests or on the topics available in a composition reader and, instead, designates a single broad topic which will be the subject of inquiry for the entire term. David Russell, for example, suggests turning the first-year composition course into a liberal arts course about writing in society where students examine research about academic discourses and writing in the workplace, consider "ways writing shapes social processes and power relations," and become aware of the "role of writing in society and in their lives" (74). David Joliffe recommends using an "inquiry contract" in which students write four papers on a single, self-selected subject chosen because of their prior interest in the subject. Students begin by clarifying what they already know about the subject they have selected and conclude with a final paper that draws on previous work "to demonstrate a thesis or to persuade people to think or behave differently about their subject matter" (214). Joliffe maintains that the inquiry contract leads "the student to learn a great deal about a subject matter by considering it as being constituted by a public conversation" and creates the richer discursive context usually found only in content or disciplinary courses (215).

Another approach to limiting content is illustrated by Washington State University's first-year writing program. In revising their General Education program, the faculty decided to integrate internationalism into their General Education curriculum by selecting it as the content for the first-year composition course. Using a reader (*Writing About the World*) developed by writing program faculty and administrators, instructors design reading and writing assignments to develop an international perspective by asking students to focus on such issues as what it means to encounter the "other" and how to understand cultural difference (McLeod). As these examples show, this approach asks students to engage in an extended investigation of a subject which will allow them to consider that subject in depth, thereby creating an instructional context more closely related to the extended inquiry characteristic of most content courses.⁴

Assessing the Alternatives

Each of these content-based alternatives reduces, to varying degrees, the separation between writing and content that New Abolitionists have criticized in first-year writing courses. In theory, these models enable students to contend with both rhetorical and content problems as well as to engage in a deeper level of critical analysis than is usually possible in a general skills writing class where they typically spend two or three weeks on an assignment, each usually on a different and unrelated topic. However, varying degrees of emphasis are given to rhetorical and content instruction in the models considered. Viewing the alternatives along a continuum with a content emphasis at one end and a rhetorical emphasis at the other, the Writing Intensive and Freshman Writing Seminar models would be placed near the content end; the Writing Link model, which attempt to balance rhetoric and content, near the middle; and the specific content model near the rhetorical end. Such differences in emphasis are significant when considering the appropriateness of a model for a particular institution and its students.

Although all of the models address the role of content in writing, none undertakes to resolve the problem of "transfer"—learning to write for varied contexts. No evidence exists that genres and conventions that may be learned in a single content-based writing course will be more applicable to writing papers in other courses than the rhetorical forms and conventions taught in general skills writing courses. Writing papers for a freshman writing seminar that uses, for example, history as its content or for a writing-intensive sociology course will not prepare students to write literary analyses or scientific reviews. Instead, students are likely to be as confused as the subject of Lucille McCarthy's research who, as he moved from reviewing journal articles in *Cell Biology* to analyzing poems in *Introduction to Poetry*, concluded "that the writing he was doing was totally unlike anything he had ever done before" (126).

The problem of transfer continues at the upper division level even for students who have mastered the rhetorical moves of writing papers for their major classes. In "Writing in History: Narrating the Subject of Time," Sharon Stockton found that history majors receiving A's on their history papers were those who had learned how to move from causal analysis to a complex, specialized form of narrative which built the argument into a narrative event rather than stating it explicitly (55). However, English majors who received A's on their literary analysis papers had difficulty mastering the argument structure favored in history because it seemed like writing a plot summary, an anathema in literary analysis, and so they typically received lower grades on history papers than on their English papers (62). Moreover, genres and expectations can differ substantially even between courses within a discipline. Herrington's 1985 study of two required Chemical Engineering courses (Chemical Process Design and Chemical Engineering Laboratory) found that the two courses in effect constituted separate disciplinary "forums" which differed on a range of variables including issues addressed, the lines of reasoning used, the audience roles assumed, and the social purposes of the writing (119).

Whether any of the content-based instructional models described will be more effective than current general skills writing courses will depend, as all programs do, upon pragmatic issues of implementation as well as the institutional context. Therefore, WPAs must weigh such factors as the balance between writing and content, the match between the level of students' writing skills and the amount of writing instruction provided, the instructional staff available to teach content-based writing courses, and the institutional context to determine which, if any, of these alternatives might be successfully implemented in their institutions.

Student-Based Concerns and Constraints

A WPA's first consideration must be the writing ability of typical first-year students. The less emphasis that a curricular model places on rhetorical as opposed to content instruction, the greater the need for students to have developed a general rhetorical competence by the time they enter college or university. Although small, highly selective liberal arts colleges have long relied on writing intensive courses or freshman writing seminars rather than a separate, first-year writing course, students at the lower end of the admissions pool may need the additional emphasis on writing and rhetoric provided by a general skills writing course even at these institutions. Vanderbilt, for example, evaluates students on several measures (SAT score, high school GPA, and a placement essay) and requires those who score below a specified level to complete a separate general skills writing course before enrolling in their two required freshman writing seminars (Neel). The same need exists at highly selective research universities. At the University of California, which admits the top 12-1/2% of California's high school seniors, students must pass the Subject A examination or complete a preparatory writing course before taking the required first-year writing course(s). Therefore, the University of California-San Diego postpones the writing instruction component in its year-long freshman core until the winter quarter so that less proficient writers can meet the Subject A requirement during the fall quarter (Graham 114). At the University at Albany, SUNY, whose students have an average combined SAT of 1100, weaker students are assisted through "an array of programs—the Writing Center among them—that give students support, additional instruction, and ways of positioning their ideas within the University" (Brannon 241).

This consistent pattern of preparatory course work and additional instructional support for students with weaker writing skills suggests that institutions which have successfully eliminated or replaced the first-year general skills writing course have been able to do so because most of their entering freshmen have already achieved a relatively high level of general writing proficiency and because they make special provisions to provide additional instruction and support for the minority who are less proficient writers. As a result, the writing intensive or the freshman writing seminar model is not likely to be successful in less selective institutions except as an option for honors students or when it follows and builds on instruction in general skills writing courses.

Faculty-Based Concerns and Constraints

Another important consideration is the faculty expertise and commitment required to implement an alternative. Both the writing intensive and freshman writing seminar models depend on strong commitment from disciplinary faculty, a commitment that is unlikely to exist unless these programs are initiated by and/or enthusiastically embraced by the faculty. In addition, ongoing faculty development programs and adequate training in teaching writing are essential. Faculty development, which has been at the center of successful Writing Across the Curriculum programs, will be even more critical when faculty are teaching content-based writing courses that replace rather than build on a first-year course. Linked writing courses present special difficulties in staffing because of the additional time required to attend the linked course, to become familiar with its content, and to develop a degree of disciplinary understanding and expertise. To be successful, linked writing courses need a core faculty of versatile and highly experienced instructors who are able to analyze the discourse of the linked course and adapt their instruction accordingly (Graham 129). Neither inexperienced graduate students nor a pool of temporary, part-time lecturers are likely to develop the expertise or be willing to commit the additional time needed to teach linked courses. Institutions with established, successful writing link programs all rely primarily on experienced, full-time instructors: UC Santa Barbara uses full-time lecturers (Zimmerman), San Diego State University a combination of regular faculty and lecturers (Johns), and the Interdisciplinary Writing Program at the University of Washington a core faculty of six full-time lecturers supplemented by a small number of hand-picked, experienced TAs (Graham 122).

Administrative Concerns and Constraints

Finally, the size and complexity of the institution as well as the logistics involved in implementing an alternative must enter into any evaluation of whether it is likely to be successful. Freshman seminars taught by regular faculty are most easily implemented at smaller institutions, particularly ones that have a strong commitment to teaching. However, at least one large research institution—Cornell—has developed a program which uses both regular faculty and graduate students as instructors. Linked writing classes are arguably the most administratively complex of the models because of the difficulties of scheduling students concurrently in two classes and finding courses whose content and approach are easily adapted to achieve the goals of writing instruction. When the links constitute a first-year composition option (rather than a requirement for all students) as at the University of Washington, UC Santa Barbara, and San Diego State University, the logistical problems of enrollment, coordinating, and scheduling links are greatly reduced.

Finally, WPAs must be aware that the success of existing programs which exemplify these models results not only from the curricular model itself, but from an institution's history and context, including the skillful leadership of WPAs who have developed and administered the programs. As a result, a model

from one institution cannot be imported to another with an automatic guarantee of success. For example, Cornell's program of interdisciplinary freshman writing seminars was first established in 1966 when faculty in eight departments argued successfully that they should share the responsibility (and the accompanying graduate support) for writing instruction with the English Department. Since its reorganization in 1982 to ensure greater emphasis on writing instruction, several enterprising faculty directors have been able to establish the program's academic credibility and to obtain an endowment that provides additional funding. Continued faculty support and participation is maintained through an extensive, well-funded training program and through the requirement that graduate assistants, who teach two-thirds of the seminars, be mentored during their first term by a faculty member from their discipline. In addition, a group of full-time lecturers are responsible for coordinating instruction and handling the day-to-day administration (Gottschalk 2). The University of Washington's writing links were developed between 1977-1979 with the help of a FIPSE grant and now have semi-autonomous status within the Department of English (Graham 122). The program's success results not only from the presence of an energetic and resourceful director and a core faculty of experienced lecturers, but because the director has the authority to select both the lecture courses which will be linked to the writing classes and the TAs who teach in the program. WPAs who hope to borrow ideas from successful existing programs are well advised to analyze the institutional and instructional context of these programs carefully rather than to assume that the program structures can be successfully transplanted to their institutions.

The Role of General Skills Writing Courses

Although content-based writing instruction may prove to be a desirable alternative to general skills writing courses at some institutions, many first-year students will still benefit from a carefully designed general skills course because it is likely to offer more focused writing instruction than most content-based alternatives. In the final essay in *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, Charles Bazerman defends first-year composition as curricular support for first-year students who "as novices in the complex literate environments of the university, are engaged in many transformations in their literacy practices" (254). Rather than measuring the first-year course against the richer discursive contexts of disciplinary writing courses and finding it lacking, we should acknowledge its important role in introducing students to "the critical reflective discourse that provides the medium for the undergraduate experience" (256).

Support for Bazerman's position can be found in the research on "Reading-to-Write" conducted by Linda Flower and her colleagues, who studied the strategies, organizing plans, and text formats used by freshmen at Carnegie Mellon as they responded to writing assignments. They found that students brought well-practiced strategies for summarizing, organizing information into a draft, and writing a standard school theme to their university writing tasks. However, these strategies and formats, serviceable for the "knowledge-telling"

assignments that characterized most of their high school writing tasks, were not adequate to meet the demands of college writing assignments. In particular, students were less practiced with two highly valued characteristics of academic discourse: *"integrating one's own ideas and knowledge into the written conversation with one's sources"* and *"interpreting source texts for a purpose of one's own—applying or adapting knowledge to solve a problem or to reach one's own goals"* (22). Students who did not understand that they were being asked to invent and transform their knowledge by using synthesis and interpretive strategies typically wrote inadequate papers when they relied on their familiar comprehension/response strategies by default.

Results from the Reading-to-Write study suggest, therefore, that students need help in making the difficult transition to using these new and more complex critical thinking strategies. To enable students to move beyond basic knowledge-telling approaches, Flower argues that first-year composition courses should teach students the strategic knowledge that will embed their comprehension/response strategy in a rhetorical plan and lead them toward the goal of *"self-directed critical inquiry"* (251). In describing the relationship between first-year writing instruction and later university writing, Flower compares the freshman writer to a ballet dancer who first perfects the basic movements of ballet which are then *"transformed"* into dance and they are used, not for themselves, but to carry out the expressive, interpretive *purpose* of the dancer." She argues that *"the intellectual moves of comprehension and response [like the basic movements of ballet] are never left behind . . . But as student becomes performer, these moves become embedded in a process with expanded horizons and new goals"* (249).

Although the New Abolitionists have raised important issues in writing instruction and curriculum design, content-based alternatives to first-year composition are not panaceas that will eliminate the problems associated with first-year writing courses. At many institutions, first-year writing instruction may be improved more by resolving pragmatic issues of writing program administration, such as those identified by Crowley and Schuster, than by addressing the theoretical issues which have been the focus of recent New Abolitionists' critiques. Whether a content-based first-year writing course will be a better alternative than a general skills writing course at a given institution can only be determined by carefully weighing various factors: the writing proficiency of first-year students, the instructional staff available, the level of administrative support, etc. When university administrators and committees propose (and in some cases impose) new curricular structures for first-year writing, WPAs need to make clear the limitations as well as the benefits of the proposed alternatives, using research, theory, and their own experience to argue forcefully for the curriculum model that is likely to offer the best writing instruction for students at their institutions.

Notes

1. This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered at the Conference of Southern California Writing Program Administrators Affiliate held at California State University, Los Angeles, 5 October 1996. [Editor's Note: *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* was reviewed by Kirsti Sandy in *WPA* 20.1-2 (Fall/Winter 1996): 104-107.]
2. For two collections of essays on this subject, see Bazerman and Russell and Herrington and Moran.
3. I would like to thank Joan Graham, Director of the Interdisciplinary Writing Program, for sending me copies of syllabi and assignments from more than twelve writing link courses at the University of Washington.
4. For a discussion and examples of further models for writing courses, see Shamoon, Linda K., with Robert A. Schwegler, John Trimbur, and Patricia Bizzell, "New Rhetoric Courses in Writing Programs: A Report from a Conference for New England Writing Program Administrators." *WPA* 18.3 (Spring 1995): 7-25. [ed.]

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