

Introduction

Changing the First-Year Writing Curriculum

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At our professional conferences and on the WPA-L discussion list, there is seldom an opportunity to get a complete picture of the changes fellow WPAs have made in their first-year writing courses. Whether these changes are the result of shifts in disciplinary knowledge, leadership, population, or resources, or come about through assessment or other institutional initiatives, thicker descriptions of curricular revision can help us, as composition scholars and administrators, better understand change as a complex connection among material conditions, systems, theories, and practices.

What stands out for me in working with the articles in this issue are the similar ways, whatever the original impetus for change, in which WPAs worked closely with colleagues, paid attention to the experiences of students and teachers, redefined institutional aims, and renegotiated their courses and composition's position intellectually and politically within their local cultures—in each case making curricular revision less of an imposition and more an opportunity for collaborative reflection and strengthening of claims for the value of writing. The authors in this issue address in their analysis the larger contexts for their reforms, which include revising first-year writing to incorporate cultural studies, freshman seminars, writing across the curriculum, technical communication, community outreach, and distance learning.

E. Shelley Reid calls attention to the rhetoric of curricular renovation—how we might acknowledge both the benefit as well as the difficulty of change. Ultimately, she concludes that it is possible to view course revision as a “process narrative,” focused not just on student outcomes but on the reflection that is central to praxis in our field.

Diana Royer and her colleagues at Miami University report how their self-study brought on in part by external administrative pressure, enabled them, in teaching clusters, to critique and redesign the second “writing about literature” course in their sequence to focus on textual interpretation, a better fit with the first course’s emphasis on inquiry and writing as publication. Also a reaction to the external pressures of institutional redefinition, Margaret Himley discusses how the Syracuse writing program’s response to a new vice-chancellor’s challenge to their disciplinary expertise clarified their move outward from the “domestic classroom” emphasizing students’ writing processes toward a more “globalized classroom” that acknowledges how texts (including students’) “move through production, distribution and circulation.” Juanita Comfort and a faculty team from West Chester University outline how an increase in the hiring of tenure-line composition faculty enabled them to collaborate as administrators and appropriate their school’s general education goals in the redesign of a cultural studies writing curriculum with a “ripple effect” throughout the campus. Debra Dew offers yet another way in which the transformation of the conditions for writing instruction contributes to disciplinary legitimacy in her discussion of what is involved in substituting the general writing skills course with a writing course with a “specific content” —language matters and practices. In a similar vein, Gretchen Flesher Moon discusses how first-year seminars—topical courses emphasizing writing, conversation, and critical thinking as “the intellectual work of all disciplines”—offer an alternative to the first-year composition abolition debate. Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem share how they have revised their research writing course to include more meaningful inquiry into literacy practices, thus contributing to the perception of writing as a public act involving the larger university and local communities. Also in a renegotiation of another popular higher education initiative, Laura Brady outlines the pedagogical and administrative risks and advantages of agreeing to deliver an online distance version of the first-year writing course that would meet the needs of adult learners while remaining true to curricular goals adapted from the WPA Outcomes Statement. Finally, Dennis Lynch and Anne Frances Wysocki describe how a particular “comingling of forces and concerns” of a university task force revamping general education made possible the design of a first-year course combining oral, written, and visual communication with civic participation. Their involvement in the reforms provides greater visibility for the rhetoric and technical communication program’s ongoing work and now gives graduate students opportunities to “think through in their teaching” the current theories about multiliteracy and media with which they work.

These days no one would disagree that the approaches of particular composition programs and the contents of first-year courses are determined by much more than just the visions of particular WPAs or the adoption of certain textbooks. As the authors in this issue demonstrate, new agendas and forces at work within English departments and institutions make it more necessary than ever to reexamine the means of production and delivery and renegotiate our curriculum and professional expertise. These authors make clear, however, how thought-provoking and transformative this negotiation can be.

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