Introduction: Teaching and Troubling

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Since 2007, over 70 DU faculty have participated in three-day workshops, as preamble to their teaching a Writing Intensive Core course. I've invited each to write a short informal article after the experience, and this slim volume collects the work of 28 professors who have taken me up on the offer. In each case, they're responding to a brief and fairly open prompt:

> Explain how and why you've designed the writing intensive component of your course. This piece should briefly introduce the course in ways that would be clear to nonexpert faculty colleagues, explain the writing assignments and teaching practices you propose, and discuss what you hope the writing component will achieve and why. You might also discuss challenges you anticipate your students will face—or that you might face in teaching the writing component of the course. Write for an audience of DU faculty members. Alternative: Discuss a particular issue in student writing or teaching writing that's of interest to you (perhaps an issue raised in the workshop) and important to several of your colleagues.

The essays that follow, then, represent thoughtful responses to that invitation. They are very lightly edited, and you should assume that any errors or glitches are my fault.

Writing Intensive Core Courses manifest an ambitious campus decision to improve not only the quality of student writing but also the visibility and centrality of writing to the undergraduate experience, a decision emanating from the Marsico Initiative that created a new first year seminar and first year writing program and that formed a writing center. All students are required to complete at least one writing intensive core course, preferably during their junior years. DU hired over twenty tenure-line faculty in several departments to build capacity to meet these new requirements. Taught in sections capped at 15 students, to foster writing and exchanges between students and professors, the WI element meets four components:

1. Students write a minimum of 20 pages (about 6000 words), some of which may be informal, but some of which must be revised, polished, and intended for an educated readership.

Different kinds of writing serve different kinds of purposes. For example, "writing to learn" assignments are designed primarily to have students grapple with course concepts in order to engage them more fully. They might consist of reading summaries or responses, course journals, or answers to specific questions. They might even be assigned in class, during the first ten minutes to help students focus on the topic of the day or during the last ten minutes, to formulate some ideas about the preceding hour. These and other informal writing assignments might be relatively short, single draft assignments, receiving brief comments and graded holistically.

More formal writing assignments put a premium not on the student as learner but on the student as communicator of ideas to various audiences. The stakes are higher in this kind of writing—everything counts—so students tend to have longer to produce these assignments, which almost always require multiple drafts. Given the extra time and significance of these writings, faculty generally respond more fully to them, including comments on drafts before the final version is due. The faculty development provide numerous options for assignment making, but here are some scenarios:

- At the beginning of every class meeting, Professor Whitt has students turn in a one-page response in which they comment on what they found most interesting, puzzling, or disturbing about the readings for that class meeting. She writes a brief reaction on each of them and assigns a rating from one to

three. Professor Whitt also assigns two four-page papers, in week 5 and week 10.

- Professor Becker has his students keep a media log, in which each week they summarize and analyze at least two television episodes, YouTube videos, or films related to his course content. Students post their logs on the class Blackboard, and every two weeks, the write a comment on someone else's posting. Becker has a final 10-page paper due at the end of the course. Students turn in a draft in week 8.
- Professor Kvistad wants to focus on more extended, formal writings in her course. Accordingly, she assigns three seven-page papers, due in week 4, 7, and 10.

2. Students complete a minimum of three writing projects that are distributed over the quarter; exceptions might include a cumulative project completed in multiple stages.

It's more effective—both to develop writing abilities and to learn course content—for students to write frequently rather than infrequently, even if doing so means that papers will be shorter. Generally, then, students should write at least three papers in the course. The faculty development seminars for the Core writing intensive courses will provide strategies for making effective assignments. The pattern of assignments can take many forms. For example,

- Professor Jefferson assigns ten 2-page papers, one due each week. She requires students to revise three of these papers, collecting them in a final portfolio with a reflective introduction introducing the work.
- Professor King begins the course by having a one-page paper due each class meeting for the first 10 classes. She then has a five-page paper due in week 7 and a second five-page paper due in week 10.
- Professor Jones assigns three 6-7 page papers, spaced over the course of the semester.

In a few cases, professors may find it vital to have fewer than three papers, perhaps because they find it important to produce a single, larger writing project. Such projects can—and should—be divided into several smaller projects that culminate in the final whole. Doing so, and providing feedback to each piece, accomplishes many of the goals of a longer project.

- Professor Klaus wants students to complete a 20-page, researched position paper on a topic central to the course. In week 2, assigns a one-page proposal. In week four, he assigns a 2-page paper that summarizes and analyzes two key readings on the topic. In week five, he assigns an annotated bibliography of all the sources to be used in the paper. In week six he asks for a 4-5 page section of the paper. In week eight he requires a first draft of the entire paper, and students make 10-minute class presentations about their work in program. The completed final draft is due in week 10.

3. Students are required to revise some of their work based on feedback from their professor.

One of the most powerful strategies for teaching writing is to provide feedback to students on a draft, then have them revise the work before turning it in for a grade. "Providing feedback" is not editing or correcting. Instead, the professor indicates strengths and areas of improvement for the student, who must then do the real work of revision (literally, "seeing again"). Except in the rare cases when students have turned in a highly polished draft that is the product of extensive revisions already, most revising feedback focuses on "higher level" matters than mere grammar, punctuation, or style. Some examples of revision comments are:

- Your draft is too one-sided to be effective. That is, while you present the arguments for X pretty well, a lot of reasonable people would argue for Y instead. Can you take into account their arguments and still defend your position?
- Your draft relies extensively on quotation and summary. While these are generally apt, the paper doesn't have enough of your own thinking. For example, when you summarize X, what do you see as its significance or importance?
- Your assertion X lacks sufficient evidence to be convincing. What facts or analysis could you provide to make your point.
- I have a difficult time following your line of thinking. For example, on page 2 you jump

between point A and point B, and the connection just doesn't make sense. You'll probably need to write more obvious connections, but you might also have to rearrange the parts of the paper—or even discard some.

4. Some instructional time is given to writing matters.

Giving "some instructional time" to writing certainly doesn't require providing extended lectures. (In fact, that would be less effective than other strategies.) One of the purposes of the Core Writing Intensive faculty development seminars is to provide some minimal strategies that nonetheless can be very useful to students.
Consider several possible teaching practices

- Whenever Professor Wallace gives a writing assignment, she takes 10-15 minutes of class time to talk about the assignment. She asks students to brainstorm ideas, she contributes some ideas of her own, and she discusses evaluation criteria for the papers, perhaps sharing a grading rubric.
- For each assignment, Professor Kalter has students bring a draft to one class. He divides into small groups and has them furnish some peer response to one another, following a review sheet he has provided.
- After each assignment, Professor Mencia selects two or three of the strongest papers and reproduces them for the entire class, then takes several minutes of class time to point out their strengths.
- Professor Karas discusses her writing process on an article she's writing, including sharing drafts with the students. Occasionally, she invites a colleague or advanced student to do the same.
- A few times a quarter, Professor Roen invites professional staff from the Writing Center to guest teach in the class, for about 45-minutes each time. These topics range from helping students generate ideas to helping them revise to helping them document sources effectively.
- Once a week, Professor Anukye leads a 15-minute discussion about a piece of writing from her field. She invites the students to "read like writers," that is, to point out the features of a text and to speculate how its writer got from blank screen to finished product.

As the essays that follow reveal, DU faculty have implemented these requirements in several creative ways, showing not only personal preferences but also the influences of their disciplinary backgrounds and the course themes.

These essays also deal with some complex issues; hence the "troubling" element in my title. For example, what's the right line between giving students too much guidance, so that writing is reduced to paint by numbers formalism, and giving them too much leeway, so that writing becomes a frustrating guessing game—and professors get works depressingly far from their expectations? To what extent should writings in these courses target educated public audiences vs. narrower academic audience, even members of disciplinary traditions? A variant on this question is whether faculty teaching in the core are representing "how we write in my field," "how academics write to one another," or "how educated people write to, say, readers, of *Harpers* magazine or trade publishing.

More questions. How do we deal with a range of writing abilities and interests, including, for example, the situation of bright international students whose English language skills necessarily differ from native speakers? How do we prioritize our own attention and teaching energies when dealing with student writings that present numerous opportunities—and challenges—yet we have finite amounts of time and expertise? How ought we to balance focus on the course content and attention to student writing, especially when faculty don't—and can't—have certain kinds of expertise teaching writing? In terms of responding and grading, are rubrics helpful, clear, and fair, or are they reductive tools of a testing culture gone rampant?

I could continue to list questions that have emerged from the workshop, but you get the point. I take it as a healthy sign, both for teaching and for the situation of writing at DU, that so many colleagues across campus are turning over these questions so thoughtfully. I hope that readers of the works that follow appreciate both the clear, confident descriptions of courses and teaching practices and the messy explorations of issues yet to be resolved.