What Kind of Writing Across the Curriculum? History, Trajectory, and a Nudge for Civic Discourse

Doug Hesse
Writing Program and English

Without a doubt, the prime lever for expanding the writing across the curriculum movement was the promotion of writing as a mode of learning. Encapsulated in Janet Emig's influential 1977 article by the same name, this movement articulated how the activity of writing promoted deeper learning and understanding than more passive modes of reading and listening. It was a line of thinking umbrellaed later by the "Active" or "Engaged" Learning folks, a trajectory that continues to morph through enterprises like the flipped classroom. The thrust of this movement was to replace learning as a receptive activity, marked by taking occasional exams and completing occasional writings that functioned primarily as exams, with learning as a productive activity. Students instead were to do and make things.

Writing as a mode of learning had a couple of major promises and advantages. First, it freed professors across campus from having to think of themselves substantially—or even significantly—as writing teachers. Writing became a means to promote learning of course content, a means to an end that respected professors' interests and appealed to their perceptions of expertise. The juxtaposition was "writing to learn" vs. "learning to write," with the latter being perhaps an ancillary consequence of the former, not necessarily something that had to be tackled head on.

Second, it meant that new forms of writing could be justified in the academy. Instead of formal papers and reports or genres correlating to published writing, professors could assign forms that were instrumental to learning, genres like journals or letters or microthemes. Just as high energy physics creates particles or elements that don't exist outside the environments in which they were made, so might writing assignments function as modest supercolliders. If the focus was on learning and not on crafting well-made artifacts—on the writer and subject matter rather than on the audience—then all manner of prompts and exercises free from "real world" constraints got legitimated. The bible of all Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) faculty development, John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, collected this wisdom in several chapters, most notably an extended one on informal writing assignments.

The Rise of WID

Of course, Bean's bible has another chapter on formal writing assignments, and surely these didn't disappear from campuses. However, they did begin taking a different form in the late 1980s, with the rise of Writing in the Disciplines, or WID. The twin underpinnings were, first, social constructivist theory, embodied in the idea of discourse communities—groups of people who communicate about certain topics in certain ways through certain channels—and, second, genre theory, which described the different epistemologies, rhetorics, and textual characteristics of different categories of writing. For many scholars, the upshot was that it was folly to teach "general writing skills" about "no content in particular." David Russell famously analogized that teaching general writing outside of context was akin to teaching basketball, bowling, billiards, and baseball through generic instruction in "ball skills." Furthermore, except for extreme versions of paralogic rhetoric, in which any writing

situation was radically unlike any other writing situation, academic genres or discourse communities could be sorted into different traditions. In an award-winning article, Michael Carter identified four broad academic metagenre groupings: problem solving; empirical inquiry; research from sources; performances.

The upshot of all this was to give a complementary mission to WAC: WID. (The acronyms, by the way, are endless. There's WIC (Writing Intensive Courses) and WEC (Writing Enhanced Courses) and CAC (Communication Across the Curriculum) and MAC (Multimodality Across the Curriculum).) In WID emphases, student writers are taught to develop the kinds of writing skills and genres indigenous to different academic disciplines—learning to write like a philosopher or an accountant or a chemist or a social worker. Most vitally, they learn in major courses and from major professors. Rather than writing abilities being something students were to have acquired, once and for all, prior to courses in the major, learning to write in a major was part and parcel of the major; a discipline had a content, of course, but also forms of thinking and being, and writing was one of them.

The Limits of Academic Discourse

Now, there's a wrinkle and divide, one somewhat more pronounced in some fields than others, and that's the difference between the "academic" manifestations of a discourse community and its genres and the "vocational or professional" manifestations. Were students to practice and master kinds of writing like that appearing in a field's journals, or were they to emulate writing in jobs that graduates in that major got? Take an English major, for example, especially one concentrating in literary studies. Unless that student goes on to graduate school, chances are slim that she will ever have to write a ten-page essay, complete with MLA citations, that analyzes a literary text for a scholarly audience. She will no doubt write in almost any job she takes, but this will take the form primarily of reports, proposals, emails, documentation, and so on. If she writes for popular audiences, as a journalist, that writing will differ in crucial ways from strictly academic discourse.

Decades ago, when writing was seen to be writing, this discrepancy between the kind of writing students did in school and the kind they'd do after graduation was no problem. Academic writing could be seen as calisthenics to build general writing muscles that could then be deployed in all sorts of ways. Decades ago, for example, required writing courses were often "writing about literature" courses. The notion was that explicating a Keats poem served students well for writing lab reports or history term papers, and it also served them for writing marketing studies and accounting reports. Those consolations have been seriously eroded, and one key area of research right now is transfer: how do skills learned and practiced in one setting transfer to another one? DU Writing Professor Kara Takzack has been a leading researcher on this particular question (see Yancey, Robinson, and Taczak).

Most contemporary WAC/WID programs have tacitly deferred this question through a couple of decisions. Many allow students to take a designated writing intensive course from those generally offered in any department, with students and departments finding that majors courses offer the practical best option. Some, as I noted earlier, have required a specific writing course in the major. In either case, the knowledge and forms of writing taken for granted are explicitly disciplinary. The default genre is the scholarly article or chapter, generally a lite version (or a very lite version: the ubiquitous "paper"). But even these assumptions are questioned. Research that Anne Ruggles Gere and her University of Michigan colleagues reported at the 2014 International Writing Across the Curriculum conference showed skepticism by many faculty and students. "Writing like an academic sociologist," for example, matters perhaps only at the graduate level—and perhaps not even then, if one is going to work as a professional outside a university setting.

The configuration of ASEM at DU stacks the assumptions against the academic or disciplinary default, leaving a couple of options. One is for "writing to learn," having students produce work that may have no "extra-classroom" correlative, done for the good of the student, first, and the classroom community second. However, this seems problematic for a senior level course, one especially designed to mark some synthesizing and performative role in

the general education sequence. While writing to learn is valuable for any class (indeed, a process pedagogy of drafting and revising presumes it, such writing seems meager for an advanced course.

A Nudge

A second, and better, option, I suggest, is having students write for some public audience: for readers who are not experts. Rather than the journal article or chapter, the default genre is the magazine or newspaper article or the policy brief, the *Harper's* or *New Yorker* or *Salon* piece that is steeped in research and analysis but written for intelligent folks who aren't obliged to read it but do so from a combination of individual betterment, civic responsibility, or interest. That interest can either be brought to the topic (people who read anything about baseball or the middle east or the Civil War) or created by the writer, who makes readers care about a topic they didn't expect by the approach or style of the piece. Now, this kind of writing poses considerable problems, as I'll explain soon. But let me elaborate the possibility.

I recently taught WRIT 1733: Writing and Research for a section of honors students. Because one of the course goals was to acquaint students with different research traditions and their implications for writing, I had them do one paper as a conventional IMRD report (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) aimed at a social sciences journal. (As a class, we'd devised a 27-item survey that explored the relationship between degrees of introversion and various demographic characteristics, beliefs, and practices, giving that survey to 120 students.) I next had them write a second version of that paper, this time as an article for a magazine with a popular readership. No longer could they presume a readership; they had to make one. As part of this process we looked at how writers for NPR, the *New York Times*, the *Huffington Post*, and similar venues translated scholarly articles for popular audiences, noting along the way how frequently those translations got sensationalized or even wrong.

I suggest that the "multiple perspectives" and theme/issue focus of ASEM lends itself well to this kind of popular and civic discourse. Students come to the courses out of interest (mostly), drawn to topics about which they may know little, as smart amateurs led by a fine professorial guide. They read, talk, and write their way to some understanding, potentially some new insights fostered by that ASEM's particular concatenation of course materials. They produce knowledge for themselves and for the other members of the seminar. Why not have them take the next step and perform that knowledge for intelligent others not privy to this course, the publics whose thoughts and actions our university vision and values would have them shape—for the public good?

At least two challenges abound. Years ago, one could invoke "editorial" or "op ed" or "magazine feature" and count on students to have some familiarity with these genres. Now those seem curious relics of a previous age, as do the "intellectual" periodicals. Our common civic sphere, is famously fractured, with highly energized—and often highly partisan—discourses abounding, available (and abandonable) at the click of a keystroke. The first challenge, then, is oddly one of identity. To have students write "for the public" brings a host of new questions starting with where and what is the public sphere.

The second challenge concerns the difficulty of popular writing. The academic sphere, demarcated by that blandest of enterprises, the "paper," is a safe and known one. Professors and classmates are obliged to read in it. Contexts and audiences come prefabbed with assignments. Writing for readers who don't expect or necessarily want a particular text is, in many ways, much harder.

Still, I think the challenges are worthwhile. I think we at DU should attend to students not only as academics, not only as working professional, but also as engaged citizens, realizing that the world of ideas and inquiry—the world of questions and issues vexed and enriched by multiple perspectives—doesn't end at graduation but starts there.