

A FOCUS ON THE ASSIGNMENT: THE LA SALLE INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM

MARGOT SOVEN

If it does not meet the specific, day-to-day classroom needs of the teachers involved, a writing-across-the-curriculum program will fail. No matter how relevant the presentations on theory or how provocative the discussions may be, the program will not change teaching practices unless the teachers' individual desires to improve their own course are met. As Toby Fulweiler reminds us, teachers need to be "awfully dedicated" to "make a new idea a regular part of their pedagogical repertoire, and although we don't mean to, we too often dabble rather than commit ourselves" to "new ideas" (114).

At La Salle University we have developed a writing across the curriculum program that meets the needs of instructors by focusing on the specific writing assignments used by the participants in their courses. Strongly influenced by Ann Herrington's article, "Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines," we instituted a three-part writing-across-the-curriculum program that initially combines a week-long summer workshop which focuses on the principles of assignment design from the introductory stage in the classroom to evaluation in the instructor's study. In the weeks immediately following the workshop, the writing specialist and each participant plan specific writing assignments. Finally, we maintain continuing consultation and discussion between instructors and the writing specialist throughout the academic year.

Participants in our program do not dabble. They agree to review and redesign the writing assignments and assignment related

instruction for at least two courses. (In fact, many participants work on assignments for other courses as well.) The activities include:

- evaluating previous assignments in light of course objectives;
- redesigning former assignments or developing new ones;
- rewriting student guidelines for assignments;
- planning assignment-related class instruction;
- developing evaluation criteria and methods of responding to student writing.

They agree to attend an eight-day summer workshop followed by continued collaboration with the composition specialist during the following academic year.

As we enter the third year of the program we can say it “works,” meaning that teachers in the program have redesigned many of their assignments to reflect more closely the course objectives and have experimented with new teaching methods. These changes are well documented in their assignment descriptions, in pre- and post project questionnaires, and in my own first hand observations of their classrooms.

The summer workshop, the first stage of the program, differs somewhat from many other writing-across-the-curriculum workshops by its strong emphasis on assignment design. Like other such workshops, it begins with an examination of the theories on the use of writing as a conceptual tool, theories of rhetoric and composing, the development of writing ability and the relationship between reading and writing. We conduct this review through analysis of our own composing process, retracing our own development as writers, and by reading the work of experts (Emig, Vygotsky, Bazerman, and others). Each participant keeps a daily journal recording his or her impressions of the readings and preliminary ideas for assignment development. I found that college instructors, accustomed to learning through reading (even perhaps more so than learning by doing), are favorably impressed by the serious scholarships in composition theory. One instructor started his journal entry, “Bazerman is the best so far. He really speaks to me.” Another found Emig’s article “Writing is a Mode of Learning” to be “explosive.”

During the next phase of the workshop the focus shifts to student writing problems. For example, we scrutinize student writing to identify common characteristics such as lack of clear thesis statements, poor development of ideas, faulty organization, etc.

Guided (by the writing specialist) speculation about causes leads workshop participants to conclude what most of us already know: many of our students have difficulty distinguishing among facts, ideas and assumptions, seem incapable of generalizing, have difficulty defining criteria when writing a comparison and are often poor observers. The theory we've read helps us to explain these problems: some are related to cognitive development, others to student misconceptions about the composing process, and some skills seem simply never to have been taught. It's at this point in the workshop that one of the participants usually says, "I came here worried about poor grammar. Now I realize what bothers me most about my students' writing is poor thinking."

It is only a short step from viewing writing as a thinking problem to viewing the writing assignment and assignment-related instruction as either facilitating or hindering the development of thinking skills. Implications for assignment design suddenly seem obvious. The kinds of writing tasks presented to students, our methods of presenting them and evaluating the papers written in response to our instructions now become the focus of the workshop.

Conveniently, these subjects—the writing task, its presentation (which includes written directions to student and classroom instruction), and the evaluation of the student papers—include all of the methodology typically reviewed in writing-across-the-curriculum workshops. However, when discussed in more specific and personally engaging terms of assignment design and implementation, what may otherwise seem like isolated teaching methods (pre-writing instruction, peer review, staging assignments in drafts) become integrated in a coherent pedagogical structure. For example, pre-writing instruction is seen to be classroom activity tailored to the data gathering and conceptual tasks of a particular assignment. It may involve teaching students methods for retrieving data from memory (heuristics, free writing, etc.), or a lesson on summary and paraphrase writing if, for example, students are preparing to write research papers. Writing drafts and peer review are seen to be instructional techniques related to the ultimate production of a paper.

I find that it is useful to ask participants to reflect on the weaknesses of student papers written in response to existing writing assignments to decide how to stage new assignments and plan appropriate instruction. An instructor in the Management Depart-

ment, for example, noticed that the analysis section of reports is often weak. It was suggested that he have students bring in drafts for peer review as well as teacher response before completing the report. In general, instructors who have been reluctant to collect drafts of whole papers see the value of having students submit a pivotal "stage" of the paper in order to improve the final product.

Developing evaluation criteria is a central part of assignment design and of the workshop. It is treated as an exercise in matching the evaluation criteria to the particular skills emphasized by the assignment. A sociology instructor, who before the workshop had used a generic scale for evaluating student papers (consisting simply of ratings for content, grammar and the appearance of the manuscript), developed the following criteria for a paper on comparative political ideologies:

1. Clarity and thoroughness of summaries and comparisons.
2. Degree to which points are documented with examples and specifics from articles.
3. Smoothness of transitions from one part of the paper to the next.
4. Accuracy of spelling, punctuation, grammar, footnote and bibliographic form.

As part of the workshop everyone drafts the instructions for at least one assignment and shares it with the group to critique. The workshop culminates with a swapping of new assignments, though everyone is still terribly apologetic about his or her efforts.

Comments about the workshop clearly indicate changes in the participants' attitudes towards assignment design. For example, a psychology professor said:

The workshop was eye-opening to me. I have a much clearer and more specific idea about what might be useful to students when I make writing assignments and evaluate them. Highlighting stages in the writing process focused my thinking in specific ways to make, receive, and evaluate writing assignments.

He goes on to say,

I have used journals in several courses, but not always with specific instructions. After a night of reading I changed a set

of instructions midway in a graduate class last week—much to the relief of my students!

Most teachers, like this one, find the workshop very productive. However, interestingly enough, many participants have commented that the most significant phase of our program occurs after the workshop. Although instructors redesign one assignment during the summer workshop, in the following academic year they do the bulk of the work applying the content of the workshop to their courses. They need more time than the workshop allows to develop additional writing assignments, to perform task analyses of existing writing assignments which they plan to retain, and to plan assignment-related instruction. And perhaps even more important, they need to experiment with methods suggested by the workshop and receive immediate feedback to their first attempts to try out new teaching practices. While it is possible for teachers to do all of the above independently except the experimentation in the new pedagogy, for several reasons it is enormously useful to develop new assignments with the aid of a writing specialist. Soon after the workshop is over, our colleagues return to their academic and scholarly interests, understandably forgetting many of the alternatives we have presented in the workshop. In the ensuing individual discussions during the academic year, the writing specialist can help colleagues to recall these options. The principles of the workshop often remain, but they most likely will not be implemented if the strategies for classroom practice become hazy. For example, instructors who want to attempt journals may be rapidly discouraged if they don't use effective practices for assigning, collecting, and evaluating them. Peer review can be a dismal failure if students are not prepared appropriately.

I meet with each instructor at least once during the summer weeks immediately following the workshop, the purpose of the meeting being to refine the assignment developed during the workshop and set plans for our future work together. At this point my interaction with each participant becomes highly individualized. Some instructors want to meet more frequently, some decide they want to co-teach one or more lessons with me, others want *me* to observe a lesson they teach independently, while some want me to review student writing with them. We decide which activities we will engage in together and which the instructor will carry out on his or her own.

The advantage of the summer follow-up meeting soon after the workshop cannot be overestimated. Participants are still "high" from the workshop and want to do everything. My task is to help the instructor focus on a particular assignment and sketch a plan for reviewing others. One of my colleagues, an instructor in Health Care Administration, wanted to use journals in a graduate course for health care professionals who are being asked to review new models for designing health care systems. In the past she had found students most reluctant to accept these models. The journal seemed to be an ideal format for the students to express doubts and ask questions. While she was "sold" on journals she was not sure how to structure student responses. On the one hand she knew her students would have a great deal to say about the readings; on the other hand she was doubtful they would address the issues she considered important. We discussed in great detail the most appropriate questions for journal guidelines. We arrived at the following set of questions:

Which ideas does the author state?

Which ideas does the author imply?

Is the argument valid?

How does the material relate to my own experience?

Furthermore, our discussion about journals led this instructor to start thinking about integrating her formal writing assignments with her journal assignments. Designing the journal assignment had helped her to clarify the objectives for this course. She realized that formal writing assignments were not helping her students reflect on the relevance of the course material to their own practices, the major goal of the course.

The one on one meetings during the academic year are the setting for continued discussions on theory and principles as well as practical matters concerning the particular course. My collaboration with two different instructors whose aims were very different illustrate this phase of the program.

An instructor in the Geology Department at La Salle hopes to use writing to:

1. prepare students to write in the scientific style;
2. consolidate what the student has learned; (In structural geology, for example, the student must write a paper on the structural history of a particular geographic area.)
3. describe phenomena accurately;
4. improve students' ability to use deductive reasoning.

We concluded that her existing assignments met her course objectives and that the written instructions for her lab reports and review papers were clear, but that it would be useful to add a checklist of evaluative criteria to help students to understand her expectations. However, the most important thing we did was to change the way in which she presented her assignments. An entire class session was devoted to introducing assignments, with an emphasis on the study of models of good reports and review papers. We, the writing specialist and the instructor, designed a lesson on taking notes from scientific literature and reviewed documentation procedure, with an emphasis on what is and what is not plagiarism, a problem she had frequently encountered. We also added a class session on responding to essay exam questions, which we taught collaboratively.

The major writing project for the particular course is a review paper. We decided to stage it, first collecting and evaluating an annotated bibliography, a detailed outline, and a preliminary draft. The instructor admitted that more time was spent with the students describing and explaining exactly what was wanted. On the other hand, she said "there was no doubt that students wrote better papers this year than last." An unexpected side benefit that came through better preliminary instruction and staging of parts of the assignment was that the students did not feel as much time pressure. This instructor concluded a brief report on her activities with the comment, "One aspect that still needs improvement, however, as far as actual writing is concerned, is continuity. Many of the students still string sentences and paragraphs together with no connection. I guess that the only way to overcome this obstacle is through repetition of the same type of writing assignment so that the students can learn from their mistakes and can examine samples of good assignments, perhaps written by their peers and discussed in class." Her last comment indicates that she is planning additional changes in her assignments to respond to deficiencies still encountered.

An instructor in the philosophy department believed that her writing assignments were not fulfilling her course objectives. In their writing the students were not, to use her words, "engaging in the philosophical inquiry and close analysis of concepts and the formulation of reasoned arguments" that she was hoping for. As happens to many teachers, she was also tired of using the same assignments, but seemed to have run out of ideas. As a

result of the workshop she modified the instructions for those assignments she decided to keep, introduced additional classroom instruction related to the assignments, staged one of them, added a new assignment and used a questionnaire to find out what her students thought about the writing in her classes.

The existing major assignments for the philosophy course, *Work and Culture*, included two 3-to-5 page papers. In the first, students are asked to choose a particular work experience and analyze whether or not it is satisfying. The second paper is a brief research assignment for which students must answer a question central to the subject matter of the course. The new assignment developed as a result of the workshop for the course *Concepts of Liberation: Men and Women* asks students to show how a literary or artistic work reflects concepts discussed in that course.

Reviewing the instructions for the two assignments in her "Work and Culture" course, she added explanations of abstract terms in questions such as "Is the work *alienating* and *meaningful*" and added additional examples to explain what she meant by "topic questions." She included evaluation criteria and improved the format of the instruction sheet. She also required that students submit a brief summary of the thesis of their paper, and in preparation for this stage provided them with an example and a non-example of a thesis statement. She found that this last measure was a "good device for weeding out poorly-conceived papers which lacked a guiding thesis or argument."

On the other hand, not every good idea works every time. The philosophy instructor tried peer critiquing of drafts, asking students to "check out the use of concepts of alienation" in each other's papers. Not pleased at all with the results, she said "This activity did not work well; I had no policing or enforcement mechanism to make sure that students brought drafts to class. Draft exchange would probably work better if it is done repeatedly in a course." This instructor (like her colleague in the geology department) surveyed her students' attitudes toward her new methods of assigning writing. One interesting finding: most students agreed that teacher's comments on abstracts helped them improve their writing.

We began the La Salle Writing Project assuming that changing teachers' methods of assigning writing requires meeting their specific needs. We anticipated that this is a two-fold process: not only must participants see the relevance of suggested methods

in helping them to meet the learning objectives of their courses and to improve student writing, but they also need to learn how to implement these methods in a way that suits their own teaching styles and is compatible with the nature of their discipline. What we did not expect, and what we have learned, is that the process of individualizing writing-across-the-curriculum pedagogy stimulates instructors to examine their general approach to teaching their subjects. Evaluating the use of writing in their classrooms raises basic questions such as, "Is my class an active learning environment?" "Are the objectives of my course appropriate?" "Are requirements of my courses explicit or vague to my students?" "Does my syllabus include too many readings or too few?"

Writing-across-the-curriculum is not another educational fad. The La Salle program, as well as others, has demonstrated that the effect of a writing-across-the-curriculum program can transcend a simple improvement in the use of writing in all disciplines (although that is the primary aim) and lead to more global transformations in teaching practices. It provides a potential mechanism for faculty cooperation and concentration on teaching practices rarely met in the hectic academic environment. Our experience at La Salle shows that this does occur and that with care and planning the program that emphasizes specific needs of teachers is effective in promoting greater teacher satisfaction and, most importantly, more effective teaching.

Margot Soven is Associate Professor of English at La Salle University, Philadelphia. She is currently the Director of the La Salle University Writing Project and President of the Delaware Valley Writing Council.

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