



Making Writing Visible at Duke University

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In 2000, Duke University put into place a new curriculum that requires all undergraduates to take a seminar in “Academic Writing” in their first year and two “writing in the disciplines” courses afterwards. This new emphasis on writing as a mode of learning and inquiry was spearheaded by the dean of Trinity College, Robert Thompson, who made professionalizing the first-year writing course one of his priorities. Under his leadership, Duke decided to invest in a new postdoctoral faculty to teach an ambitiously reimagined first-year writing course.

“Academic Writing” is now the only course taken by every undergraduate at Duke. There are no prerequisites and no exemptions. More than 80 percent of the sections of this course are now taught by a faculty of twenty-five postdoctoral fellows in the University Writing Program. This multidisciplinary writing program is housed in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Writing (CTLW), which also sponsors various programs supporting the work of undergraduate teachers at Duke—including workshops and consulting on teaching, a tutorial writing studio, training in teaching and technology, a Preparing Future Faculty program, a series of teaching breakfasts and lunches, and speakers and symposia on the scholarship of teaching. Our efforts to remake the first-year writing course are thus tightly connected to college-wide attempts to rethink the intellectual work of undergraduate teaching.

“Writing in the disciplines” (WID) courses are designed and staffed by faculty and graduate teaching assistants in the various departments throughout Duke.

Students in WID courses are expected to write regularly throughout the semester, to discuss the work they are doing as writers in class, to revise their work in response to comments from their teachers and peers, and to learn about the roles and uses of writing in the field they are studying. To have a course designated as writing intensive, faculty must show how they will teach towards these four guidelines. The CTLW offers both workshops and one-on-one consulting for teachers of WID courses.

In the last four years, more than 200 WID courses have been developed and taught across a wide range of departments, many several times and in multiple sections. Not all of these courses center on teaching the critical essay; rather, since their aim is to introduce students to the actual forms of writing practiced in the various disciplines, many instructors instead ask students to compose policy memos, field and lab reports, grant proposals, conference posters, Web sites, software programs, or proofs. In describing how these two new writing initiatives at Duke build on and diverge from each other, we thus might say that while our first-year course draws on the materials of the disciplines to highlight issues in academic writing, WID courses make use of writing to investigate issues in the disciplines.

Interdisciplinarity

Since one of the aims of “Academic Writing” is to prepare students to approach writing in a wide range of disciplinary contexts, it seemed counterproductive to imagine a faculty for that first-year course composed only of scholars trained in English or composition. And



so the first-year writing faculty at Duke is now truly multidisciplinary. In the last several years we have recruited young scholars with PhDs in African-American studies, anthropology, architecture, biology, cultural studies, economics, education, engineering, English, epidemiology, genetics, history, linguistics, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, rhetoric, sociology, and women's studies to teach "Academic Writing." The utopian goal of interdisciplinarity is thus an everyday, lived reality in the First-Year Writing Program. What gives our work its sense of coherence is not a set of specialized topics or controversies, as is the case in most departments, but a collective teaching project. We all teach the same course, if in very different ways, and that is what we talk about when we come together as a group; it is what centers our intellectual work.

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Fellows draw on their interests as scholars to design and teach five sections of "Academic Writing" per year. In the current semester, for instance, we are offering, among many others, writing seminars focusing on "Communicating Science to the Public," "Freudian Legacies," "Guns in America," "Imagining the African Diaspora," "Judging Technology," "Media Nation," "Stages of Life," "Interpreting

Slavery," "Origins of Darwinism," and "Writing Ethnography." These courses are listed by instructor, title, and brief description in the Duke online catalogue. Students thus no longer simply sign up for an unmarked version of freshman comp taught by an anonymous instructor; instead, they choose a writing seminar much as they would select any other course, according to their intellectual goals and interests.

Postdoctoral Fellowships

Sections of "Academic Writing" are capped at twelve students, for a total of only sixty students taught per year by each fellow in the program. Most fellows design two different writing courses each year—one for the fall and one for the spring. We support their work through a series of symposia, beginning with an intensive three-week "Summer Seminar in Teaching Writing" in

their experiences at Duke in landing tenure-track jobs at other colleges or universities. The salary is reasonable (\$36,000 to \$40,000 per year), the support for research strong, the environment for teaching excellent, and the collegial support of the other fellows extraordinary. Fellows are offered an initial three-year contract. In the second semester of their second year at Duke, they undergo a rigorous review of their work based on a teaching portfolio that they have assembled. If this review is positive, their contract is extended to five years.

Academic Writing

The work that these fellows have done as teachers of "Academic Writing" has been a success by almost every measure imaginable. The Duke student newspaper has called the first-year writing course "the brightest quadrant" of the new undergraduate curriculum, and, in their course evaluations, students consistently rank "Academic Writing" as more intellectually stimulating and harder than most of the other classes they have taken in their first year at Duke.

A portion of our success so far may be attributed to a set of ambitious instructional goals that provide the armature upon which our writing seminars are built. These goals, composed and regularly revised by all writing faculty, lend the program a unity that rests not upon a particular set of materials to teach from but, rather, upon a set of objectives that figure writing as a set of discursive activities enacted across varying contexts of inquiry. "Academic Writing" teaches four intellectual practices: reading



closely and critically for the purposes of scholarly analysis; responding to and making use of the work of others; drafting and revising texts; and making texts public.

Our challenge has been to posit a working definition of academic writing flexible enough to accommodate our own and Duke's multidisciplinary interests, but strong enough to provide coherence in its application without becoming foundational. While we do not treat academic writing as a single, monolithic discourse, we do argue that intellectual writing is almost always composed in response to others' texts. Academic writing names the kind of intellectual prose students are expected to produce as undergraduates: writing that takes a sustained interest in an issue under consideration and gathers much of its evidence from a careful reading of sources. We embrace these intertextual and citational features of academic writing in our first two instructional goals of reading closely and responding to the work of others.

The rhetorical practices associated with what we term academic writing exist, then, in both social and epistemological dimensions. To be successful, students new to the university must begin to position themselves as active intellectual agents, ready to construct arguments built from their careful reading of others' texts. Though acts of summary are at times useful, what is often wanted in college-level prose is something more: writing that demonstrates not merely a stalwart comprehension of texts surrounding an issue, but

that reaches with its analyses and arguments to make new uses of prior texts and positions.

In short, what is wanted is writing that works to move knowledge forward and that clearly earns its new conclusions. Such writing doesn't merely quote from other texts but, rather, constructs its point from an interested reading of them. In social terms, such student writing actively joins rather than listens to the conversation of other thinkers. This direct involvement allows students to frame their positions with and against the grain of others' claims and interpretations, and to extend earlier thinking on a subject, to trace out the unanticipated implications of one or another line of inquiry.

Assessment

In spring 2003, we conducted a program-wide, text-based assessment of learning in "Academic Writing" centered on a comparison of essays written at the start and end of the semester. We found convincing evidence that, on the whole, students learn in our courses how to make much more sophisticated and critical uses of other texts in their writing.* Our assessment experiment assumes that strong writing is tied to strong reading, which involves putting what we call "pressure" on a text under consideration. The metaphor speaks to the action of applying a degree of interpretive force to a specific aspect of another's text in order to assess its ability to hold up under close scrutiny, to delineate the boundaries of its

scope, or to discover the limits of its explanatory powers. We value this method of academic reading principally because it demonstrates not simply *that* a student has read a text, but rather *how* that text has been read. It treats student writing as an opportunity to comment upon the work being read, to make judgments about its use and value, and—perhaps more importantly—to position a student writer's thinking rather than a theorist's thinking at the center of his or her work. A significant number of our first-year writers exit "Academic Writing" able to make powerful use of others' texts in their own writing, an ability that we expect them to draw upon in their writing at disciplinary sites across the university.

Conclusion

In sum, we have tried to structure the First-Year Writing Program at Duke both to establish an intellectually vibrant forum for students to learn the defining moves of academic writing and to help a group of young scholars from across the disciplines develop new approaches to teaching undergraduates. We believe this program shows that there are strong alternatives to staffing writing courses with contingent armies of adjunct instructors and teaching assistants, and also that the teaching of writing is not the charge of the English department alone but the task of the entire university faculty. In doing so, we hope to make writing a more visible aspect of the intellectual culture of the academy. ■

*Please e-mail ctlw@aes.duke.edu to request a copy of this study.