PERSPECTIVES

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Reforming General Education

Three Reasons to Make Writing Across the Curriculum Part of the Conversation

Contemplation of writing (or quantitative reasoning, or oral communication) across the curriculum shouldn't be shoved aside during efforts to reform general education

HOWEVER MUCH we may recognize that writing is best taught not just in the first year and not just by English instructors, but across all four years and in all departments, we all know the reasons why it's tempting to leave writing across the curriculum out of our conversations about general education reform: People outside of the English department worry that they might be forced to do someone else's job; people in the English department aren't sure they trust their colleagues to teach writing. It's too controversial and could doom the entire general education model. It would be better just to leave it alone, to shove it aside in order to deal with more important issues.

Fair enough. Changing a curriculum is already stressful enough without finding new ways to create anxiety, discontent, and rancor. And yet . . .

What follows are three reasons why—all political instincts to the contrary—it's probably better to fold conversations about writing across the curriculum into the larger debate about general education models, scaffolding, institutional support, and student needs. While this short essay addresses oral communication across the curriculum and quantitative reasoning across the curriculum only in passing, it's safe to say that much of what applies to writing applies to these areas as well.

Reason #1: Writing is a complex skill

Because writing is not, like spoken language, a biological imperative, psychologist Ronald T. Kellogg argues that learning to construct "an effective extended text" is akin to becoming a chess master or a concert violinist. "The very best violinists, for example, have accumulated more than 10,000 hours in solitary practice, whereas lesser experts (7,500 hours), least accomplished experts (5,000), and amateurs (1,500) have devoted proportionally less time to self-improvement" (2008, 3). Needless to say, very few students arrive at college with 1,500 hours of highly motivated individual practice in writing under their belts, much less 10,000 hours. And needless to say, thirty-nine hours of first-year writing, while helpful, likely won't be enough to give students the amount of practice they'll need to satisfy their second-, third-, and fourth-year instructors. What writing across the curriculum recognizes, then, is that students need more practice and more instruction in composition in order to become the writers we want them to be. Indeed, given that employers regularly cite writing (along with oral communication) as the top skill they look for in employees (Hart Research Associates 2010), and that most of our students were raised in the age of Twitter and Facebook, where an "extended argument" equals all of 140 characters, an emphasis on developing writing skills has become all the more important.

Acknowledging these realities, though, is not just beneficial for students. It's also valuable for institutions involved in broader curricular conversations, for implicit in Kellogg's data is the recognition that learning takes time and that teaching must be deliberate. Put another way, this isn't just about writing. Discussion of writing across the curriculum reminds us that all teaching must meet students where they are and bring them to where we want them to be.

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Bemoaning how ill-prepared this or that cohort is in this or that area becomes irrelevant. Similarly, telling students "You had this last year! You should know this!" is beside the point: exposure to an idea or skill is not the same thing as learning that idea or skill. If students are to learn, if they are to acquire the skills they'll need to succeed in a complex world, all of us will have to share the responsibility for teaching them key content and skills—not just once, but multiple times and at increasing levels of complexity.

Reason #2: Different fields define "good writing" differently

A few years ago, we asked a number of the candidates for a position in the English department to give "job talks" that were open to the entire campus. After one of these, a friend of mine from the biology department came over to me, horrified by one of the applicants. "Did you see that?" she said. "He *read* his whole talk! Not just from notes—he *read* it!" It was one of those moments that sharpened my awareness of the potential disconnects between fields, particularly in matters of literacy. What my colleagues saw as grievous sin, I saw as . . . well, someone who'd carefully constructed an argument and wanted to make sure he got it right by following his text very closely.

The fact is that when it comes to writing (and speaking and quantitative reasoning),

various fields value different things. Our history department, for instance, is insistent that students avoid the passive voice at all times, at all costs. Coming from English and writing, I see no particular harm in the practice, as long as it's not overdone. Our computer scientists and philosophers tend to value very precise writing, while other fields recognize that sometimes complex truths require a more loquacious approach. Moreover, what one field views as an appropriate thesis is not what another field values—indeed, for some types of writing in some kinds of fields, the concept of the thesis is irrelevant. Similarly, what does and doesn't qualify as appropriate evidence changes from discipline to discipline, field to field, and even course to course. Even if a student does very well in a fourteen- or sixteen-week writing course, he or she is no more prepared to do the sorts of advanced writing in, say, chemistry or economics than a student who passed a generic foreign language course would be to speak Russian.

Properly engaged—that is, designed and supported effectively by the instructor—writing becomes evidence of critical thinking on the part of students

The writing-across-the-curriculum approach recognizes the varieties of discourse and discourse expectations students will be exposed to, both during their time at college and once they're in the workplace. Through participation in a writing-across-the-curriculum program, faculty are made aware that we can't assume our students understand the particular writing practices of our own fields. As a result, we're forced to be more deliberate about *teaching* writing, not just assigning it.

Here again, the point is not just that writing across the curriculum is good for students once a new curriculum is in place. Discussion of across-the-curriculum programs is in itself valuable for faculty, even while a particular general education model is under consideration. In such discussions, we foreground the ways in which our fields and disciplines do or don't connect with one another as well as how they do or don't overlap in terms of their values, their methodologies, their ways of constructing meaning and truth. As an increasing number of colleges and universities adopt more "integrative" models of liberal education, these kinds of interdisciplinary conversations among faculty are crucial. How can we prepare our students to meet the challenges of another field or discipline if we ourselves aren't familiar with these fields and disciplines or how they operate? And if we can't prepare our students for challenges they'll face in other classes, how can we prepare them for challenges they'll face as citizens in a rapidly changing world?

Reason #3: Writing is critical thinking

When I ask faculty or administrators what they want from a new curriculum, it's not uncommon for them to say, "I want my students to become better critical thinkers." This is an excellent answer, of course. The only problem is with that word "thinker." Since thinking is an internal action, we can't actually tell when it's going on. Sure, every once in a while one of our students will have one of those "aha!" moments that are so strong, everyone in the room knows what's happened. And certainly we can gaze around the room in the midst of a lecture or discussion and get a sense that some of our students are deep in thought—thoughts about *what*, we're not entirely sure.

Properly engaged—that is, designed and supported effectively by the instructor—writing becomes evidence of critical thinking on the part of students. Chris Anson (2002, x) perhaps states it best: "As writers formulate thoughts into written propositions, their emerging texts loop back into their own thinking. Words written become words reconsidered, ideas put to new tests. Gaps in information appear, revealing the need for further learning. Accumulated knowledge takes on the voice of authority, creating in the writers a new sense of expertise." Writing, then, is more than the communication of perfectly formed thoughts—or, as is sometimes the case, poorly formed thoughts. Rather, it's a visible means of testing our ideas. As we put a thought or concept down on paper, we're able to see whether our thinking "makes sense," whether what sounded so good in the dim abstract of our minds actually survives in the light of day. More than once I've had the experience of searching for a passage to support my argument, only to find that, once I'd put in on the page, it didn't in any way prove my point.

And most academics, I've no doubt, have had the experience of watching a writing project evolve beyond our outlines in ways we hadn't anticipated, largely because we're watching our words, following our logic, and testing our ideas to see whether they're sound. As one of my graduate advisors said years ago, "If your dissertation ends up looking exactly like your prospectus, you're probably not paying attention."

The same is true of quantitative reasoning. The numbers on the page, the calculations, and the rationales are more than just a tracing of thought. They're a *challenge* to thought, an attempt to see whether our hypotheses are correct and whether our methods worked or not. And though students in the midst of a formal oral presentation generally can't pause to reconsider the veracity and logic of their spoken words, they certainly can do so as they draft, practice, and revise their presentations ahead of time.

Implicit in all of this is the idea that any well-designed program to develop students' writing or oral communication or quantitative reasoning skills across the curriculum entails more than just assigning writing or oral communication or quantitative reasoning in more places. First of all, the kinds of projects we ask students to complete will change. Papers that ask for a summary of another's point or for a simple description or narrative will perhaps be replaced by assignments requiring more synthesis, more evaluation, and more analysis. Indeed, perhaps even the traditional "pick a topic of your choice and research it" essay will become a thing of the past. Second, because we're asking our students to use writing, quantitative reasoning, or oral communication more as a tool to aid complex thinking, we'll need to be more thoughtful about using smaller assignments, homework, and class time to provide students with needed practice in using the skills associated with the forms of critical thinking we value.

Which means that, again, contemplation of writing (or quantitative reasoning, or oral communication) across the curriculum shouldn't be shoved aside during efforts to reform general education. Indeed, what I've been discussing here is essential to making general education reform effective. In the end, if we're to provide a truly integrated liberal education, we must not only change our curricula—the courses we offer—but we must also change what we do in the classroom, the kinds of papers and assignments and labs and projects we assign, and the kinds of test questions we ask. Only then will we really reshape the way our colleges and universities prepare students for the challenges of a changing world. □

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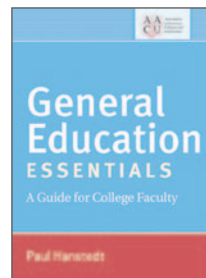
From Jossey-Bass

General Education Essentials: A Guide to College Faculty

By Paul Hanstedt

With a Foreword by Terrel Rhodes



Every year, hundreds of small colleges, state schools, and large research-oriented universities across the United States (and increasingly across Europe and Asia) are revisiting their core and general education curricula, often moving toward more integrative models. And every year, faculty who are highly skilled and regularly rewarded for their work are asking "Why?" and "How is this going to impact me?" In addition to answering these questions, this guide provides an overview of and a rationale for the shift in general education curricular design, a sense of how this shift can affect a faculty member's teaching, and a sense of how this can impact course and student assessment.

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