

WRITING ACROSS DISCIPLINES: TRAINING A STAFF

EDWARD M. UEHLING

At Valparaiso we have introduced freshman seminars as a general education requirement for students in all colleges of the University. The seminar, the third intensive writing course required of freshmen, is significantly different from the other two — a traditional composition course and an introduction to theology. To students and faculty alike, the seminar may be most important for addressing writing concerns within the framework of a theme or topic and for involving faculty outside the English department. Expanding and intensifying the students' writing experience in such a way has obvious benefits not only for those students, but for the instructors, too. Nationally, faculty members in every discipline have voiced concern over students' inadequacies as writers. That concern within the Valparaiso faculty has resulted in energetic discussions on the nature of good writing and how to bring it about. In week-long summer workshops to train the seminar staff, colleagues from a wide range of disciplines considered writing within the framework of cross-disciplinary seminars. Our experience, I think, is representative and potentially valuable for any public school or university preparing to undertake a program in writing across disciplines.

Having others not only express concern for writing but volunteer to help has been greatly reassuring. At the same time, colleagues who expressed such a level of interest in student writing often felt poorly prepared to discuss it. Many were unnecessarily apologetic about not having the critical vocabulary of hardened grammarians. And all expressed

Edward M. Uehling is Director of Writing and Assistant Professor of English at Valparaiso University.

some anxiety over teaching writing for the first time. Of their reasons, three stand out:

- First, students would not be knowledgeable in the seminar topic and might even be indifferent to it — this from faculty members who teach mostly advanced students in their major field;
- second, although faculty members had assigned papers in their discipline-centered courses, few had experience in explaining how students should write the papers;
- finally, many had been dissatisfied with their students' papers but were unsure of how to express that dissatisfaction constructively.

Answers to these issues developed within workshop sessions. During that time participants became immersed in the writing process through a series of free writing exercises and discussions of those exercises, and through presentations on such topics as assignment making and methods of evaluation. The sense of ourselves as a staff with a common degree of shared purpose and enthusiasm developed over these full five days of working and thinking together with an intensity that would have been unlikely in any other context.

An outline of suggestions in two key areas for new teachers of writing — creating writing assignments and (more briefly) evaluating students' responses to them — developed through the workshop.

The starting point for all teachers of writing is understanding their students. Through our response to them, students must be led to believe in the value of their own ideas and the need for thoughtfully stating them. Most do not, however, because they have little experience in being taken seriously or in shaping and interpreting the information they receive in class. Only in creating meaningful writing assignments can we encourage them to recognize the valuable potential of their several voices/personalities in addressing academic issues. Even in formal situations students are relatively comfortable in assuming various speaking roles: sons and daughters, roommates, biology majors, citizens. For writing, they must similarly discover areas of authority, expertise.

Writing is more difficult, of course, because in a sustained piece of closely considered ideas there is no opportunity to retrace steps, clarify, or answer questions. However much prewriting and revising goes on, one must finally sub-

mit a paper which stands on its own merits. Writing is more difficult, too, because the sense of audience is less certain — there are no faces or immediate responses. Thus a major stumbling block can develop in any writing course when students believe that their essays must exclusively please the instructor as a person (and how many of our students are thoroughly convinced that we are real people and not some curious third sex?). Students, who are intimidated when a professor simply tells them, “write about topic X,” often resort to a style that is textbookish and worse: long, unvaried sentence patterns; pretentious diction (Thesaurus syndrome); passive voice; phrases when a single modifier or specific action verb would do. They assume that all of this is necessary in sounding important, and such vagueness becomes a form of self-protection.

This lack of confidence diminishes when we frame assignments in a way that requires students to address a topic in a voice appropriate to a specific audience and for a clearly defined purpose (occasion). The seminar format — with a class limited to fifteen students who have chosen a topic to explore in depth — lends itself well to these issues of voice, audience, and occasion. Immersed in the topic for its own sake, not because it introduces any single academic discipline, students should become increasingly confident about the subject matter and better able to address different topics and readers. Inevitably, one of those readers is the instructor, but the seminar atmosphere and limited class size can help students to see us not merely as evaluator and judge. Moreover, how we talk about writing assignments in class and in conference can enable students to regard us as co-editors and advocates who join in helping them address other potentially interested readers.

When student writers are conscious of their materials, purpose, and readership, they have established a rhetorical profile for the assignment. Although instructors need not use that term or any other which would be unfamiliar and perhaps intimidating, the concept of a rhetorical profile is essential. It develops as they consider the quality and level of their diction, the general pattern and length of their sentences, and the structure and length of their paragraphs. Their choices will determine the relative formality or informality of the paper. If our assignments call attention to these issues, students can become as flexible and honest in their writing as they are in their speech.

At the very least, students should see themselves, their classmates, and us as potential audiences of interested, educated adults. Once they do, they can ask appropriate questions: what the audience already knows, what it needs to know, and what biases or special interests it may have.

By requiring various types of assignments, we can enable our students to write for several genuine occasions. Journals, essays of exploratory investigation, critical analysis, and formal argument (moving from a private to an increasingly public voice) are all within the scope of a freshman seminar. Without discussing the expository and argumentative modes of the traditional composition class, seminar instructors can nevertheless provide valuable writing experience for their students. By focusing on audience, voice, and occasion, they can lead students to distinguish between a topic and a thesis. By varying the kind and length of assignments, they can help students face decisions of structure, proportion, and emphasis.

Both experienced and new teachers of writing have found several valuable kinds of assignments for their seminars. Thematically focused journals, free writing exercises, in-class essays, essay exams, out of class critical analyses have called for various audiences, voices, and occasions.

Evaluating the students' work also becomes more productive when we have specified our expectations clearly in the assignment. We have recommended only a few guidelines for evaluation:

1. Identify grammatical strengths and weaknesses in the text without revising or rewriting the essay. Aid students in discovering their responsibility as proof-readers and editors; do not take it from them.
2. Don't overwhelm the writer of a bad first paper by identifying every flaw in it.
3. Don't separate style and content in assigning a grade. Writers should be encouraged to see form, style, and substance as integral parts of the whole: effective communication.
4. Don't rehash in a concluding paragraph what you have already written in the margins. Your final comment should be comprehensive, specific, and helpful. Reiterating earlier comments only prolongs an already time-consuming process.
5. Attempt to develop a grading speed of 15-20

minutes for each 2-4 page paper. Before marking an essay, read it through: have a general impression of its argument and organization before you begin to evaluate specific strengths and weaknesses.

6. Most important, always say something positive about the substance of the paper.

Successful evaluation and assignment making can be accomplished by appealing to the students' common sense: that writing is first an act of discovery and of shaping and solidifying ideas which before were only random and tentative; that writing is an act of communication which can be more or less successful, but that it is never merely a drill or form of punishment. Finally, the seminar writing experience should encourage students to regard their prose as integral to the scholarly process of imaginative investigation and intellectual commitment.

