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Carol Peterson Haviland

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Writing Centers and Writing-Across-The-Curriculum: An Important Connection

Carol Peterson Haviland

Although generally optimistic about the effect of writing center instruction, writing center staff commonly remain frustrated with the "fix-it shop" role that writing centers so frequently must assume, a role that presses staff to spend disproportionate time with the cosmetics of writing and to neglect the thinking/writing skills that build confident, competent writers. Drop-in, last-minute service will always be necessary and important. However, both writing-across-the-curriculum research and the projects to be reported here suggest that writing center instructors can better solve fundamental writing problems if they spend some of their time outside of the writing center, working with faculty and students on the design and the development of non-English course writing projects.

This paper, then, will describe three models of an important extension of writing center activities—moving writing instruction out of the center and into courses across the curriculum. This extension is both cognitively sound and politically astute, for it facilitates thinking/writing skills instruction throughout the university and establishes the writing center as an important resource for all students rather than as a narrowly-defined developmental resource serving only "special" populations such as basic writers or non-traditional students. The extension also can be pivotal in reshaping the character of a writing center, markedly diminishing its function as a comma clinic and clearly establishing its role as a true writing center—a place where, as Stephen North observes, people come to talk about writing (441).

Montana State University's initial experiments with writing-center based writing-across-the-curriculum projects (1981-83) were funded through a university instructional development grant that was supplemented with money from the university's FIPSE grant. Projects are now funded as part of the regular Writing Center budget. These early experiments set a pattern for three categories of projects: those primarily involving faculty, those primarily involving students, and those involving faculty and students in fairly equal proportions. Although none of these three models is inherently profound in terms of instructional target or design, it seems reasonable to offer them as examples of focused collaborative processes, transferable but clearly variable with other specific settings.

Common to all three projects is a most important first step: discussion with potential collaborators in disciplines other than English to understand their goals for writing in their courses. Moving into others' classrooms is not license to set up soapboxes to advance our own agenda. Writing Center staff need to discover how their colleagues perceive writing and what functions of writing they want to incorporate into their existing courses. And, these discussions must continue frequently and candidly, in both the design and the implementation stages, to make certain that the projects are truly departmentally-based and are appropriate to the discipline. Beyond these initial discussions, interactions vary substantially.

Faculty-centered Projects

Faculty-centered projects focus on helping instructors across the curriculum design writing assignments for their classes. At MSU such projects have been set up in a variety of disciplines including physics, political science, ceramics, business, and

history. One of the Writing Center's first faculty-centered projects began with a ceramics instructor who lamented over coffee after an all-university faculty meeting, "I'm discouraged with my students' resistance to concrete thinking and writing, about their contentions that art simply flows from a truly creative person and that writing is for those 'dull, would-be creative persons in the English department.' How can I show them that writing can help them make discoveries that will make them better ceramists?" In subsequent conferences with Writing Center staff, it became clear that the instructor valued for himself the thinking/writing connection but had been unable to infect his students with similar values.

Because his concern was less for generating a polished final product than for using writing for exploration and discovery, we suggested he try discovery journals to encourage students to think seriously about art and themselves as artists, an approach that he still is using several quarters later.

In his second-year ceramics studio, students enter five questions each week into a cumulative question bank and then develop one question weekly, mainly through focused freewriting. One hour of studio time each week is used to discuss the journal questions, the instructor functioning as facilitator. The first two or three weeks' questions tend to be flat, rhetorical questions such as "Why is art important?" But continued writing and sharing fairly quickly move students to genuine, substantive concerns. By mid-quarter, students' questions range from the economics of art, to fine points of design, to particular artistic activities; discussions often are heated, frequently extending well past the allotted time as students argue mug design based on integrity vs. what will sell in volume at the local airport gift shop. At the end of the quarter, students write an essay on their changing perceptions of art and of themselves as artists.

Student response to this Ceramics II writing component is that it takes extra time, but most add that the investment is worthwhile. On end-of-quarter evaluations, 70-80% report that after the first few weeks, they began to value their journals enough to write for themselves, not simply to fulfill a requirement. For example, last year one student commented, "At the end of my freewriting, I usually knew something I didn't know before." Another said that journal writing made class discussions more substantive than usual, that they weren't simply monopolized by students who made shoddy pots but tried to gain points by droning on about pet topics or by otherwise trying to impress the teacher. The instructor consistently has noted two significant gains over previous non-writing quarters: students think more critically, and they communicate more clearly about their work.

This sort of faculty-centered project does not directly alter Writing Center work with the students in this class, for students do not need to use the Writing Center for their projects. However, it seems reasonable to project an indirect effect: as students practice serious thinking/questioning/prewriting activities, they begin to understand the writing process more clearly; as instructors give clearer, more manageable assignments, students come to the writing center better prepared to use the staff for more than spelling correction.

Student-centered Projects

Our second category of project—those that are student-centered—usually involves a highly-motivated group with clearly-perceived needs, such as the pre-medical, dental, and veterinary students who are writing the personal-comments sections of their professional school applications or graduate students preparing to write comprehensive examinations. Even here, however, some careful initial assess-

ment is critical, for often the perceived need is not the actual need. For example, when the pre-health professions advisor first asked for assistance for his students, he noted that, although students agonized over their writing, the resulting essays still were disappointing. We suggested that although some agony probably was inevitable, the process could be made more productive. We also established a very clear ground rule that Writing Center staff would be enablers, never writers, that writing for students was unethical and unacceptable. The goals then became threefold: to turn students' agony into productive writing energy and better essays, to use Writing Center staff more effectively, and to create a writing experience that would transfer to other contexts. We then set up a protocol for fall and spring quarter sessions timed to match the major application deadlines.

These twice-yearly sessions begin with three group meetings, the first about two months before the essays are due. In the first meeting, we discuss purpose, audience, and invention. The most difficult task is to convince students that the purpose of the essay is to say something about themselves as unique persons, not to write anonymous essays that will bury them safely with others who are trying to write what they think someone else might like to hear—"I'm interested in science and I like to help people." Once they accept this revised purpose, we spend time with various invention activities (freewriting, questioning, drawing, mapping). Here we encourage students to suspend judgment about ideas and approaches and to concentrate on getting as many specifics as possible about experiences, interests, motivations, and expectations onto paper where they can be examined, sorted, and interpreted.

The second meeting moves to discovering focus and imposing organization. Pointing out the parallel between the chemistry lab procedure and the writing process is helpful here, for students quickly see the similarity between discovering the meaning of laboratory findings and discovering what the results of their invention say about them as medical, dental, or veterinary school applicants. We then look at the issue of focus developed through specific details rather than through wandering repetition of general statements. Because these essays matter, those students who slept through freshman composition now are alert and energetic. In fact, this "readiness for writing" is the most rewarding element of the project for Writing Center staff.

The third meeting deals with revision, and here Kenneth Bruffee's collaborative learning strategies are useful. Once students realize that it is safe to share their writing, for no two essays will be alike, they make excellent use of each other as audience and critic.

At the end of these three group meetings, students are able to write thoughtful rough drafts, which they then bring to the Writing Center for one-to-one consultation. Most students make two visits, the first to clarify focus and the second to flesh out details. Interestingly enough, the time spent on cosmetics is minimal, for, as Bruffee says, when "writers realize that they do have something to say and that they can say it coherently and effectively...errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure tend to disappear" (xvii).

The result for students is not less work but much more productive and rewarding work. Also, many note that they have learned how to attack writing and to reduce their writing anxiety. The faculty advisor reports uniformly better essays, both in his opinion and in that of other faculty on the university screening committee. The most dramatic change is that almost all of the essays now reveal unique individuals, whereas in previous years a high percentage simply rambled anonymously through predictable clichés. The Writing Center staff clearly uses time more effectively, for the group meetings clarify students' expectations for writing center assistance and prepare them for productive one-to-one work.

Faculty-and-Student-Centered Projects

These first two projects are examples of fairly limited collaborations. They are productive because they introduce Writing Center collaboration into new areas and because they meet specific needs. However, the third and most common design, that involving faculty and students fairly equally, illustrates a fuller collaboration, one that often extends over many quarters and to other courses within a department or college. These projects, which begin with the course instructor and assignment design and then move to collaborative instruction in the classroom and one-to-one Writing Center conferences with students, have, in fact, altered the Writing Center's relationship with entire departments.

Classes in nursing, business, military science, teacher education, physical education, computer science, chemical engineering, history, and political science have been involved in such projects. An example of this design is an introduction to a nursing course in which students had been writing term papers that the instructor described at our initial meeting as "uniformly depressing—students dislike writing them and I dread reading them." At that point, the English/nursing connection had been limited to cameo presentations on how to footnote and the usual last-minute student requests for term paper editing, though several faculty had become interested in trying some writing-across-the-curriculum activities as the result of a summer FIPSE-sponsored workshop.

As we discussed goals for writing in this course, two instructor concerns emerged: to get students to think about nursing issues and to produce one solid piece of nursing-related writing. We discussed several personal writing and shorter micro-theme options and then set up two projects: (1) a discovery journal similar to the ceramics students' journals that would encourage students to think about class material and not merely parrot it back on tests and (2) a nursing case report.

In their journals, nursing students wrote five questions each week and developed one through focused freewriting. A few minutes of almost every class then was devoted to journal sharing. Early questions, like those in the ceramics class, tended to be informational requests, but these students too quickly moved to fiery interchanges between men and women on sexual stereotypes in the profession and vigorous debates on the ethics of physician-nurse relationships or of "pulling the plug" on the terminally ill.

The second project was a modified case report, the focus of which was organizing material and presenting it appropriately to an audience. For example, one of the options was to write an incident report on a hospital patient who had fallen while walking from bed to bathroom. Students had to select relevant chart information and write a clear, non-judgmental report that addressed both nursing and legal questions and that could help staff provide optimal continuing care. Both nursing and writing instructors were available during class workshop sessions, and writing staff were available in the writing center for one-to-one work.

These two assignments were used for three quarters, but then nursing faculty shortages resulted in larger classes with instructors teaching several sections of sixty students rather than the previous twenty-five. Although instructors had been pleased with the writing assignments and with the fact that they had required even less grading time than the previous term papers, they still felt pressed to trim the case study. So, we substituted a shorter project, one that still focused on the critical thinking and writing skills nursing faculty wanted to develop but that would require even less grading time.

For this new assignment, students selected one of six articles (selected from nursing journals and changed each quarter) and on a 5 x 8 inch card summarized the article, posed one issue question, and set out two opposing responses to the issue

question. For example, one article discussed sex in nursing homes. Although the summaries were fairly uniform, the issue questions ranged from the obvious, "Should nursing homes condone sexual activity between unmarried patients?" to more specific legal, family, psychological, or implementation considerations. To prepare their opposing responses, students role played their situations in groups, an experience which was particularly useful in discovering opposition to those responses they personally preferred. In addition to providing writing experience, the process of examining contradictions and quandaries offered nursing students practice in a frequent nursing role: explaining treatment options to patients and families without revealing personal preferences. This journal and issue question activity was used for four quarters, but now it too is in revision because this course is being combined with a second course into a larger core course. Again, nursing and Writing Center staff are back to the goal assessment and assignment design phase.

In each of the variations of this course, the response to writing has been generally favorable. Students complain about the workload, though no more than they do in any challenging course, and some ask why they should write in nursing courses. But they also comment about the discoveries that journal freewriting generates and about the value of collaborative work in providing an audience for the case writing or issue discussions. The nursing instructor notes that journals make class discussions less one-sided and more interesting. She also reports that both case writings and issue discussions, in contrast to the term papers, reflect a new sense of audience, say something specific and significant, demonstrate greater openness to complexity and controversy, and include fewer mechanical errors. Again, Writing Center staff are pleased to work with students who have a sense of direction, who know enough about the writing process to expect to revise, and who are looking for more than help with distinguishing between "its" and "it's."

A pleasing outgrowth of this particular collaboration was an invitation for the writing instructor to participate as a writing consultant at College of Nursing faculty meetings. This has led to a true collaborative relationship between the Writing Center and the College of Nursing, with writing components in almost all courses, cooperative research on thinking and writing skills, and staunch nursing support of the Writing Center as "that place to talk about writing," an attitude that reflects a dramatic and positive departure from the footnote and comma checker role.

At this juncture, it seems important to anticipate a very logical question: "Yes, it all sounds great; clearly some collaborations have gone well for MSU's Writing Center. But, what didn't work; what failures or setbacks are you concealing?" Actually, there is nothing to conceal; we have been fortunate. First, the Vice President for Academic Affairs was very interested in writing-across-the-curriculum possibilities and was willing to sponsor some initial experiments, but he did not mandate participation. Therefore, we were able to work with only willing, interested collaborators and allow them to become our advocates for expansion. Second, Writing Center faculty sensed the importance of presenting themselves as true collaborators, not as experts wafting in to transform someone else's teaching. Even now, with many successful projects behind us, collaborators carefully maintain this posture. Third, we have offered an attractive Writing Center package—consultation on course and assignment design, assistance in presenting and evaluating writing, and one-to-one tutoring for students.

Finally, we have been willing to learn and revamp as we go. The major mistake that we made early on was not realizing that collaborating faculty must introduce writing assignments as their own. The evaluations of the first two runs of the nursing project pointed out this critical element in presenting writing activities to non-English classes, for they demonstrated the importance of writing instructors being

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perceived as students' allies, not imposers of additional demands. The first quarter, the writing instructor presented the writing component because the nursing instructor felt uneasy introducing a project still new to her. While many students reacted favorably to the course, at least one-third complained about "having to do English in a nursing class."

The next quarter, however, the nursing instructor was at ease with the writing and introduced it herself. She then presented the writing instructor as a resource person several class sessions later; the transformation was remarkable. No longer was the English instructor a Miss Thistlebottom complicating their lives as nursing students. Writing with concern for a specific audience, organizing for clarity, or observing the spelling difference between afferent and efferent limbs of the bowel became nursing issues, issues that students knew could affect patient care and prevent lawsuits. The English instructor became an ally, not a pest. Thus, even though collaborators often wish to defer to Writing Center staff in initial class presentations, Writing Center staff refuse this role, taking whatever time is required to help the collaborator feel comfortable presenting the writing assignments as his or her own.

We have learned from this work. We know that our success is tied to a general university commitment to writing, to starting slowly, to working only with collaborators who want us and counting on them to become our advertising, and to recognizing the importance of working with colleagues who retain full charge of their course contents and presentations.

We see the gains as impressive. First, many non-English instructors are enthusiastic and optimistic about using writing to promote learning in their courses. In three years, the number of faculty using one of the models at least experimentally has grown from fewer than a dozen to nearly one hundred. Second, these projects in conjunction with the FIPSE training projects have generated significantly broadened support for the Writing Center. In three years, permanent funding has materialized to begin a full-scale, comprehensive writing-across-the-curriculum program. Third, faculty report that a great number of students are writing papers that focus clearly on significant issues, support assertions with specific details, and have few "grammar" deficits. Fourth, students are using the Writing Center more productively. From both "project" courses and other courses, more students are coming in early with rough drafts and questions, ready to do real revisions, not an hour before deadline with final copies to be proofread or edited for only sentence-level errors. Also, students come from nearly all age and ability levels in contrast to the usual high percentage of freshmen and basic writers. Therefore, we plan to continue to allot at least half of the time of Writing Center professional staff to writing-across-the-curriculum outreach. We believe that this move from a reactive to a proactive posture is an important move—for students, for collaborating faculty, and for Writing Center staff.

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Carol Peterson Haviland is a member of the Composition Faculty at Montana State University, where she serves as the Faculty Writing Consultant in the Writing Center and teaches composition. She has presented papers at both regional and national conferences and has published articles on writing and related subjects in several journals.