

Writing in the Disciplines as a Model for Writing, Critical Thinking, and Information Literacy Across the Curriculum

Writing Across the Curriculum has become a rich field, complex with pedagogical strategies, ongoing research, and lessons learned from institutional implementation. As such, the following distinction is a vastly simplified version, but one that is nevertheless important to make. Writing Across the Curriculum theory posits two main functions of writing in University courses, often termed “Writing to Learn,” and “Writing in the Disciplines.” Writing to Learn is focused on a particular set of pedagogical strategies that use writing not as a way to communicate, but rather as a way to foster critical thinking and explore learning. Writing to Learn activities are often short, impromptu, and low-stakes (Keifer, LeCourt, Reid, and Wyrlic, “A Fuller Definition of Writing to Learn”). In contrast, Writing in the Disciplines gives students practical writing tasks, often formal papers, that allow them to practice writing skills and, importantly, to learn and practice the writing conventions within a particular area of study (Keifer, LeCourt, Reid, and Wyrlic, “What is Writing in the Disciplines?”).

The Writing subcommittee supports a QEP model focused on Writing in the Disciplines for several reasons. First, Writing in the Disciplines necessarily involves critical thinking and information literacy as noted in Bean’s *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* and articulated by Dan Berrett from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* who says, “Writing works exceedingly well as both a way to assess learning and a means of deepening that learning, according to experts who study its effects on students” (A4). Second, Writing in the Disciplines situates the responsibility for writing instruction with faculty teaching in the disciplines rather than with administration or just with faculty in writing. Jonathan Monroe, who directs the Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University, points out that “writing should be vested in the disciplines where this work takes place and in the faculty who are the ultimate arbiters and authorities, latently if not manifestly, over what counts as effective writing in their respective fields” (4). Finally, it has been the experience of committee members who teach upper level writing courses that students who have been exposed to a lot of Writing to Learn without understanding its aims can struggle to meet acceptable writing standards in their Writing Intensive courses.

A Writing in the Disciplines model, as the subcommittee envisions it, could encompass a variety of initiatives. At its heart would be a University Center for Writing in the Disciplines, with a full-time director. This Center would encompass the Writing Center and expand on its services by providing support to faculty teaching writing with their disciplines. This support could come as professional development opportunities or individual assistance in designing courses, crafting assignments, and learning to grade writing effectively. While faculty in the disciplines may themselves be adept at the conventions of writing required in the field, the teaching of writing presents unique pedagogical challenges that experts could help them navigate. For example, three important texts in the field (Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*; Elbow and Belanoff, *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited*; and Herrington and Moran, *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*) posit peer collaboration as crucial in writing instruction in spite of the challenges it presents for faculty. Importantly, the Center would also provide assistance to students and faculty from tutors who are specifically trained in the research and writing conventions of a specific discipline. The Center would not coordinate or schedule course offerings.

Rather, Composition courses would continue to be offered from the Department of Languages and Literature, and other writing courses would be offered in their appropriate disciplinary homes.

The Center could conceivably play a role in ensuring continuity within writing instruction and in the University-wide assessment of writing, as some coordination will certainly be required, with input from faculty. Mary Allen, director of the California State University Institute for Teaching and Learning, points out in her 2004 book, *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education*, "Agreeing on learning objectives, checking for program alignment, developing an assessment plan, collecting data, using results, and examining assessment practices are not tasks for one person" (15). With its coordinating role, the Center is envisioned to be a "middle way" given models that we saw like at Cornell University, where the Center is very large and has a lot of control over course offerings within the disciplines and others like Eastern Illinois University, which has a loosely organized Writing Across the Curriculum Committee and a Writing Center, whose responsibilities seem to overlap in places and possibly leave gaps in support for students and faculty.

Another key aspect of a Writing in the Disciplines model is introducing discipline specific writing early in the undergraduate curriculum. The subcommittee did not see a need to transform Composition 1 and 2 into discipline-specific courses, as is done at Cornell and elsewhere, but did recommend that Composition 2 become the launching place for Writing in the Disciplines. As it is currently designed, the course should give students the foundational skills to learn the conventions of research and writing within a particular field. The subcommittee saw the need then not for a change in that curriculum, but instead an opportunity to add interesting components to the course that will allow students to see the connections between the generalized skills they are learning and those they will employ while writing in their major areas of study. In keeping with Monroe's assertion that writing in the disciplines is done best when situated within the discipline itself, we recommend that each major require a course that focuses on teaching students the skills to read, research, and write in the discipline and that the course be required early in the progression through the major. These benefits of types of courses are well documented in the research and appear in the Writing across the Curriculum programs at many Universities.

While the subcommittee entertained other interesting possibilities that could fit within this model, we present these two ideas as the basis, knowing that as the QEP evolves with faculty input that other ideas can work well within this basic structure.

Works Cited

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