"My teacher hates me!" The writing center as locus for a rhetoric-based WAC program

Students—even, and perhaps especially, “good” students—are aware of the duality of their learning, the need to learn both disciplinary material and specific conventions of writing and thinking. However, these conventions may not be recognized as discipline-specific, but seen as “hoops” to jump through, a “game to play” in order to satisfy the immediate audience—the instructor. Perhaps especially at a school the size of Eureka College (approximately 500 students, 40 full-time faculty), word gets around quickly that “this is what Professor So-and-So wants;” “don’t write about X or make Y mistakes in Dr. Z’s class, or you’ll get a bad grade.” These unwritten “rules” refer less frequently to lower order concerns such as pronoun-antecedent agreement, first vs. third-person narrative, or active voice vs. passive (which can and do vary widely between professors teaching the same subject or even the same course) than to broader issues of topic, purpose, audience and stylistic voice. Even more
distressing is the propensity of students to engage in “pseudo-academese,” an artificially inflated prose style that they believe is the key to success, and for writing center consultants (unwittingly) to perpetuate this belief. “Writing smart” is a tendency for which undergraduates are often penalized.

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors’ Column essays. If possible, please send as attached files or as cut-and-paste in an e-mail to wln@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send a 3 and 1/2 in. disk with the file, along with the paper copy. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 30 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for an October issue).

As one writing center consultant puts it, “Why tell the butterfly guy what he already knows?”

Why indeed? Kenneth Burke’s “parlor” model serves to address at least part of this concern (and many concerns of voice and purpose, as we shall explore later). Students, or anyone else who explores a new subject or area, can envision themselves as entering what Burke calls “the unending conversation”:

When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a . . . discussion . . . too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent. . . . However, the discussion is inerminable. The hour grows late; you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-11)

The search for a “solution” may occasionally drive a conversation in a given field, but far more frequent (and useful) are those discussions that are ongoing dialogues. The conversation does not end when a student—or anyone else—withdraws.

The Burkean parlor model is central to the effectiveness of interlocking WAC programs and writing centers, and serves to illustrate the connections between audience, purpose and voice. Thus the “butterfly guy” may not be looking for his undergraduates to tell him something he has never before encountered about lepidoptery; rather, he may be assessing their ability to determine the discourse climate, and gaug-
ing their understanding of and engagement with the material through their contributions to the conversation. “New” contributions, while not discouraged, are not necessarily the primary objective of the students or the instructor. The audience, then, goes far beyond the immediate one of instructor and/or peers provided in the classroom context; students are training themselves to listen to their own voices, and anticipate the value of their contributions—who will listen, and who won’t? Who will contribute in turn, and what will they be likely to say?

“Writing to get it done:” Three views of purpose

The parlor discussion model also serves to address the closely-inter-twined concept of purpose. The same consultant (a biology major) who questions the purpose of telling professors what they already know expresses frustration over the “devaluing” of personal observations and experience in the sciences, and the need to couch everything in someone else’s words in order to achieve credibility. Once we discuss the rhetorical and pedagogical benefits of grounding oneself in the conversation in order to achieve the necessary dual-level of expertise in content and style to have something worth contributing, he appears more comfortable. It’s still not the same thing the British Lit professor wants, though—she constantly asks students for more original ideas and critical thinking, steering them away from recitation of quotes and facts toward ways of thinking that are “new” to them. On the other hand, every time a student tries to break up the monotony a form of thinking and learning. We can’t blame students for wanting to dance the tune the piper calls. They’d be fools if they didn’t.” He cites variations in personal preferences over first, second- or third-person, passive voice, and “contribution” among professors, as well as significant differences in feedback and grading styles. It is worth noting that many of these personal differences address lower-order concerns of grammar and phrasing, although the line between these areas and “voice” can become obscured. The history professor may not have a personal affinity for dry, colorless prose, but recognizes the need for objectivity in that discipline and encourages students to keep personal voice from “interfering” with content.

Through a series of WAC workshops based on John Bean’s Engaging Ideas, Eureka faculty are encouraged to have their students determine the purpose of the assigned writing task: writing-to-learn or learning-to-write. When I suggest to the writing center consultants that they too can raise students’ awareness of the purpose of their own writing by asking them to identify into which of these two categories their papers fall, one offers a third purpose: writing-to-get-it-done. Undoubtedly this will occur at least some of the time. But since students already have a known fondness for attempting to determine the motivations and desires of their professors, why not use this to everyone’s advantage? Students who visit the writing center are now asked to identify the assignment as a writing-to-learn or learning-to-write activity (always allowing for the possibility that it could be both); this can help them become more adept at guiding themselves toward the objective of the assignment, rather than simply “getting it done.” Central to any WAC program, after all, is the view of writing as a form of thinking and learning.

Pitching student voice

John Harbord, of the Centre for Academic Writing at Central European University in Hungary, correctly observes that issues of commodification enter the discussion as well: “the grade does not come from the academic discipline, it comes from the professor. . . . We can’t blame students for wanting to dance the tune the piper calls. They’d be fools if they didn’t.” He cites variations in personal preferences over first, second- or third-person, passive voice, and “contribution” among professors, as well as significant differences in feedback and grading styles. It is worth noting that many of these personal differences address lower-order concerns of grammar and phrasing, although the line between these areas and “voice” can become obscured. The history professor may not have a personal affinity for dry, colorless prose, but recognizes the need for objectivity in that discipline and encourages students to keep personal voice from “interfering” with content.

Students strive to master the discourse style of the discipline they are studying at the same time they strive to please their professors; at the same time, those in academia perpetuate these discourse conventions even as we demand clarity, organization, and a strong writing voice—while not always practicing what we preach. Some professors will claim in class, on syllabi, and on students’ papers that logic and structure are more valuable than the “entertainment” factor, and yet we choose to read books, articles and papers that entertain us, that mesh with our own interests and views; we reward, consciously or not, papers that do the same. How can this confusing mix of signals —about what we want, what we value, what builds credibility, what type of thinking profits the writer and the audience—be addressed?

Writing center consultants can familiarize themselves with a variety of discourse styles through studying advanced undergraduate and published papers within each field, and can become more adept at identifying writing-to-learn and learning-to-write assignments and encourage other students to do the same. At the same time, much of the “guesswork” on the students’ part can be reduced by clearer guidelines from professors about what exactly the standards of
“good” writing are for each respective field or writing task. The Eureka College Writing Center is in the process of compiling roughly standardized guidelines for stylistic and rhetorical conventions across the curriculum, to be used as resources for training and consultations. These ask professors to examine and articulate their expectations and objectives for writing assignments—which can open up insightful dialogues among members of a discipline and strengthen the structure and objectives of assignments themselves, to avoid unwittingly setting “traps” for students.

The October 2003 launch issue of Praxis: a Writing Center Journal is an invaluable resource for new and experienced consultants alike, and is a good way to introduce students to kairos, Burke’s “identification” with audience, Toulmin’s concept of warrant, and other key rhetorical principles. Above all, students’ essential rhetorical awareness and desire to write for and with a perceived audience, purpose and voice is to be recognized and commended; guidance and reinforcement from all academic areas (both faculty and peer-tutors) can provide direction on how to shape this innate awareness and diligence into productive processes and results.

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Works Cited

In December 2003 a new International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Web site was launched: writingcenters.org. With the help of an IWCA committee to explore ways to make the Web resources both stable and more dynamic, our first task after securing a new domain name was to look for a non-institutional host server. Nick Carbone was instrumental in hooking us up with Eric Crump, who will oversee the hosting role; Bedford St. Martin’s has agreed to pick up the tab on the costs of hosting. The committee then turned its attention to finding an innovative Web editor. We chose Clint Gardner, at Salt Lake Community College, and he agreed to a three-year term as Web editor. Thanks go the Web committee formed by past president Paula Gillespie (Lisa Eastmond and Jane Love as members), and to Vivian Rice, who took good care of the site that was originally developed and maintained at Syracuse University by Bruce Pegg.

Following the launch, Clint was offered suggestions and kudos. The site has become a hub for both information and interaction. As Clint tracks posts on WCenter and trends in our field, he updates the site regularly and has created several exchange opportunities through discussion forums. Jon Olson, IWCA president, is eager to see the site bring the organization together for online meetings and voting as well. The site provides an important supplement to the lively exchanges on WCenter listserv and houses the most current information on conferences, job postings, and other news in the field of writing centers. Clint has made certain that peer tutors, directors, and the IWCA board each have a “place” to interact on the Web site. Future plans include providing a searchable database of online writing centers and ways to renew memberships and subscribe to our publications. The editorial board for writingcenters.org welcomes your ideas and feedback.

Michele Eodice, Editorial Board
writingcenters.org

Symposium on Second Language Writing

Proposals are sought for 20-minute presentations that address how instructional policies and politics affect instructional practices. Each presentation should include (1) a description of a particular L2 writing instruction context, (2) an analysis of how institutional policies and politics shape the curriculum in this context, and (3) a discussion of implications for second language writing theory, research, instruction, assessment and/or administration, and the professional development of second language writing specialists. A special event, a Graduate Student Conference on Second Language Writing will be held in conjunction with the Symposium. Proposals must be received by May 15, 2004. For more information, please visit <http://symposium.jslw.org/2004/>. Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda, Chairs.

Call for Proposals
Sept. 30-Oct. 2, 2004
West Lafayette, IN
“Second Language Writing Instruction in Context(s): The Effects of Institutional Policies and Politics.”