

University Core Development Committee

March 13, 2001

Gasson 105, 1:30 p.m.

Minutes

Members in attendance were Chair Richard Cobb-Stevens, Patrick Byrne, Clare Dunsford, Rob Gross, John Heineman, Maggie Kearney, Kathleen Mahoney, Ourida Mostefai, Joseph Quinn, and Dennis Sardella.

The purpose of the meeting was to review the writing core. To that end the committee had invited Lad Tobin, Director of the First Year Writing Program. Lad brought along Eileen Donovan-Kranz, Assistant Director of the Writing Program; Paul Lewis, Chair of the English Department; and Kwasi Sarkodie-Mensah, Manager of Instructional Services at O'Neill Library.

The committee raised the following issues at the outset of the discussion, reflecting some members' personal concerns about the program, based on their own teaching experience:

- whether the amount of writing required in the program was adequate
- the disproportionate amount of time assigned to writing personal narratives
- the need for students to learn how to write concisely, e.g., for grant proposals (Sardella)
- the need to teach students to write better expository prose, including the ability to define terms (Heineman)
- the need for grammar remediation (Kearney)

Lad Tobin acknowledged that the emphasis on revision in the First Year Writing Seminar (FWS) does not prepare students to write, for example, better midterm exams, which are written under pressure of time, but suggested that the latter skill is not a goal that the program has set for itself. He asked the larger question: how could the writing program coordinate with the rest of the core to ensure that students acquire all the skills they need?

On the subject of revision, Rob Gross expressed the hope that after they had taken First Year Writing Seminar, students would become independent in the revision process. Ourida Mostefai noted the difference between goal-oriented writing, such as grant proposals, and writing for an unspecified audience. Joe Quinn described the paper process in his team-taught course as one in which the main paper is due early in the semester and then revised and discussed in the class during the rest of the semester. He asked whether the writing program had rules about the mix of kinds of papers to be assigned.

Paul Lewis addressed some of these issues, noting as he began that the writing program provides an important course in the University, that it is expensive to staff, and

that in some cases the only small class a freshman will be enrolled in is the First Year Writing Seminar. Lewis observed that the process of revision, including among established scholars, is often collaborative. He also pointed out that the distinction between personal and expository writing is not sharp. Another point he made was that B.C. students, in a study Dean Quinn had shared with the Board of Chairs, have been cited as studying less hours than students at comparable schools; as a result, the quality of their papers can not be as high.

John Heineman was concerned that on student evaluations of the First Year Writing Seminar, 55% of students said they devoted "about the same" amount of time to the course as to their other courses. Tobin suggested that the writing course, as far as he was aware, did not have a mandate to require more work than other core courses, so he was satisfied with this response on the survey. Regarding Quinn's question about the kinds of writing assignments required, he said that there are guidelines, but also noted that narrative assignments often evolve into researched papers, an example of the kinds of hybrid forms encouraged in the course.

Tobin then commented on the staffing of the course: half the courses are taught by graduate students, half by adjunct lecturers, and about 3 of 121 sections taught by full-time professors. The graduate students are trained intensely: in the first year of the master's program they take a course in composition taught by Lad or another member of the department; they only teach in the second year, during which they attend regular workshops and receive supervision. Master's students teach one course per semester, while adjuncts teach one, two, or three courses per semester. Doctoral students teach two courses in their third and fourth years, with those teaching in their second year receiving supervision and mentoring. The course evaluations reveal that adjuncts receive much higher approval ratings than teaching fellows; perhaps one reason is that master's students only teach one year, and don't have the opportunity to improve.

Pat Byrne praised the work of the adjuncts, and also the inclusion of research papers on almost all syllabi. He remained concerned though about the proportion of narratives assigned.

Kathleen Mahoney remarked that there seemed to be a "firewall" between First Year Writing Seminar and the rest of the core. She advocated a change in the culture of academic life here, which could be brought about by engaging other, non-English, faculty in conversations about writing. One such place, suggested Mostefai, is among the Cornerstone faculty, where such conversations already go on. Quinn wondered if groups might meet to discuss how to bring other core courses in line with the aims of FWS.

Heineman asked if student complaints about grades might be influenced by the lack of grades in FWS until the end of the course and also the difficulty of objectively grading personal narratives. The group then discussed grade inflation in FWS and in the University at large.

A couple of concluding comments: Mostefai observed that American students talk about themselves more than the French, for instance; she thought a corrective might be in order to encourage more objectivity. Lastly, Maggie Kearney returned to the issue of teaching grammar. Tobin stressed that in FWS papers are in fact ultimately graded with grammar as a standard. Instructors also refer students in need of grammar review to writing manuals and to the Academic Development Center.

Submitted by Clare Dunsford