

A PROGRESS REPORT: THE WRITING PROGRAM THAT WORKS



Eight years ago, the English department set out to reshape its freshman composition courses. The result has been a campuswide emphasis on writing that has caught everyone's attention.

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Like many writing programs at the beginning of the 1980s, the University of Oklahoma's was at a changing point. The faculty knew that what had been acceptable as composition instruction was no longer tenable. A revolution in composition theory, research and practice had begun in the mid-'60s, and knowledgeable faculties in English across the country were re-examining the mission of composition at their universities. They realized what most people in business, the sciences, the arts or any leadership position knew: writing was central to the kind of communication that builds better buildings, helps reshape attitudes toward health and the environment, promotes understanding between nations and individuals and helps form what we know, believe and cherish.

Virginia Woolf once said that writing helps women shape and create their existence. But this is also true of men; we are all language-using creatures, and through language we shape our thoughts, feelings and experiences to induce in others images of the world similar to ours. Language (written and spoken) is probably the most common way we communicate, though a case can be made for the arts and various social systems of communication (how we dress, how we behave socially, etc.). But no matter how many communication systems may exist, language education is central to the mission of our schools and universities, and writing is part of that center. Composition once had the reputation of "bone head" English, the "dead-end of intellectual life," the "dumping ground for misfit students and misfit teachers" and the last place where people in their right minds would seek intellectual stimulation. Now composition was seen, as OU's new master plan, the Strategy for Excellence, states, as the "cornerstone of liberal education."

The stage was set, and in 1980 Earl A. and Betty Galt Brown of Houston, Texas, donated funds for a named professorship to direct composition. Some changes sought by dedicated OU faculty and administrators already had

begun before a director of composition had been hired. For example, a fully reconstituted upper-division technical writing course had been put in place thanks to cooperation between faculty in English and engineering. Attempts were under way to hire Ph.D.s who wanted to teach writing. Most faculty realized, however, that if composition instruction were to improve, graduate teaching assistants, who teach most freshman writing courses, had to receive more training in the teaching of writing. But training in a course or a workshop was not enough to create the kind of composition program that would be truly excellent in the eyes of those inside and outside the University.

The new Brown director of composition, Michael Flanigan, hired in 1981, knew that the outstanding kind of program the faculty, administrators and alumni wanted could not be achieved overnight. His goals were long-range: to hire faculty whose degrees, backgrounds and research interests were in composition and to develop a graduate program to train and attract outstanding graduate students. Initially, three new faculty who were specialists in composition and rhetoric were hired. Though the hope at the time was to hire five more composition specialists, the core of the composition faculty has never grown beyond the original four.

Revamping the program by improving the training of graduate teaching assistants began immediately, and in 1983 the University Associates underwrote the cost of the first week-long Summer Workshop in Teaching Composition. All new GTAs learned about the writing process; wrote partial plans for teaching; studied peer revision, collaboration, close reading, grading standards, thinking strategies and a host of other issues and approaches designed to make them thoughtful, knowledgeable teachers.

When they begin teaching, the GTAs are observed closely. A graduate research assistant and Ph.D. candidate, Linda Hasley, was appointed in 1988 to visit GTA classes, help them

plan and organize and support them in all ways possible in their teaching. The goal of these observations, support systems and workshops is to ensure that our freshmen receive the best composition teaching possible.

Another requirement is that all new GTAs must take a course focused on improving their teaching of freshman writing and furthering their own intellectual development. These young people, who are mostly from Oklahoma, work continuously on the relationship of theory to their practice as teachers.

The course also focuses on research. Some major research studies in composition from the past 20 years are examined carefully, then parts of them are used to conduct research in the freshman composition courses. Such institutional research not only contributes to our knowledge of what works best in teaching writing, but it also provides a perfect way to teach GTAs how research techniques work.

SPECIALIZED DEGREES

For graduate students who want to pursue composition studies in addition to the semester-long course in teaching college composition, a new concentration on the master's level in composition/rhetoric/literacy was approved in 1988. This concentration is designed to prepare graduate students to teach in high schools, junior colleges and community colleges.

In addition, the master's degree, which requires a thesis, prepares students to do research on their own. To date six students have completed master's theses in composition, three in technical writing and three in areas directly affecting the freshman writing program—research that has helped improve OU's teaching of writing.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The composition program at OU has moved beyond the composition courses and the graduate programs of the English department. In 1986 the provost sponsored a series of workshops



Writing Center secretary Debby Key checks out Taiwan junior Kuo-Li Lin on operation of word processing software on one of the center's ten personal computers.

on "Writing Across the Curriculum," and attending were faculty from the sciences, arts, engineering, social sciences and geosciences. The focus in the four workshops was on the faculty's use of writing in a variety of disciplines to increase the amount and quality of student learning.

Writing across the curriculum has become a standard part of the campus-wide orientation program for GTAs in all disciplines. The new faculty orientation program begun in fall 1988, devoted a substantial portion of its sessions to writing across the curriculum.

The Honors Program now sponsors pre-freshman seminars, and writing is an integral part. Flanigan and David Mair, who directs the freshman composition program, participated in these summer courses, focusing on writing within a framework of studying medieval art and the process and methods of the natural sciences. The 80 freshmen who attended the seminars received a good introduction to the ways scholarship and writing work together.

THE LITERACY PROJECT

In 1987 OU received a \$53,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to focus on issues of literacy, especially writing. The grant, called "The Empowerments of Literacy," was directed by Flanigan. More than 65 faculty members were involved in one or more of the four phases of the project, which focused on ways to use components of literacy to help instructors teach more effectively and students learn better.

The central assumptions of this project were that students gain intellectual power from literacy—broadly defined—and that such literacy involves six components: writing, reading, critical thinking, speaking, collaborating and interdisciplinary study. The general goal of the project was gradually but steadily to increase the number of courses on the OU campus that include as many of the components of literacy as possible. A strong effort was made to learn about the problems and opportunities associated with trying to teach each of these components. Flanigan deliberately started with a small group of professors and then involved additional faculty in a series of activities.

Phase I: In the initial thrust, starting fall 1987, six professors, two each from English, political science and history, worked together to coordinate their teaching. Flanigan used reading material from history and political science and set up small groups for writing and revision tasks. Meanwhile political science professor Donald Maletz used occasional, short, in-class writing assignments to get students thinking and talking. He also assigned close readings of such diverse documents as the Declaration of Independence, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Phase II: In spring 1988, 30 other faculty joined the effort to improve instruction. They came from art, chemistry, biology, classics, geography, psychology, mathematics, computer science, English, sociology, history, polit-

ical science, anthropology, history of science, drama, human relations, philosophy and zoology. They met eight times to devise new ways to incorporate the six "literacy" components into their courses.

Phase III: In fall 1988, these 30 professors used components of literacy to teach their classes. Flanigan visited several classes and besides witnessing excellent teaching, he saw students deeply engrossed in learning ideas central to the various disciplines observed. In almost every class, students undertook short, in-class writing assignments; collaborative work; serious, guided oral discussion; close reading; and critical examination of issues and concepts central to the discipline.

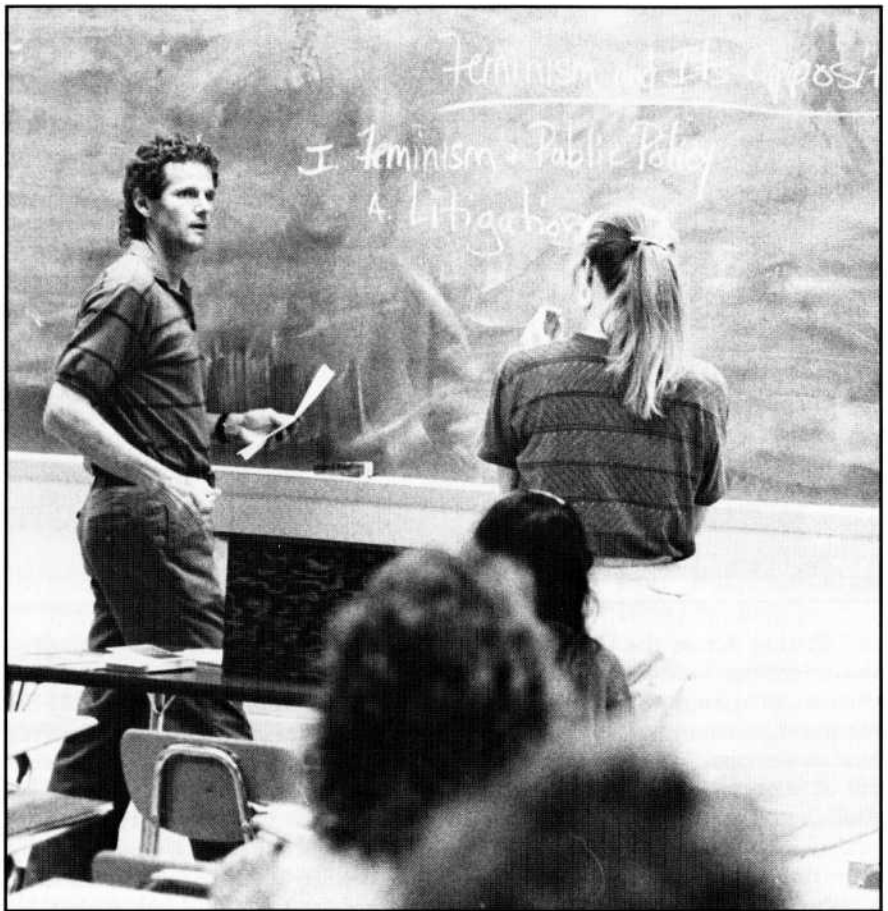
Phase IV: This past spring 15 faculty members who participated in Phase II and III worked with 30 new faculty members to try out ideas developed in earlier phases of the project. Nine faculty teams met three times during the semester, determining their own agenda and direction; most focused on writing. Throughout the Ford project, both students and faculty felt that the concentration on writing gave them a way to enhance learning.

THE WRITING CENTER

One of the greatest achievements of the last eight years has been the funding of the OU Writing Center. In January 1989 the Writing Center opened its doors to students eager to take advantage of an array of services. Tom Lide, director of the center, worked immediately to train the 10 graduate-student tutors, and business was brisk from the first day. Besides serving students in 30-minute tutoring sessions, the center will help ensure that work done under Writing Across the Curriculum and the Ford Foundation grant will continue.

During its first semester of operation, the center staff offered short-term workshops on writing research papers, using the computer to improve writing and other topics. It also offered more than 1,200 tutorial sessions to undergraduate and graduate students

Professor Robert Griswold has been very effective in using writing skills to increase the amount and quality of student learning in his history classes.



alike. Director Lide and his staff met with faculty and students in accounting, business, chemistry, zoology, anthropology, architecture, nursing, political science, marketing and art to discuss ways to use writing and to use the center to improve the educational thrust of the University.

The center's tutors, trained in cooperation with the English department's composition faculty, are the heart of the operation, because they meet one-on-one with students seeking help.

The Writing Center is a smashing success because it is "user friendly." Students appreciate that.

Tutors concentrate on "high-order concerns"—thesis, voice, organization, development and clarity—as opposed to sentence-level revision problems, such as word usage, punctuation and spelling—things that handbooks and some computer programs address.

Weaknesses in "high-order concerns" destroy meaning, and no amount of punctuation or spelling drill can address such central thinking problems. For example, if tutors have

difficulty understanding the point (thesis) of an essay, they may ask students to write a one-sentence summary of the paper. If students have trouble writing such a summary, tutors then ask questions that help students to think through and complete the task. Subsequent rewritings of the summary enable writers to realize what their point is and as a result come to make sense for themselves of what they are trying to do. Once students have firm control of

their ideas, lower-level concerns and strategies for recognizing mistakes are taught.

The whole point of these personal, 30-minute contacts is to help students who are stuck find alternative approaches. The tutors are not after quick fixes; they are after long-range improvement.

The Writing Center is designed to operate in the modern world. A special room is set aside for computers, which

have programs that support writing improvement. Grants from the Instructional Support Committee and from the College of Arts and Sciences have enabled the center to buy six IBM-compatible and four MacIntosh SE computers for student use. The College of Business Administration has bought a site license for the software program "Business Writing," to help business students with their business writing.

The Writing Center has been a smashing success because it is "user friendly." Students appreciate that. As Karla Crockett, a Bixby sophomore majoring in accounting, said, "The thing I like about the Writing Center is that you don't feel intimidated, and you really get help. Sometimes you go to campus offices for help and you feel intimidated, but the Writing Center is a warm and friendly place. I plan to continue to use the center for projects in my business communication classes." Another student, Fran Kovach, a graduate student in library and information studies, focused on the way the staff of the center behaved: "It's good to have a patient, thoughtful reader. The tutor's questions and com-



Michael Flanigan, Tom Lide and David Mair, shown at left in the Writing Center, confer regularly on the various parts of the University's composition program.



Taking advantage of the one-on-one tutoring available to all OU students in the new Writing Center, Kim Williams (left) reviews her paper with Mary Goetz, a graduate teaching assistant in English who worked as a summer term tutor.

ments help me focus my ideas, show me where I have not explained things well enough."

THE NATIONAL SCENE

Both Flanigan and Mair have worked closely with Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, to improve both the testing of composition and the development of scoring methods for research in composition done on the OU campus. One or both have attended training and scoring

sessions for CLEP (College Level Entrance Program), NTE (National Teachers Exam), ECT (English Composition Test), pilot work on a writing component of the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), and the AP (Advanced Placement Exam in English). Flanigan served on the College Board's English Advisory Committee where he helped write *Academic Preparation in English: Teaching for Transition from High School to College*, a booklet designed to help guide discussion for the public, administrators and

teachers about what our schools might do to foster academic excellence in English among students. He also has been an advisor to the College Board's Project Equality aimed at helping "at risk" students prepare themselves academically.

Both Mair and Flanigan have presented papers about OU's composition program at more than a dozen conferences around the country, and both also worked at Lund University in Sweden, where they taught faculty and students about writing developments in the United States, and especially at OU. Co-author of *Strategies for Technical Communication*, Mair has worked closely with various local businesses and industries to improve communication through writing in various businesses.

All of these activities—from working with training graduate students to teach writing, to helping set up a Writing Center, to doing basic research in composition—owe much to the original funding by Earl and Betty Brown. By providing the opportunity for focused, long-term development under the leadership of a team of composition faculty, the Browns invested in the long-range health of their University and in the individual learning lives of every student who takes writing at OU.

A great deal remains to be done. As the University moves into the 1990s, better funding will be needed for graduate scholarships in composition research. It will become increasingly difficult to attract dedicated young teachers without better incentives. Graduate teaching assistants will need to receive decent stipends and perhaps a reduction in the teaching load that accompanies their own graduate studies.

These problems can be solved if the University and supporters like the Browns continue to work together to improve how and what our students learn. For the more people use writing as a way of thinking and a way of sharing ideas, the more our University, our state and our society will benefit. ☞