

CALL FOR TEXTBOOK REVIEWERS

Focuses is a journal for scholars with interests in writing as a discipline. *Focuses* publishes articles linking rhetorical theory with composition programs and practices both in the classroom and in the writing center.

Focuses is preparing a special issue that will feature reviews of many of the current writing and rhetoric textbooks. We are looking for reviewers who will help us in the task. If you are interested – and have never written or edited a writing textbook – please contact:

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TEACHING WRITING AS A LIBERAL ART

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Many educators have recently focused attention on the significant value of a liberal arts education for college students (Bloom, Hirsch). That administrators of liberal arts colleges, universities, and professional programs are increasingly interested in developing humanities core courses, which often follow the model of the "Great Books" curriculum, reflects their concern that students must read key works of Western and non-Western cultures in order to develop critical thinking skills enabling them to become fully participatory members of American democracy.

More conservative than most academicians, Secretary of Education William Bennett has reported on the efficacy of educational reform movements "to reclaim a legacy" of Western cultural values, and he has publicly criticized the faculty of Stanford University for diluting the Western component of the university's core requirement.² Allan Bloom has similarly argued that the intellectual mediocrity of today's college students has been caused by excessively liberal educational reforms of the 1960's, and he suggests that students read works by important authors of the Western tradition in order to recoup their lost heritage. Other educators also remain preoccupied with what texts students study as the paramount issue in the debate over core curricula. Literary critics, historians, and social scientists have entered their voices in a debate that many see as exemplary of a strong political division in the academy.

Unfortunately, the political dimensions of canon formation have prevented many educators from considering other aspects of humanities core courses that might be improved, for the overwhelming and potentially divisive issue of what constitutes a canon of works that ought to be read by all citizens often obscures further analysis of core courses. Frequently, as in the debate over Stanford's reading list, discussion centers on the values embodied by particular works on the syllabus of a humanities core course as faculty judge which texts should be read (Atlas). Few individuals address themselves to specific methodological questions, such as the mode of instruction or the goals of the course, yet these issues are as crucial as the question of what constitutes a great work.³

Because many of the humanities core courses replace basic skills courses in reading and writing, faculty should also consider how seminars teach students to articulate their views in speech and in writing. Freshman seminars must supplement the opportunity for students to discuss contextual issues raised in the readings by providing the opportunity for faculty to teach writing skills related to contextual issues. Writing instruction need not mean a return to the expository composition class, but students should develop a familiarity with basic rhetorical principles and should learn to apply an understanding of rhetoric to the texts analyzed in their seminars.

Although the original interdisciplinary humanities programs at the University of Chicago, Columbia, and St. John's College

incorporate significant writing instruction in their curricula, many other institutions have weighed liberal arts core courses and writing courses as comparable alternatives.⁴ Like the curricula upon which they are modeled, newly-established interdisciplinary humanities courses that focus on the development of cultural understanding must include the teaching of writing skills in the core course if other expository writing instruction is not required in the curriculum.

Even if explicit writing instruction is offered in a separate composition course, students benefit from the humanities seminar that links rhetoric to content. A noted authority on rhetoric, Toby Fulwiler, describes the ideal writing course as both training and education, and he emphasizes that "writing is an important index to intellectual thought and development rather than a mechanical skill in constant need of correction and improvement" (36). Similarly, Bob Infantino, a critic of core curricula, noted in a speech delivered at a National Council of Teachers of English convention that the core curriculum in literature should include "a solid program of writing activities concerned not only with explicating literary texts but also with developing a student's voice and his/her sense of audience and purpose, and with training in various modes of discourse." By learning that authors make deliberate stylistic choices, students are empowered to criticize those choices and to determine their own use of rhetorical modes in writing.

Marshall Gregory also believes that English departments must promote writing, sometimes thought of as a technical skill to be mastered or a process to be achieved, as "a liberal art" that "teaches the mind of the writer to know itself" and liberates "the educated person's mind from provinciality, prejudice, and egotism" (30). His observation that writing courses should blend the teaching of technical skills and intellectual content argues for a marriage of the standard composition course and the interdisciplinary humanities core curriculum. Teaching writing as a liberal art must be recognized as a necessary method of teaching students to think.

Like their colleagues in liberal arts programs, those involved in the project of improving professional education define the desired education as one that helps students to refine their reading, thinking, and writing skills in addition to developing technical skills. The authors of a recent report on pharmaceutical education distinguish carefully between training and education and indicate that faculty at colleges of pharmacy must "consider it a responsibility to instruct at higher cognitive levels."⁵ As members of the 1985-86 Academic Affairs Committee of AACP offer, "Emphasis on reading, listening, writing, and speaking is not something which should be isolated to one or two college courses; rather, these skills should be integrated through all lecture courses, laboratories, and practical experience components of the curriculum, both to build confidence and to apply communication skills" (Bootman 387). It is no accident that proponents of core curricula and of the writing-across-the-curriculum philosophy have found allies in professional programs, for many college teachers recognize that the content and the format of some courses can develop critical thinking skills applicable in both liberal arts and professional courses.

The Albany College of Pharmacy curriculum reflects the concern of its administrators and faculty that students must learn to think by writing. Although writing instruction was omitted in the first version of the interdisciplinary freshman humanities seminar, the recent incorporation of writing instruction into the humanities core courses offered to all freshmen at the college reflects the melding of several approaches to teaching writing—as

a skill, as a process, and as a liberal art. Writing exercises are used as springboards for discussion and as opportunities for students to develop and refine their ideas. Fundamental skills in writing are taught and practiced in the humanities core courses and reinforced in liberal arts electives, in general science classes, and in professional pharmacy courses.

The liberal arts curriculum currently in place at the college was developed with the assistance of an outside consultant and refined by the faculty over a period of three years. During the 1985 fall semester, administrators of the college conducted a review of its programs and support services in preparation for an accreditation review by Middle States and the American Council on Pharmacy Education. The curriculum of the liberal arts department was studied by its faculty members and an outside reviewer, Jennifer Wicke, assistant professor of English and comparative literature at Yale University. Professor Wicke's report on the existing curriculum and her suggestions regarding the implementation of a humanities core curriculum became the theoretical motivation and original plan for the college's transformation of the liberal arts course sequence. Essentially, she proposed shifting the emphasis of all liberal arts courses by requiring each freshman to participate in two writing-intensive seminars designed to develop skills in reading, thinking, and writing.

Like many other post-secondary institutions, the Albany College of Pharmacy, a five-year professional school affiliated with Union University, had emphasized the development of reading and writing skills in the first two years of the curriculum. The liberal arts faculty had offered a spectrum of courses on a variety of topics in the humanities and social sciences. Professor Wicke argued that "a more streamlined and interrelated set of courses" would challenge students, and she recommended the elimination of expository writing and introductory literature classes to make room for the humanities core curriculum. At the time she recognized that in employing the seminar method to teach students "to read critically, approach a problem, and investigate it in writing" instructors must recognize and resist the temptation "to produce survey classes or to simply cover material." The college administration eagerly embraced the new proposal as a positive innovation and replaced courses emphasizing technique with a sequence of content courses which required students to discuss primary texts.⁶

The new sequence of liberal arts courses, the first-semester humanities preceptorial and the second-semester humanities seminar, required freshman students to confront philosophical, religious, literary, and sociological works in their first-year seminars and related courses. Each discussion section of twenty-five students and one instructor met independently, but all freshmen read the same texts at approximately the same time in the semester. Among the readings for the first-semester course were Plato's *Apology*, selections from *Genesis* and *Matthew*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Dickens' *Hard Times*, and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*; in addition, all students viewed *Citizen Kane*. The syllabus also included the work of an author who was invited to campus to speak with students; in different years, Toni Morrison and William Kennedy spoke to freshmen about the imagination of a writer. Students generally responded well to the texts and participated enthusiastically in the classroom discussions and the extra-curricular sessions with Morrison and Kennedy.

In conjunction with the first-semester preceptorial, all freshmen also attended a lecture course on comparative cultures that required them to read an anthropological textbook and to view several films about third-world cultures; this course provided

much of the historical background for texts considered in the preceptorial. The second-semester humanities seminars were individually designed by instructors to take up issues and themes explored in the first-semester preceptorial. Students selected courses focusing on the subjects of childhood, coming of age, adulthood, death, and the individual and society.

Each semester students in the freshman seminars were required to write four or five short papers developing ideas discussed in class. The college's freshman seminars, like many of the humanities core courses currently endorsed by the academic community, did not explicitly offer writing instruction, but relied on written comments of a writing center tutor and of the course instructor on the papers to teach students these skills. As Professor Wicke recommended, a newly-created writing center played a part in the development of writing skills; two part-time tutors offered tutorial instruction by appointment and sponsored various workshops on mechanical skills.

While the seminars and the readings attracted the interest of students, many found it difficult to cope with the writing assignments required by the faculty. A survey distributed early in the fall semester to the first group of freshmen to participate in the seminars revealed that nearly two-thirds of the students were anxious about their writing skills (See Table I). Faculty members did not mandate tutorial sessions for students because of their pedagogical reluctance to define writing instruction as punitive. Because instructors believed that technical training in writing should supplement the exploration of values and ideas initiated by the readings, they assumed that students would also be convinced that writing instruction would be helpful and would eagerly sign up for extra-curricular tutorials.

The students who voluntarily elected to receive tutoring did improve their writing skills, but many of these students were more proficient than those who were reluctant to enter the writing center. Another survey later distributed to students who visited the writing center indicated that they found the assistance received from tutors valuable; however, many students explained that they had limited time to devote to tutorial sessions and to writing papers in view of their demanding schedule of classes (See Table II and Table III). Most freshmen took biology, general chemistry, and calculus during the same semester that they participated in the two humanities core courses; two laboratory sessions added a significant number of classroom hours to their schedule. The writing center tutors had understood these student concerns and had permitted students to attend tutorial sessions as frequently or as infrequently as their time permitted. Unfortunately, few students were able to view writing as a process because many students could attend only one or two tutorial individual sessions (See Table III). Most tutorial sessions were brief and demanded that the tutors function as editors of student drafts. The extra-curricular workshops attracted even fewer students; in two years, only a dozen students participated in workshops devoted to grammatical topics.

Anonymous evaluations of the preceptorials conducted at the end of each semester revealed that many students resisted seeking out what they perceived to be remedial instruction offered by writing center tutors (See Table III). Paradoxically, students who explained their aversion to tutorial instruction also perceived their writing abilities as less than adequate. The tutors recognized from these responses that voluntary writing instruction was of limited efficacy in reaching the great number of students who realized that they would benefit from instruction but who were unable or unwilling to enter the writing center. As readers of freshman papers, the tutors had observed that a student made

the same mechanical and rhetorical errors on most assignments for the class and concluded that the voluntary system of writing instruction did not help most freshmen learn to write because most students would not elect to participate in tutorials where they could speak with those individuals who had marked their papers.

While the system of tutorial instruction in writing offered individual attention for students, the number of negative points that surfaced over the course of the initial two years of the new program caused the faculty to reconsider the elimination of freshman composition instruction. Although the humanities seminars focused attention on critical thinking and effective communication in class discussions, the instructors of the courses agreed with the writing center tutors that students must also be offered substantial classroom instruction in writing in order to develop their understanding of the texts considered in the seminars.

In discussions with liberal arts faculty members, the writing center tutors proposed a revision of the original approach to writing suggested by Professor Wicke. Faculty agreed that teaching writing as part of the freshman seminar would enhance a student's ability to read, think, and write. The proposal to incorporate a significant amount of writing instruction into the humanities core course involves bringing the writing center tutors into the classroom for a number of workshops devoted to rhetorical and grammatical topics. One instructor of a 1987 freshman seminar devoted six classes of the humanities preceptorial to writing instruction and group workshops on rhetorical skills. Based on her pilot syllabus, proposed rhetorical topics for future classroom workshops include how to write a thesis statement, how to write an analysis of a text, and how to compare texts; these topics are keyed to specific texts on the syllabus. Certain workshops offered early in the term will incorporate a review of grammar and will also consider the construction of sentences and paragraphs.

In addition to classroom workshops designed for the freshman seminar courses and team-taught by liberal arts faculty, the writing center tutors will continue to sponsor a series of faculty dialogues that allow faculty members from various disciplines to exchange ideas and information regarding writing across the curriculum. Because one of the writing center tutors has been trained in methods of holistic scoring of student essays, future faculty discussions will consider establishing an in-house set of criteria for the grading of student writing in general science and professional courses.

A number of faculty members who teach general science and professional courses have also requested that tutors offer classroom workshops for students designed in conjunction with specific writing projects. For example, one pilot program already offered in conjunction with an organic chemistry course required each student to review drafts of two lab reports with a writing center tutor; a future collaborative venture will permit the tutor to offer a workshop on report writing during a general meeting of the course. Students will be encouraged to apply rhetorical principles taught in the humanities core courses to the more technical texts they read in their professional courses.

A student who reads the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Montaigne, or the authors of *The Federalist Papers* might become more familiar with classic concepts of political science, but it is unclear that examination of these texts alone will help students develop their abilities to read, think, and write effectively. For students to respond more than superficially to any reading material, they must be taught to examine lan-

guage and content; discussions must tease out the implications of the rhetoric employed by the writer and of the information presented or avoided. In order for a student to establish an engagement with a particular text, whether it be poetry, fiction, or scientific writing, he or she must be able to judge its rhetorical presentation and to analyze its meaning and style in simple and direct prose. The ability to respond to and to write about a text is not innate, but it can be developed through offering classroom instruction in rhetorical modes and encouraging a student to understand the writing process. Teaching students to write will teach them to think about the content and format of all courses they take in college.

TABLE I
ANXIETY OF FRESHMAN WRITERS

During the first week of the 1986 fall semester, one hundred freshmen at Albany College of Pharmacy were asked if they liked to write:

- 39% of the students responding answered affirmatively
- 30% offered mixed responses (I do, but I don't write well.)
- 32% responded negatively (I don't because it's hard for me.)

TABLE II
EVALUATION OF WRITING CENTER
BY STUDENTS TUTORED

The following questions were asked of all students who attended tutorial sessions in the Writing Center in the 1987 fall semester:

- Has instruction received in the writing center helped you fulfill the requirements of your course?
 - 83% responded affirmatively
 - 17% responded negatively
- Do you believe that writing center instruction should be required for certain students?
 - 67% responded affirmatively
 - 33% responded negatively
- Do you anticipate visiting the writing center in the future?
 - 100% responded affirmatively

TABLE III
EVALUATION OF WRITING AND WRITING CENTER
BY ALL FRESHMEN

The following responses were provided by students who participated in the humanities preceptorial in the 1986 and 1987 fall semesters.⁷

I think we have written	(1986)	(1987)
Too much	15%	6%
Just enough	80%	83%
Too little	1%	6%
I used the writing center	(1986)	(1987)
Never	35%	40%
Once	19%	28%
2-3 times	21%	13%
4-5 times	15%	10%
6 or more times	6%	1%

Students were also asked to explain why they did or did not visit the writing center. Most who had not used the writing center wrote that they did not have enough time to attend tutorial sessions and write their papers.

NOTES

¹Marshall Gregory uses this phrase in "Writing, Literacy, and the Liberal Arts."

²For a critique of Secretary Bennett's assumption that literature can be encompassed by Matthew Arnold's definition of culture, see Poirier 26-28.

³For an example of the reduction of the debate to a copy of the Stanford reading list, see Christopher Hitchens's annotation of the syllabus in *Harper's* June 1988, 54-55.

⁴At Columbia and Chicago, students are able to take expository writing courses. At St. John's where there are fewer students in each class writing instruction is offered on an individual basis. Other interdisciplinary programs, like that of Boston University's School of General Studies, integrate extensive formal and informal writing assignments into individual courses.

⁵The 1987-88 Report of the Academic Affairs Committee, *American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy*.

⁶All quotations from Professor Wicke's report are taken from her letter of October 10, 1985, to Joseph M. Lapetina, dean of academic affairs at the college.

⁷Jeffrey Soleau, the liberal arts faculty member who coordinated the humanities seminars, compiled these statistics.

BRIDGING HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE WRITING

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Even when our students are admitted to an introductory-level course on the basis of a college writing assessment, they display a wide range of backgrounds, attitudes and abilities. In order to plan a writing course that is sensitive to such differences in preparation among our students, we need to know the diversity of their experiences with writing. Because our students often come from different schools in different states, the college instructor, unlike the high-school teacher, cannot consult directly with previous teachers to predict her students' needs. Given this diversity, we do well to consider Maxine Hairston's advice for teachers — to follow the rhetorician's practice and to analyse our student audience (1986).

I know of few approaches for getting to know my students so effective as a series of conversations conducted in the mini-conference style such as Atwell (1987) describes or in the more extended meetings that Murray (1979) and Carnicelli (1980) practice. However, I often find that several valuable weeks of our single-term course have passed before I can know individual students in this way. Many college composition teachers attempt to deal with this problem by giving a first essay on topics such as "My strengths and weaknesses as a writer," "Why I like/dislike writing" or "The best/worst thing I ever wrote."

These topic papers begin to profile the students' current attitudes toward writing. However, such assignments seldom lead students to describe critically the curriculum in writing¹ that they have experienced or to reflect thoughtfully on what it has meant to them. To prepare students for college writing, we must involve them in answering Freedman's question: "At the secondary level, how do the students of these teachers understand the instruction they are receiving?" (1987, 35)

To learn as much as I can about my students at the beginning of term, I ask them to describe their experiences as writers in the form of a reflective essay. Their responses provide me with a writ-