CROSSING BOUNDARIES: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, FYC, AND GENERAL EDUCATION

For writing teachers, theory and practice are mediated by reflection. In Reflection in the Writing Classroom, Kathleen Yancey describes exactly what reflective practice means for teachers and students. With the advent of post-process theory, Yancey argues, writing teachers have moved away from the early attempts of researchers like Janet Emig who tried to work backward from an ideal text, constructing a process to produce that ideal text. Instead, researchers have used these texts, what Yancey calls "end points," to understand the complex relationship between writers, contexts, and the conversations they engage (4). Post-process, these end points are the basis for reflective writing that when shared with others produces insight into the complex arrangement and rearrangement of our ideas, plans, beliefs and desires. This inward and outward practice, according to Yancey, looks both forward and backward, "putting these [end points] into dialogue as we seek to discover what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand" (7). The act of reflection and its written products promise to bring theory and practice together by developing theory from practice in the collaborative and recursive process of sharing, extending, and revising earlier practices. Because of its orientation towards agency, teacher-researchers and especially writing teachers have used reflection to investigate and interrogate their own learning and bring theory and practice together (8).

Reflective practice has proven especially important to teachers of first-year composition (FYC) who are committed to assisting students in making the transition from secondary school to the university. Taking that strategic move back to reflect on our goals and plans has ensured that

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Composition Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2002
theory and practice continue to energize each another, but we also need to use reflective practice to develop an understanding of the larger context outside our classrooms. Our interest in students and commitment to the life-giving mission of the university should also move our reflective practice beyond our own classrooms and engage the larger structures we work within. More and more, specialists in composition are being asked to collaborate with high school teachers, English educators, general education programs, and community literacy projects. University and high school teachers, for example, have traditionally shared information and ideas at articulation conferences in the hopes of making students’ transition from high school to university smoother. In another growing trend, universities have offered new students learning communities, which place students in groups to help them make connections between their lives and their new social and academic environment. This ever-broadening landscape requires all writing teachers to cross traditional boundaries of specialization, discipline, rank, and program. In our efforts to focus reflection on theory and practice in our own classrooms, writing teachers have failed to consider the connections and disconnections that occur in these broader interdisciplinary encounters.

It is at least partly because of these historic dis/connections with institutional goals that historians of rhetoric and composition like Sharon Crowley want to abolish FYC as a requirement. In “The Invention of Freshman English,” Crowley describes FYC’s complicity with institutional programs that marginalized both students and teachers to such an extent that our current involvement with such programs demands rigorous scrutiny. Despite calls for the abolition of FYC as a requirement, it remains almost universal. However, if we are to continue supporting it, we must take seriously the lessons provided by historians and work to reconcile the best of composition theory with interdisciplinary learning communities. Reflective practice, as Yancey has described it, presents a way for teachers, students and administrators to understand and re-think the university’s goals and aims and their connection to composition theory and pedagogy.

Traditionally, teachers of FYC have often characterized their work as service to students making the transition from high school to college. The service FYC offers students does not, however, simply mean cooperating with or ignoring the larger system in which that labor occurs. Any curriculum or set of courses like the general education curriculum—of which FYC is usually a part—has the goal of producing students with particular capabilities and habits, but the nature of these institutional aims
should not compromise the responsibility of FYC teachers to shape and reform that curriculum. Even though FYC and other general education courses are often referred to as service courses, the service element inherent in them should not position teachers as mere functionaries, unconsciously reproducing reading, writing, thinking, and learning habits. While many of us who teach FYC often describe our work within the larger curriculum as subtly subversive, the very public ways these programs use rhetoric to define literacy and inscribe students should make our critique more vocal. As long as FYC continues to be required by the university, writing teachers should recognize their stake in the larger programs, projects, and aims of the general education curriculum and work to influence those structures.

THE EVOLUTION OF GENERAL EDUCATION

The general education programs in which FYC has usually been included have a long history of characterizing and inscribing students in ways that make clear its influence on and connection to FYC. In Professing Literature, Gerald Graff attributes the development of general education programs to the efforts of Robert Maynard Hutchins from the University of Chicago. In his analysis, Graff argues that in the wake of two world wars, scholars like Hutchins and Mortimer Adler developed the Great Books curriculum as a way to move students out of a chaotic cultural ethos to the common, universal discourse of the university (163). Not only was their notion of a common, cultural heritage important to battling the complexities of the post-war world, but it was also the aim of those arguing for general education to resist the growing and multiplying of academic departments and specializations. With the influence of the German universities, American universities had been increasing the development of separate departments and specializations, but, as Graff notes, the advocates of a general education curriculum believed that this practice had fragmented students’ learning and their experience of the university (163-166). Graff’s analysis of the beginnings of general education parallels the history of FYC developed by Crowley in that both programs are the result of institutional responses to the perceived inadequacy of incoming students.

Inspired by the work of scholars at the University of Chicago, other reformers took the idea of a common first-year experience and developed a more holistic approach to assisting new students in the transition and providing a cohesive learning experience. In this plan, FYC would not function as a discrete course, but as part of a larger first-year experience
that sought to introduce students into the discourse of the university and democratic citizenship. Educational reformers like Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey began to combat what they saw as the widespread fragmentation of the educational experience by advocating learning communities as a general education curriculum. According to these reformers, the notions of general education developed by scholars like Hutchins failed to connect students’ lives to the intellectual work of the university. In *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty and Disciplines*, Faith Gabelnick, Jean McGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith collaborate to write the history of learning communities as well as the theories that have driven their evolution. For example, Meiklejohn’s efforts at reforming the college curriculum resulted in the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. In this program, the first-year learning communities were established in a two-year, lower-division program focusing on democracy in fifth century Athens and nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Besides introducing a holistic approach that integrated the Great Books with class discussion, the curriculum also encouraged students to connect ideas from the course with their “real world” by writing a prolonged research project (Gabelnick et al. 12). Learning communities, as envisioned by Meiklejohn, were a wholesale rejection of the popular elective system and instead stressed the responsibility of professors for creating a cohesive and unified curriculum that foregrounded students’ connection to the university community and citizenship in a democracy (Gabelnick et al. 13).

Today, many in the field of educational reform, like David Johnson, Roger Johnson and Karl Smith, have continued to argue for community through curricula and pedagogy that stress collaboration and cooperation (26-35). While much of their work seems to rely on the premises of social epistemic rhetoric, which is familiar turf for those in composition/rhetoric, others like Patricia Cross have been more direct in suggesting general education programs develop the old notion of learning communities to improve students’ transition from high school to the university. In “Why Learning Communities? Why Now?” Cross defines these learning communities as “groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purposes of learning” (4). With the acknowledged difficulty of prescribing rigid core courses, Cross and others see the development of learning communities as a way to take advantage of common themes and issues that already exist across different courses and disciplines. Even if a teacher is not an advocate of social construction, Cross believes this space
should still effectively connect the conflicts across disciplinary boundaries (11). For FYC, the development of learning communities in the general education curriculum should reinforce the social nature of writing and making knowledge, but my own experiences with one general education program raise serious questions about the future direction of FYC and general education.

A Case Study

Despite the fear that these learning community programs may sink to the lowest common intellectual denominator by positioning students not as the makers of knowledge but the consumers of prescribed "conflicts" or "themes," administrators continue to see such programs as a valuable means to accommodate students' needs as well as assist retention and enhance learning. The role of FYC teachers in this debate may seem tenuous, but we have an important stake in any discursive effort to inscribe or figure the students we encounter in our classes. With the best hopes of making universities more accessible to everyone, administrators have seen learning communities as an important tool, not only in recruiting and retaining students but also in translating the literate habits and social attitudes of the university. Creating communities becomes a powerful way to transform students, but we may not always reflect on how we effect this change or why it is only the students who are in need of transformation. While this concept of community may be powerful, it is also often unexamined. Reflective practice may reveal the ways these programs use language as well as promote a more critical analysis of both the responsibility the university has for shaping and revising students' attitudes as well as its own openness to revision. In my reading of one such program at Illinois State University, the complex visual and verbal messages I found in its promotional products may suggest to readers the difficulties inherent in the creation of this learning community program.

Illinois State University's goals for its Connections program are similar to other such programs: assist new students, especially those labeled as "at risk," by providing a space for making connections between the university and life outside it. In overall effect, however, Illinois State University's calculated deployment of a culturally potent term like community serves to obscure any real examination of what it seeks to accomplish. Since community has no opposing term, it becomes a godlike one, enforcing a kind of hegemony that resists critical examination. Even the brochure for ISU's Connections learning community program highlights this discrepancy in the claims it makes:
1 Learning communities help freshmen achieve academic and social success
2 Learning communities provide students the opportunity to form lasting friendships
3 Learning communities make it easier to establish study groups and share experiences
4 Learning communities include weekly seminars with faculty, staff and peer advisors
5 Learning communities are a great way to start your education at Illinois State University. (Brochure 1997)

These highlighted objectives suggest that the key components of this program rely on students’ relationships with faculty/staff and the blending of the affective/social with the academic to enhance students’ commitment to their studies and the university. While the overall language of the brochure seems to be in keeping with the university’s stated commitment to empower students, this brochure could also be read as a catalogue of perceived student deficiencies that the university wishes to remedy. For example, numbers three and four suggest that first-year students lack study skills and the proper level of commitment to studies, while the others seem to suggest that they lack the social skills to make the transition from high school to the university. Like many of the programs offered to first-year students, the Connections program at ISU begins with the assumption that the university and the world outside it are separate entities, and those entering the university need to be supplied with the capabilities and habits they lack. While these programs use the language of student-empowerment, they seek to make students acceptable to the university, which often fails to account for the ways the knowledge and experience of students may call for the university to change.

The main audience for this brochure, prospective students and parents, are subjected to a mix of semiotic modes, the most dominant being the visual images. In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen describe the renewed power of a visual literacy in which the image, in this case the photographs comprising 80% of the brochure, exerts greater control. These photographs derive their rhetorical power from the trust we place in their ability to credibly represent the world. As Kress and van Leeuwen argue, increasingly for our culture, seeing is believing, and the more representational an image is, the greater its credibility (159). That does not mean, however, that these photographs are not structured, in fact, they serve to produce a “realism” with truths that align prospective parents and
students with the desires of the university. The seeming correspondence between photographs and our world often creates a naturalism that resists deeper readings, but the very constructedness of these images and their placement in the brochure invites us to read them as a part of the motivated actions of those in the Connections program.

Centered on the cover of the brochure, underneath the name of the program, appears an image of two African American students smiling at each other, a notebook open between them. Framed by the leaves of a tree in the background, the male and female seem to be engaged in conversation over the contents of the notebook, and the male can be seen holding the notebook, as if he were pointing to something in it. The two images on the inside of the brochure feature classroom shots. In these, the greatest focus is on the smiling white women in each picture. In one, the female student, obviously looking toward the front of the lecture hall where the teacher stands (out of frame), smiles with arms and elbows relaxed on her desk. The other students surrounding her are not in focus, but they also appear to be smiling. The third image is centered on two white females; one student looks attentively towards the front of the lecture hall while the other appears to be writing in a notebook. In the background other students can be seen with eyes focused on the front of the room in rapt attention.

By placing the image of the two African American students on the cover, the Connections program creates a reality that attempts to appeal to one of the groups that has a traditionally high drop-out rate at this university. The image of these two students happily poring over a notebook conveys the sense that this program will make such students feel comfortable by connecting them with others like themselves and providing the necessary connections for the transition from the life outside the university to life in the university. The inside of the brochure contains images, which by their structure and placement, present a somewhat different reality. The predominance of white females in each image makes clear what the program’s own report, *Self-Assessment of Connections to Connections Staff*, reveals: the program actually serves and has appealed to white females, who have historically had above average retention and grades (Gordon 12). While the front cover of the brochure hopes to create a reality that attracts minorities and males, they actually make-up a fraction of the program’s enrollment even though Connections’ own statistics show that those minorities who do participate have better retention and grades. As Kress and van Leeuwen suggest, photo-realism promises a “naturalistic, unmediated, uncoded representation of reality,”
but the reliability of photo-realism must be considered in light of its purposes and audiences (162). Reading these images as interested signs shows the efforts of Connections to both create an audience with African Americans and males as well maintain its credibility with its most enthusiastic audience, white females. In addition to revealing how Connections has deployed the transparency of the visual in its brochure, Kress and van Leeuwen’s work can also point to the importance of critical strategies that lead to alternate readings of the brochure and the program it represents. The nature of the images in the brochure raises questions about those who use this program and the correlation between their achievements and the work of the program. Creatively engaging these questions through reflective practice would lead, not just to more informed choices, but to innovative approaches and new goals for the program.

These images do more than merely serve to recruit students. They also convey messages about what counts as learning in a learning community. For teachers of FYC, the position of the students in each of these photos creates very different realities for their relationship to learning and knowledge. While the front cover shows two African American students talking to each other outside over an open notebook, the images on the inside both show students passively listening or taking notes. Is this what students need help adjusting to when they enter the university: lecture halls? This brochure seems to show exactly the dangers of a general education program that produces “Stepford students.” The front cover of this brochure seems to represent one set of educational ideals and goals, while the images on the inside of the brochure create a reality closer to the one I experienced working with Connections. Much of the rhetoric driving learning communities argues for student-centered approaches, but in reality these communities risk inscribing students as passive sponges and faculty as gnostics. As the images of passive students inside the brochure demonstrate, the path students happily follow to the episteme is through the teacher. This positioning of students clearly contradicts the program’s goal of empowerment by continuing to place students outside of knowledge and subtly figuring their experiences of language and learning.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

My own experiences with a Connections section of FYC made clear to me the consequences of such programs for the writing classroom. Besides equipping students with the social skills, the common syllabus for
Connections also states its intent to serve as an interface for bridging first-year courses by highlighting related themes or conflicts. The writing program’s conscious effort to use revision as a way to engage students in extended thinking and re-thinking, however, directly conflicted with the way writing was used in other common courses joined by Connections. In my Connections section of FYC, we devoted a unit to the revision of a graded writing assignment from another class in order to more holistically connect revision to language and learning. Since my students claimed that they did little writing in any of their classes besides FYC and another core class, Foundations of Inquiry, we decided to revise a researched argument they had written in their Foundations of Inquiry class. The weekly Connections seminar would serve as an opportunity for me to connect with the Foundations of Inquiry teacher and understand his goals and purposes as well as explain what I would be doing through revision. My colleague in Foundations of Inquiry explained that he wanted students to construct a policy argument in which they demonstrated how to use a number of sources and follow the course’s guidelines for the use of claims and warrants. He expressed his pleasure that our class had chosen this assignment to revise, and he offered his services to assist students in their revision, although he made clear that the grade students received would remain the same. Since the Connections teacher had also spent a session discussing this argument paper with students, he was also pleased that we would be making another connection through the composition class.

I found that most of these papers argued to change or keep policies like the death penalty or abortion. While the Foundations of Inquiry teacher did an excellent job responding to the strengths and weaknesses of these papers as policy arguments, the larger problem seemed to be with the ways students were positioning themselves in relation to their writing and knowledge. Even a tried and true method of revision like writing the opposition’s argument seemed to be asking students to merely rearrange information. The first thing I wanted to know as a reader of these arguments was why my students cared in the first place. Most were happy to tell me they did not, in fact, care, which freed them from having to “really argue” as one of my students claimed. Many students tried to reassure me that even though they may not have had a stake in their argument, both their Connections teacher and Foundations of Inquiry teacher told them that this was the writing and thinking valued in the university, and if they wanted to succeed, they would need to master it. I feared that “learning to write” had not only eclipsed “writing to learn” but also any notion of an authentic rhetorical practice.
To begin our revision, I wanted to understand what my students meant by "really argue," so I asked them to recall the last real argument they were in or witnessed and distinguish for me the difference between the argument paper and what happened in a real argument. In recounting their own observations and experiences, my students understood, among other things, the importance of context, pathos, logos, and ethos in arguing. Many told, for example, how effective emotion was in making an argument in some circumstances, but a mistake in others. One student in particular described how she was able to win over a co-worker by first showing how she understood his side of the dispute. I also recorded in my teaching log that several students expressed their aversion for confrontation, and one student even claimed he would "walk a mile out of his way" to avoid getting into a dispute. In highlighting the difference between their argument papers and what they knew about arguing, one student seemed to sum it up when he contrasted a "real" argument that required rhetorical savvy with the arguments written for school that stressed library research. This student's distinction underscored his awareness of the complex rhetorical work that often occurs in an argument that directly involves him.

In order to help my students connect their insights and experiences to their writing, I asked students to write a response in which they think about the way their beliefs enabled them to make their policy argument. I told them that looking at this argument again from the perspective of what they believed or experienced would serve as one possible basis for revising the paper. My attempt here was nothing especially innovative; teachers have been foregrounding student experience at least since the time of John Dewey, but reflective practice made visible the thinking and re-thinking students did that opened their writing and thinking to revision from many perspectives. My effort to reposition students with some authority or ethos only becomes noteworthy when placed alongside the efforts of Foundations of Inquiry to ignore students' experiences of argument in favor of formulas that may preclude these experiences. In the same way, as teachers and administrators reflect and make visible their own thoughts, beliefs and desires, the very human impulse to privilege content or coverage over students may be checked.

Many students found this reflective writing to be torturous, and I received more than the usual number of requests for conferences as well as emails asking for help. By listening to students, I found that many feared writing about beliefs because they were first and foremost unsure of what they believed, but even more important to our discussion, students feared
sharing beliefs because they expected me to deconstruct them, or as one student wrote in an in-class response, “mess with them.” In other words, writing about something they had little interest or stake in was a move to ensure self-preservation. Despite the powerful rhetoric of community, general education programs, including courses like Foundations of Inquiry and programs like Connections, continue to position teachers and students in ways that make trust and risk a difficult challenge. I am not as frustrated by the assumption of the general education program—that first-year students need to know about the conventions of argument—as I am by the way these conventions trump students’ own experiences. My colleagues in Connections and Foundations of Inquiry showed interest and support for what they considered a useful “addition” to help students engage with the content of the assignment. When I suggested that the student-centered approach used in FYC could help teachers in Foundations of Inquiry and Connections better achieve their goals and the overall goals of the general education curriculum, they both felt that in the interest of time and context, their way was more expedient. Given our overall goal of helping students transition and make Connections, the place to begin discussions is not with what a teacher or program has constructed as a discourse community, but with students’ own knowledge, which we come to understand through reflective practice. This may not be expedient, but it would work better to achieve the worthy goals of the first-year program and the mission of the university to prepare students for active, involved citizenship.

From my standpoint as a teacher of FYC, the concerns voiced by scholars over the way teachers of FYC often compromise themselves in interdisciplinary first-year programs seems more than justified. Our service to students becomes degraded when thinking about theory and practice is a private function, not made concrete through writing that seeks an awareness of the social significance of our thoughts and actions on behalf of students. In the Connections program’s own three-year study, most of the proposed changes and revisions to the program centered on delivering it more efficiently to more students, not on re-thinking the students’ learning experiences. What should be an opportunity to show students how to find and pursue the questions they want to ask can devolve into training students to merely to cope. Our impulse to create and implement programs of general education that include courses like Connections, Foundations of Inquiry, and FYC demonstrates our intentions to act responsibly on behalf of the university and our students. The university realizes that the effectiveness of first-year programs often
relies not just on clearly articulated curricula but also the training of teachers and active reflection by everyone involved.

Illinois State not only offers teachers in the general education program an orientation and in-service, but like many other universities it also has a university-wide initiative focused on pedagogy. These institutional efforts do not, however, always produce the kind of reflection that questions institutional motives and assumptions. And as is the case with the Connections program, administrators seem satisfied when studies and reflection produce revisions to the organization, delivery, and scheduling of courses.

In my study, the Connections teacher and Foundations of Inquiry teacher had assumed that by showing students how to reproduce a particular way of thinking and writing they would transform students from the uncritical practices outside the university to those critical practices of the university. The students I shared with these teachers also seemed genuinely appreciative of efforts to help them learn the secrets of college survival, but survival seems inadequate in light of our overall goal to empower students to engage their civic and personal possibilities.

Connections has been justifiably proud of creating a program that has fostered students’ engagement with the university, but as writing teachers we know the goal of any curriculum is to produce students with particular capabilities and habits. This fact does not negate the agency of individuals or suggest that FYC and general education are inherently opposed. The history of general education at Illinois State does, however, call for curricula that can foreground both its intentions and processes. Those of us teaching FYC have used reflective practice as means to question and investigate the intentions of our curriculum and its effects. As rhetors, we have used our classrooms as spaces to position and reflectively open ourselves to revision from many perspectives. General education curricula and programs like Connections that present a kind of pre-packaged approach to language and learning often rely on match-to-sample surveys and other data but do not engage in this kind of reflective practice.

The discrepancy between the university’s intentions and the effect of the Connections program becomes more complex as the university’s expectations of the program grow. According to the director of the Connections program, it continues to struggle with the issue of forcing some students labeled as “at risk” to join as a condition of admission. He expressed his belief that if these students joined, retention would increase, and yet he acknowledged that in the long run, the university’s attempt to
act responsibly on behalf of these students may undermine the overall effectiveness of the program, which currently enjoys the support of many faculty and students who have experienced Connections. Indeed, interest in the program continues to grow, and through effective recruiting and advertising the program has been filled to capacity every year, and has even added a residential component for students who choose it (Gordon, Personal Interview).

A FUTURE FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND COMPOSITION

What seems an even larger question is the way this program and others like it will serve the institutional mandate that they become an interface for the general education requirement. As universities come to expect more and more from such programs, those of us involved in FYC become more wary about the effectiveness of the service we offer students. For many there remain real theoretical and practical disconnections between their own approaches to language and learning and those that drive programs such as Connections. In re-organizing the general education requirements at Illinois State, the deans created a central, institutional space for a more integrated, interdisciplinary approach to the first year of studies. Since the full implementation of this new, general education scheme in 1998, a self-assessment of Connections shows that it has had minimal success in coordinating interdisciplinary efforts among instructors of first-year courses. One reason for this minimal success stems from the attempt to make older structures serve new aims. The learning community program began modestly at Illinois State with its main goal being to facilitate students’ transition from high school to the university. The organizing, staffing, and training undertaken by Connections reflected this early emphasis on social transitions. Moving the learning community to a more central role in the curriculum will require a more thorough examination of how definitions of community influence teaching and learning. This type of examination requires a level of critical reflection that reaches across boundaries to engage administrators, teachers and students in the process of creating curriculum. The future success of programs like Connections depends on their ability to involve and become partners with those who have a stake in first-year courses.

My purpose in crossing the boundary between general education programs and FYC has been to show how both have histories in which students were constructed as lacking the social and academic experience to succeed in the university. In our more recent history, we have sought
both the language of service and student empowerment to characterize a revised notion of our work. While we have maintained the common institutional space that forms students’ initial educational experiences, the space we create for students seems very different. My experiences working with general education curricula have shown me the difficulty such programs have in remaining faithful to their goals of student empowerment. As administrators allow the efficient delivery of programs to eclipse the timely reflection necessary to mediate theory and practice, the beliefs and commitments that motivate teachers and students risk becoming of secondary importance. FYC and writing program administration may also tend towards this kind of entropy, but a strong commitment to reflection and revision has led to the creation of programs that are more questioning of and less comfortable with their own assumptions, which in the long run may better serve students’ changing needs. While FYC and general education programs like Connections share a history, our destiny depends on our ability to reflect together on the meanings of that common past. The insights this reflection produces will help us to forge a curriculum that will prepare students to meet their future with optimism.

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——. Personal interview. 8 October 1999.


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