WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY "WRITING"?

A writing emphasis does more than define the curriculum for students. In addition to this function, the writing emphasis curriculum produces a definition of what writing is and also calls into question the limits of disciplinarity.

In addition to having an M.F.A. program in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric, our department has a contested undergraduate writing emphasis that requires students to study multiple genres of writing, including nonfiction writing, fiction and/or poetry, and technical writing. Many of the students in the writing emphasis are interested in becoming creative writers; some of them express frustration at having to study genres of writing that seem to require a different mindset.

The creative writing faculty have from time to time tried to change the writing emphasis to a creative writing emphasis. The desire to make this change, while in many contexts understandable, has the unhappy side-effect of leaving the composition and rhetoric faculty with no clear presence in the undergraduate writing emphasis. In addition, some of the creative writing faculty claim that non-fiction writing should be housed within the creative writing emphasis. The rhetoric and composition faculty would then be left with electives in argument and grammar. These tensions are further complicated by our dean’s repeated statements that he would not add any more emphases, because emphases create needs for new faculty that can’t necessarily be met.

Everyone here has good reasons supporting their positions. Creative writing faculty argue that schools with M.F.A. programs also typically have an undergraduate emphasis in creative writing, and that a creative writing emphasis would help our students get into M.F.A. programs. They argue further that technical communication, also housed in the English department, does not require students to take any writing classes that aren’t immediately relevant to their major. In fact, the technical communication requirement doesn’t even require literature courses.

For their part, composition and rhetoric faculty argue that without the possibility of adding a new emphasis, a change in the emphasis would leave
them and their courses marginalized. They argue further that students are unlikely to know about composition and rhetoric before they attend college, and that they are unlikely to understand what this field offers before they enroll in a required course. Removing required composition and rhetoric classes from the writing emphasis would decrease this area’s visibility.

The question of disciplinarity is also contested. The creative writing faculty include poetry, fiction, and nonfiction writing in their subdiscipline. Rhetoric and composition faculty, on the other hand, are likely to want to include those genres as well as argument (a form of nonfiction, but not likely to be found in creative writing), grammar, and new media. Not wanting to hold the creative writing students hostage, yet unable to form an additional emphasis and unsure of the kinds of writing that that emphasis would entail, the composition and rhetoric faculty continue to feel uncertain about how to solve this conflict.

Change is slow in academia, and I have no doubt that this conflict will ultimately be resolved in a way that's satisfactory to most everyone concerned. But this conflict strikes me as symptomatic of the growing pains that the field of rhetoric and composition is experiencing. Here, as a result of the lack of resources, we find ourselves forced to contest the boundaries of our discipline, and to think carefully about what we mean when we say “writing.” Perhaps our experience suggests that we should begin our planning of undergraduate emphases by answering that question.