

## **Writing, Reading, and Rhetoric Studies Research Projects**

### **A Research and Development Project for the Improvement of Writing at Portland State University**

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This project of curricular reform is designed to improve the literacy skills of PSU students.

#### **Problem Addressed by the Project**

It is a given that college graduates must have literacy skills in order to succeed at school and in the new economy they will enter after graduation. Yet, at our university, as at many public institutions that serve diverse groups of students, there is a growing sense that these literacy skills are inadequate. Faculty report that students at all levels are ill equipped to meet the writing demands of their courses and disciplines. Business partners in the community add that many graduates are unable to advance beyond entry level because they lack sufficient writing skills. Traditionally, across the country, literacy skills have been taught in required writing classes offered by English departments. In recent years, this factory model approach has been faulted for not integrating writing into curricular content in the disciplines. First year seminars and writing intensive courses, in which writing instruction is embedded in content courses, are two curricular innovations that attempt to remedy the problem. Yet, these innovations present problems of their own when writing instruction winds up being de-emphasized in favor of course content.

Our institution was a leader in this recent pattern of curricular reform in writing instruction. In 1994 it abandoned the traditional two-writing-course requirement and instituted a large innovative cross-disciplinary unit housed outside the English department and a program of other writing intensive courses in which writing is taught and integrated at every level, along with other literacy skills such as technological and numerical literacy. However, our institution went further than most in decentralizing writing; in fact, we quite simply abolished the English department-sponsored writing program, in much in the way that Sharon Crowley and other “New Abolitionists” have advocated. This bold attempt at university-wide curricular reform was supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, Kellogg and became a national model. However, nearly a decade after implementation and despite many successes in improving student learning, the general consensus on and off campus is that the writing skills of students remain inadequate to meet the demands of school and employment. Is this the case? We need a way to assess and improve this decentralized mode of writing instruction.

#### **Purpose of Our Research Project**

We are conducting a systematic program of research and development to examine broadly the many sites in which writing instruction takes place throughout the university

curriculum, to describe the current status of student writing abilities, and to gather the perspectives of all stakeholders—faculty, students, and community business partners. Our findings should provide a solid research-based foundation on which to improve existing methods of writing instruction and propose new ones. Our research program will move through three stages in five years. Its goal is to survey students, faculty, and potential employers before designing experimental writing courses/programs, whose effectiveness will be field-tested. These new approaches will, in a sense, “reform” our recent curricular reform.

Our literature review finds no clear case of a writing program based on empirical research into attitudes of the main stakeholders. In addition, many institutions are moving from traditional writing requirements to a first year seminar model. Yet most have not taken the next step of assessing and transforming the newer model. We are known for having gone much further than just a first year seminar by attempting a four-year program of integrated writing instruction. Therefore, our work should have national implications.

### **PSU as an Ideal Institution to Conduct the Project In Partnership with Pacific University and Linfield College**

PSU is an ideal place for this research because of our diverse student body, our identity as a public urban institution, our institutional developments in writing instruction since 1987, our partnerships with Oregon secondary schools, our continuous research in writing since 1993, and the interdisciplinary expertise of this research team. This project joins a number of other ongoing literacy experiments, some of which have attracted national attention. PSU is recognized for its unique cross-disciplinary general education program known as University Studies. It is a member of a four-institution national consortium, (including Harvard, Rutgers, and the University of Tennessee), for which it serves as a site for a research project called the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. This project, funded by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, is studying literacy development and its impact on adult lives. Finally, it is an active partner in the innovative statewide assessment effort entitled the Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS), a competency-based instrument designed to align high-school exit standards with college entrance standards. PASS, funded by Pew and other granting agencies, is a model closely watched by other states. Our proposed research will be enhanced by this synergy already developing among these other experiments.

#### History of Recent Literacy Study at our Institution

- 1987: Initiative in writing across the curriculum.
- 1987: Duncan Carter begins workshops with secondary faculty to discuss the teaching of writing in connection with providing college writing courses for secondary students, thus enhancing the college-secondary school partnerships through the Challenge and LINK programs.
- 1993: Writing-Intensive Course (WIC) program initiated.
- 1993-present: Faculty Senate-mandated research to evaluate WIC: interviews,

- gain studies, focus groups, student evaluations, measures of writing apprehension, and surveys; faculty time and more than \$6,000 per year committed to this research.
- 1993-94: Faculty Development Grant to train writing-intensive faculty.
  - 1994: University Studies program inaugurated. Integrated writing instruction replaces traditional courses.
  - 1995: Council of Writing Program Administrators and Faculty Development Grant, Duncan Carter and former Director of Writing Sherrie Gradin, multi-perspectived research into the kind and quality of writing instruction in University Studies.
  - 1995: Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS) proposed for all schools in the Oregon University System with PSU English faculty partnering with high school faculty to develop state-wide standards for literacy.
  - 1998: Barbara Winter Lewis, formerly Coordinator of the Writing Center, research report entitled Writing in University Studies: Improving Writing in [Sophomore Inquiry] and Cluster Courses.
  - 1998: Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy begins with PSU chosen as one of four sites to study adult literacy development, funded by the National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning.
  - 2002+: Proposed research will be integrated with state-mandated Proficiency-based Assessment Standards System (PASS), Pew-supported Urban Portfolio Project, university-wide assessment initiatives, efforts to address the special needs of ESL and transfer students, faculty development, and the demand for outcomes assessment in writing, both generally and within disciplines.
  - 2002-5: Our proposed research project received a Faculty Development Grant of \$1,175 in both 2002 and 2004 and a Faculty Enhancement Grant for \$9,977 in 2005.
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PSU takes great pride in its close connection with the city of Portland. Our motto is “Let knowledge serve the city” and we have won national awards for the last two years for our community-based courses. This year we were pleased to be one of four universities recognized nationally when we won the prestigious Certificate of Excellence for Community-University Partnerships in the Hesburgh Award competition. What this civic awareness means is that we have taken pains to insure multiple lines of communication with the city; indeed the fact that we have designed this research project to include the perspectives of potential employers in the community is a prime example of how we accomplish this goal. For us, the public is an integral part of our research and not just an audience for our findings.

It is with this concern for community in mind that we have also invited regional institutions, Pacific University and Linfield College, to join with us in this project. Both of them have well developed decentralized writing programs, though they contrast us by having a homogenous student body rather than a diverse one as we do and by being small private institutions rather than a large public one. By comparing decentralized writing in these three very different educational contexts, we hope to get abroad assessment of the effectiveness of decentralized writing.

## **Timeline of Research Project**

Our entire research project is taking place in stages over five years.

### Stage 1. Preliminary Survey Research (Years 1, 2)

The purpose of Stage 1 is to discover and document the experiences, attitudes, and needs of (1) students, (2) faculty, and (3) potential employers. By surveying these groups, we hope to discover what students know about writing, where they learned it, what problems they faced in learning to write, what they found most helpful in developing writing skills, and how they would define an effective writer.

Our team is especially interested to see whether student responses match those of faculty and employers. These results should tell us both the deficits and strengths of our current writing program. Stage 1 is well underway.

### Stage 2. Design and Test of Experimental Writing Courses and/or Programs (Years 2-3)

This stage begins with analyzing survey results and disseminating findings. These findings, when presented to focus groups of students and faculty, will provide a thorough account of the status of writing instruction and suggest new directions. These suggestions will go to a panel of students and faculty from those programs now charged with writing instruction. This panel will help to evaluate current writing courses/programs and to design experimental programs and outcome measures for assessing them.

### Stage 3. Measuring Outcomes of Experimental Programs (Years 3-5)

Students will be followed throughout their subsequent schoolwork and after graduation to measure outcomes of experimental courses/programs. Do these new methods produce effective writers? This stage will also seek to strengthen and improve current modes of evaluating writing instruction, making such course- and programmatic-evaluation a permanent, ongoing routine. Continuous evaluation will situate the university to respond to the changing needs of its students and faculty. It will launch the university on a continuous experiment in writing instruction.

## **Qualifications of Those Who Are Engaged in the Research Project**

- Heading this research program are Hildy Miller (English), Associate Professor and Director of Writing; Duncan Carter (English), Associate Dean and Professor; Hugo du Coudray (Psychology), Professor Emeritus and charter member of the Committee on Writing Across the Curriculum. Miller has worked with writing programs and writing across the curriculum at both University of Louisville and University of Minnesota. She conducted an extensive assessment project of the writing abilities of students at Minnesota, which included descriptions of student

writing in all writing courses and representative case studies across the curriculum. Carter and du Coudray brought together their expertise in composition and empirical research and have collaboratively researched writing intensive courses since 1983. They established the writing intensive course (WIC) program, tested its effectiveness as mandated by the Faculty Senate, and then broadened the scope of their research to encompass the larger context of literacy instruction. Our partners are Steve R. Smith, Assistant Dean at Pacific University, and Lex Runciman, Chair of English at Linfield College.

