

## **Commentary** *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

November 7, 2008

# **Writing Is Not Just a Basic Skill**

*By Mark Richardson*

At many colleges, professors trained in the discipline of rhetoric and composition are finding that the specialized knowledge they bring to teaching writing is held in thrall to older notions of how we learn to write — what Linda Brodkey, an author and director of the Warren College Writing Program at the University of California at San Diego, calls "common-sense myths of literacy."

Such myths are pernicious. They poison colleges and universities, affecting the morale of writing instructors, the attitudes of other faculty members, and, worst of all, students' acquisition of literacy. We need to understand such myths and to dispel them, replacing them with a new approach to first-year composition and a new commitment to upper-level writing.

Common-sense myths of literacy are akin to other common-sense myths. The truth often turns out to be more complicated than we thought. For most of human history, for example, it was assumed that time moves at a steady, equal pace for everyone (unless you are waiting for water to boil). Then Einstein showed that time moves more slowly for a clock in motion than for one that is stationary, and our common-sense observation of time was proved wrong.

The "common-sense" viewpoint about learning to write was born in the late 1800s, as colleges adapted to the enormous social and educational changes taking place: industrialization; population growth and relocation; social mobility; coeducation; and the boom in knowledge that led to the birth of the modern academic disciplines. A changing society brought new students to campuses — students of widely varied social classes and levels of literacy, eager to fill the jobs created by the new industrial society. In 1874, responding to the influx of new students, Harvard University administered an entrance exam in literacy skills.

Over half of the applicants who took it failed.

Colleges responded by creating composition courses. Harvard's new writing courses were taught not by a rhetorician or an English teacher, but by a newspaperman, Adams Sherman Hill. None of the other instructors of Harvard's composition courses had advanced degrees, either. In other words, "composition" was not a strategically planned curricular development, nor did it evolve out of scholarship or pedagogical expertise. It was invented in a hurry to resolve a perceived crisis, as colleges struggled to adapt to the requirements of a new age. And as Harvard went, so went the rest of American higher education.

Lacking real expertise, first-year-composition instructors were guided largely by "common-sense" notions about the acquisition of literacy. But in the 1960s, a whole new period of social mobility generated an explosion in rhetoric-and-composition theory and practice. Since then we have learned many truths that fly in the face of common-sense ideas. Here are just a few:

Students who do one kind of writing well will not automatically do other kinds of writing well.

The conventions of thought and expression in disciplines differ, enough so that what one learns in order to write in one discipline might have to be unlearned to write in another.

Writing is not the expression of thought; it is thought itself. Papers are not containers for ideas, containers that need only to be well formed for those ideas to emerge clearly. Papers are the working out of ideas. The thought and the container take shape simultaneously (and develop slowly, with revision).

When students are faced with an unfamiliar writing challenge, their apparent ability to write will falter across a broad range of "skills." For example, a student who handles grammatical usage, mechanics, organization, and tone competently in an explanation of the effects of global warming on coral reefs might look like a much weaker writer when she tries her hand

at a chemistry-lab report for the first time.

Teaching students grammar and mechanics through drills often does not work. Patterns of language usage, tangled up in complex issues like personal and group identities, are not easy to change.

Rhetorical considerations like ethos, purpose, audience, and occasion are crucial to even such seemingly small considerations as word choice and word order.

Writing involves abilities we develop over our lifetimes. Some students are more advanced in them when they come to college than are others. Those who are less advanced will not develop to a level comparable to the more-prepared students in one year or even in two, although they may reach adequate levels of ability over time.

Those truths, and others like them, have reshaped our understanding of what writing is and how it is learned. But administrators, faculty members in other disciplines, and even some academics trained in traditional English studies still cling to common-sense notions about literacy education. Those notions see composition as a "basic skill" that students should have attained by the end of their first year in college at the latest — first-year composition is therefore essentially remedial — just as Harvard saw it in 1874. From that perspective, academic literacy is something that students should have when they arrive at college. If they don't, then one or two courses are deemed sufficient to bring them up to speed — never mind that any complex ability that we do not fully possess, like speaking French or playing the piano, will not be mastered so quickly.

A related common-sense myth of literacy acquisition sees first-year composition as a way to prepare students for writing in other disciplines. However, as Sharon Crowley, a rhetoric-and-composition instructor at Arizona State University and author of *Toward a Civil Discourse* (University of Pittsburgh, 2006), and David Russell, a professor of rhetoric and professional communication at Iowa State University and author of *Writing in the Academic Disciplines* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), have pointed out, writing experts have learned that

disciplinary genres differ.

To take just one small example, most humanities-based writing handbooks tell writers to avoid the passive voice, but chemistry-lab reports advise students to write only in the passive. And it is not just usage issues that vary from discipline to discipline; genres, styles, resources, approaches, and habits of thought all do as well.

Of course, one could argue that all academic writing should have some qualities in common: clear organization, detailed development, mechanical correctness, evidence of critical thinking, and so on. But literacy studies have shown us that problems with such issues tend to emerge or recede as students move from genre to genre, so that Bill might write a narrative paper in first-year composition with no organizational problems and then go on to write a philosophy paper with many. Every composition teacher has seen students whose abilities seem to deteriorate rather than improve as the course proceeds. The new problems are just fault lines exposed by the pressure of an unfamiliar genre of writing.

Moreover, a particularly pernicious common-sense myth of literacy acquisition is that because writing is a "basic skill," almost anyone can teach first-year composition — newly minted graduate students in English literature, journalists, high-school English-literature teachers, even M.A.'s in other disciplines — and that those faculty members don't need to be paid well, because what they teach is so basic. But the viewpoint shaped by 50 years of research, analysis, and experimentation views composition differently. Indeed, writing experts see in composition a body of knowledge as rich as any other discipline's. Thus first-year composition should be an introduction to the discipline of rhetoric and composition (just as Psychology 101 is an introduction), generating knowledge that students can learn and on which they can be tested and evaluated through their writing.

From that vantage point, first-year composition is only indirectly preparatory to

writing in other disciplines: What a student will learn is somewhat applicable to writing a history or psychology paper, but significant gaps in preparation will remain. Psychology professors who want students to write effective papers, even at the introductory level, can't count on first-year composition to have done all the preparatory work.

Academics who would like their students to become effective writers must work with professors of rhetoric and composition not only to design effective writing assignments and writing instruction within their own courses, but also to create discipline-specific versions of advanced composition courses and require, or at least urge, their majors to take those courses. Such courses should be paid for collaboratively, with the discipline requiring or recommending the course contributing its fair share.

Finally, expertise in writing theory argues that those who teach first-year composition should be as credentialed as those who teach Introduction to Sociology, World History, or Environmental Biology, and should be paid comparably. The most destructive common-sense myth about literacy acquisition is that since it is "a basic skill," it ought to come quickly and cheaply. It isn't, and it shouldn't. Blinded by a common-sense myth, colleges have perpetuated what Ms. Crowley aptly calls an "underclass" of writing instructors who are underpaid, overworked, and often unprepared to teach the subject that students must learn: rhetoric and composition.

So let's dispel the myths, and with them, first-year composition itself. Farewell, basic skills. Hello, Introduction to Rhetoric and Comp.

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