Writing for the Pre-professional Within a Liberal Arts Curriculum

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In Liberal Arts colleges during the sixties, Advanced Composition classes, often filled to capacity, primarily served English majors and students seeking teaching credentials. These courses provided students with an opportunity to practice various forms of exposition and argumentation and to develop a sense of style. Needless to say, such brisk, purposeful business waned in the seventies: now there are few English majors and only the most perservering in any discipline pursue teaching credentials.

Believing that writing instruction beyond the basics of composition is an integral part of a liberal education but realizing that students are increasingly turning to career-oriented electives which will help them secure employment upon graduation, I developed an advanced writing class that would link liberal arts education and professional training. The course is entitled "Writing for the Pre-professional."

The challenge was how to establish a curriculum that would serve the interests of a variety of liberal arts majors entering a variety of professions. My first class had students in art, music, speech, English, business, psychology, and sociology. No longer could I assume that my students were English majors intrinsically interested in language development or credential students bound by their career choice to improve their written expression.

Textbooks on technical or business writing were helpful in introducing me to the types of writing my students would use in their careers, but the assignments and examples in these books would not have been useful to them. Only a few were entering the business world and none were entering a technical field or wished to become technical writers. Opting, therefore, to use no textbook except a handbook of usage, I did select from the business and technical writing texts the types of writing I would teach my students: memos, letters, proposals, reports, and resumes. These types of writing took as their subject not business or technical information, but material relating to each student's probable career.

Through lecture-demonstrations, I or guest speakers explained the nature of each type of writing and how to go about composing each one. Copious examples from a variety of sources—my files, the Career Planning and Placement Center, other administrative offices on campus—were invaluable pedagogical tools. Every letter or memo I sent or received that semester, every proposal--informal or formal—I had on hand, every report received from the various committees of the College became part of the living textbook I was creating for my class. A letter from the Cousteau Society soliciting funds, for example, was used to discuss "audience" in writing. Or our College's report to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges was discussed in terms of how a large body of information is divided into readable units, with appropriate subheadings and effective formatting.

Initially, after hearing our Career Planning Director speak about employment opportunities for liberal arts majors, each student discussed in a written statement the field of work he/she would like to enter after graduation. An art major in my class, for example, was interested in public relations/publications.
The two major writing assignments, the report and the project, dealt directly with each student's career choice.

The ten to twenty page report was an investigation of various aspects of each student's chosen career, researched through interviews with professors on campus and professionals in the field, readings from library sources, and on-site observations of people functioning in the career role. Students were encouraged to gather information from a variety of sources, divide the material under appropriate subheadings, and organize the sections into an interesting, logical sequence. Areas for them to consider included: education/training necessary, typical responsibilities/activities, competition and opportunities for advancement, salary and security, possible utilization of liberal arts knowledge/skills, kinds of people who enter the profession, writing skills required, and advantages and disadvantages. The list was to be used as a beginning framework for their research; the actual subheadings of all the reports would differ, reflecting how each student shaped his presentation to interest and inform a particular audience: other liberal arts students who were seeking information about career opportunities. In fact, the reports were shared among the members of the class, thus broadening each member's understanding of the world of work.

The project, in turn, was related to the research done for the report. Students determined what writing skills and/or particular kinds of writing were necessary for their career choice and fashioned a writing project that would help them develop this expertise. The art student, for example, decided to do three feature stories about different aspects of our college, typical of the kind of story that the public relations office of a college would develop for an Alum News Letter. Someone in psychology who was interested in gerontology did a number of patient profiles from his observations in the receiving ward of a county medical facility for senior citizens, practicing the kind of clinical description and analysis done by human services personnel. The finished project, therefore, was a portfolio of writing which exemplified the student's mastery of certain writing skills necessary to his/her chosen career.

All other writing for the course related to these two major writing assignments. Memos, addressed to me (their supervisor, so to speak), evaluated the progress they were making in their major report, citing specific people and references they were consulting in gathering their information. The resume was compiled to be used for a specific job application in their chosen career. Letters were written to be sent to professors on campus and professionals in their chosen field, requesting information, setting up interviews and visitations, asking advice, thanking for services rendered, etc. The proposal, outlining in detail their plans for the project, was written for me and had to receive my approval before they went ahead with their project.

Even though the subject of this Advanced Composition course has changed since the boom years of the sixties, its goal remains the same: teaching students how to write clear, coherent, stylistically effective prose. One thing, however, has changed—and in terms of pedagogy, definitely for the better: the students have a specific purpose and audience for every piece of writing they create. They constantly perceive, therefore, the intricate relationship of ends and means in written discourse and practice the art of uniting the two. To emphasize this principle, I dedicated a great deal of time during the semester to class analysis of the students' writing. This kind of feedback is invaluable in developing the
writing potential of each student but also underscores for them the important connection between writer and reader. Certainly this firm rhetorical base to career-oriented writing instruction makes it more than technical training. In the tradition of liberal arts education, students are still asked to think analytically, evaluate diverse materials, and present ideas and information with clarity and grace.

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**Research Service for the ATAC**

JAC will publish on an annual basis a research report which will be written for 1980 by Rita Sturm. This report will include (1) the year's work in advanced composition studies in the form of an annotated bibliography, and (2) "research service" items submitted by ATAC members to include recommendations, for or against, certain texts, theoretical statements as expressed in the literature of the field as well as recommendations on published research and on published pedagogical strategies. Rita Sturm needs your help in both of these matters: you should tell her about articles you have read this year which you think are particularly helpful or pernicious, AND you should tell her about articles or books written in past years which will be useful to the ATAC membership or which should be regarded with suspicion by your colleagues. Write to Rita Sturm, Vice President of the ATAC, c/o 4468 Avenida del Sol, NE, Albuquerque, NM 87110 BEFORE 1 SEPTEMBER 1980 BUT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Give her a citation in the usual bibliographical form, and give her your annotation, too.