Teaching Rhetoric to Students in Upper Division and Professional Degree Program Courses

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Until recently a paper on teaching rhetoric to upper division and graduate students in professional degree programs might have been of interest only to technical writing teachers. I am interested in the topic myself, but I teach in an unusual department which has for a number of years offered both a required senior rhetoric seminar and a variety of elective rhetoric courses to the upper division and graduate students from the thirteen different degree programs in the Engineering College, and to students from other departments at my university, primarily those scientific or professional. Until recently many members of English departments would not have been much concerned about the theoretical underpinnings of a rhetoric course at the upper division or professional degree program level.

Now, however, there are clear indications that considering such a course is appropriate for those in English departments. Public demand, funding agency support, and necessarily-revised priorities in English departments are combining to cause significant changes in the way writing is taught in American colleges and universities. Until recently writing instruction was taught almost exclusively in the freshman year and primarily by graduate students in literary studies. Increasingly it is being taught as a part of upper division and professional degree programs and by senior faculty specializing in something other than literature. For these reasons, then, it is important for us to consider the rationale for such a course.

Now I have said that I believe there are signs of change. Let me mention one particular sign I have in mind. It is the current research and curriculum development program in the college of Literature, Science and Arts (LS&A) at the University of Michigan. Funded by Mellon and Ford grants totalling nearly half a million dollars, the program will affect every student in every department of the 23,000 student college. The program, presented by the English Composition Board and approved by the LS&A faculty, calls for a composition requirement consisting of the following: 1) an assessment of entering's ability based on a writing sample; 2) exemption from, or placement of students in, tutorials or introductory composition courses depending on the quality of their writing samples; 3) completion of a junior or senior level writing requirement, preferably in the student's field of specialization; and 4) the establishment of a writing workshop open fifty hours a week to which students can go to get help with writing required in any LS&A course. All four parts of the program are now in effect, although the timetable for the third part of the program - - the more revolutionary part- calls for upper class writing instruction to be phased - in by August, 1982. That is, with some students now fulfilling the junior/senior requirement, by August, 1982, the program will provide writing instruction to the total population of the College, all 23,000 of the LS&A college students, within their own areas of concentration and at upper division levels.

I am confident that the Michigan program will prove extremely influential at other schools. Indeed many times I have heard faculty from other schools say something like "tell us about the program and how we can get something like it at our school." In short, I believe there will be rapid development of writing instruction at the upper class level and within professional degree programs elsewhere. Accordingly, in this paper I would like to outline a theoretical basis upon which to build effective upper division and professional degree program writing courses. To do this, I will examine three questions:
1. Who should be enrolled in the courses?
2. Who should teach the courses?
3. What should be the approach of the courses?

Each of these questions must be resolved at the outset of any course or program development.

Who should be enrolled in the courses?

Three alternatives exist. First, the enrollment could be completely homogeneous. That is, the students from any one degree program or discipline could take the class together. Second, the enrollment could be completely heterogeneous. That is, the students from different forms of disciplines—any disciplines—could be enrolled in a course. Or third, the enrollment could be partly heterogeneous. That is, students from different but complementary disciplines could be enrolled.

While any of these alternatives will work, the best solution, I believe, is the third. That is, students in an upper division class should not be drawn from the same program; neither should they be mixed indiscriminately. Rather the students from complementary disciplines could be enrolled.

While any of these alternatives will work, the best solution, I believe, is the third. That is, students in an upper division class should not be drawn from the same program; neither should they be mixed indiscriminately. Rather the students from complementary disciplines should be mixed in such a way as to provide rhetorical situations approximating those they will encounter in their professional roles after graduation.

Of course as a practical matter it would be easy just to mix all the students together, or easier still to establish a writing course for the students in any specific program. Indeed, administrators and faculty from specific departments are frequently eager to see only these “dedicated” sorts of courses, and will tend to be skeptical about classes not designed specifically for their own students. Yet I believe the course objectives for a writing course at the upper level are in some conflict with either of these alternatives and that these alternatives should therefore be rejected.

Certainly one major objective for the course—perhaps the major objective—is to enable the students to transcend the perspectives, jargon, and communication short-cuts of their own disciplines. The students must be taught that to communicate effectively they must be able to address audiences unlike themselves and their major professors—audiences who do not know the terms and methods and assumptions of a discipline—audiences who have a genuine need to read because they do not know what the writer knows. It is not enough that these students learn to follow the conventions of a discipline or to write coherent paragraphs or to observe grammatical and stylistic rules. Rather they must learn to look at writing transactionally, as an instrument for causing change, frequently an instrument used to address readers whose needs, education, and roles are different from the writer’s.

Clearly the homogeneous course cannot provide the students with this writing situation. If all of the students come from the same discipline, even at the junior level they will have acquired the private languages of their disciplines and will be difficult to convince that those in other disciplines do not know the same things and share the same values. Just the other day, for example, one of my Naval Architecture students told me he was absolutely astounded that his classmates—not Naval Architects—did not know the terms “draft” and “skeg” terms he had unfortunately used without definition in an oral presentation. I can only wonder if the student would have ever discovered (or believed) how private his professional language had become if he had been in a writing class with only Naval Architects. It is one thing to be told that one must write to
economics. In other words, the academic model is being used to meet the junior-senior writing requirement. In this way, if the faculty of the departments teach only their own students, the objectives of the courses are likely to be rhetorically somewhat narrow.

If the English department TA's are not to teach these courses and if the faculty of the other department are not likely to teach them indefinitely, then who is? The solution, it seems to me, is to approach the problem as a long-range problem of faculty development. If there are now few senior faculty in English departments who are interested in teaching writing to upper division and professional students, and if there are only a few members of other departments to help the program for a time, in the end the English department must assume responsibility for the program by hiring specialists in the teaching of writing and encouraging existing faculty to retain themselves to teach these courses. Of courses the budgetary responsibility for this hiring of rhetoricians familiar with specific fields might be shared with those other departments whose students are to be served; however, I believe that the hiring of writing specialists is ultimately and logically the responsibility of the English department. To do otherwise seems to me to risk both the rapid deterioration of what is otherwise an exciting and important program, and to invite "bad press" for the English department.

As new faculty are hired and as existing faculty retrain themselves, priority should be given to people who have dual competences in rhetoric and in the types of discourse common in specific professional areas. These should be people like Jim Raymond of Alabama, who has an excellent background in rhetoric as well as a specialization in legal writing. Or like John Warnock of Wyoming -- again a person with expertise in both rhetoric and law. Or like my colleague Tom Sawyer, who is trained in both speech and psychology and who has specialized in the written and oral presentation of scientific information. I hope, in short, that priority can be given to developing a faculty of trained rhetoricians knowledgeable about and interested in the types of discourse within -- and between -- specific disciplines. The transition to a faculty of this sort will obviously be gradual, but I believe that if genuinely effective upper-level writing courses are to be developed, this transition must be made.

What Should Be the Approach of the Courses?

Both the students and the types of teachers I have proposed for the upper-level writing courses signal my basic assumption about the rhetorical orientation these courses should take. These courses should treat writing as an activity of responsible professional operating within large social systems which include their professional disciplines but which are nonetheless larger than those disciplines. That is, the courses should train students to write as members of a large professional community -- not as students, not even as individual members of a single discipline, but as professionals who must understand and interact cooperatively and ethically with other professionals and with professionals from other disciplines to carry out their roles.

Obviously any writing course trains students to understand and to observe the conventions of a community of some sort. As Carolyn R. Miller has recently stated, "To write . . . is to participate in a community; to write well is to understand the conditions of one's own participation -- the concepts, value, traditions, and style which permit identification with that community and determine the success or failure of communication."6 This is true for a community at any level. Thus, for example, an introductory writing course might be seen as training students to understand and meet the expectations operating within the academic community of which the students are a part. The course trains them to write themes, term papers, and exams necessary in the community -- and to do so in ways that meet the expectations of the essential readers in that community --
politics. Yet in the end I believe the result will be worth the effort. In such a
course the students will meet the "real world" of their professional writing
situations in the classroom before they must encounter it in their job roles.

Who Should Teach the Course?

The traditional model of using English department Teaching Assistants as the
primary staff for teaching writing is of course not appropriate in upper division
and professional degree program writing courses. In our university, at least,
graduate students are barred from teaching courses at the 400 level and above --
that is, courses which might enroll other graduate students. And I think there is
good reason for that. The questions then becomes if the TA's aren't to teach the
writing course, who should?

The obvious answer would appear to be professorial staff from the English
department. In my own department, for example, we use only our own
professorial staff to teach our upper division writing courses. But then we are a
small department -- thirty members -- in which one third have specialized in
rhetoric. And our college is a small college within the university -- 4000
students. In LS&A, however, there is a very real problem. Very few of the
English department faculty have specialized in rhetoric. Yet the enrollments in
these upper division writing courses are bound to be very large. There are, as I
have indicated, some 23,000 students in the college. Of these, approximately 11,-
000 are upper division students eligible to take a writing class. Thus even
assuming that these 11,000 students were efficiently distributed, there would still
be as many as perhaps 3000 students enrolled in writing courses at any one time.

Obviously that is an extremely heavy burden for any English department
faculty to bear.

A short-term solution which LS &A must adopt is a solution which I see as
practical and even necessary for a time but undesirable in the long run. The solu-
tion is to have faculty from the various departments teach writing within their
own departments. Although there is a short-term need to do this, I do not believe
this solution is a good one. If the faculty of the discipline departments teach
writing, the courses almost certainly will be the very kinds of homogeneous
courses I have just been arguing against. In addition, the program will be
difficult to sustain. Perhaps at the outset a few particularly dedicated professors
might design and offer first-rate writing courses in their own departments. And
indeed that is the case on the Michigan campus is several departments.
However, after a time I believe most faculty would not want to continue this ser-
vice role. In scientific fields particularly, this time devoted to undergraduate
writing instruction will be time away from research and will likely become a
burden to be passed around much as the introductory undergraduate lecture
courses are passed around now. Although I know those of the LS&A faculty who
have expressed support for the program are dedicated and able, I believe it will
not be possible to rely indefinitely on them to maintain so large an upper di-
vision writing program.

Yet there is a much more important reason I believe faculty from the discipline
department should not teach the upper division writing courses. And again this
has to do with the course objectives. My reason is that if faculty from the
technical departments teach the writing courses for their own department's
students, the classes will tend not to be oriented toward the sorts of writing the
students will do after graduation. Rather, the emphasis will be on the sorts of
writing students do as students or on the types of writing professors do as
professors. The emphasis will be on academic writing which assumes
homogeneous audiences and pedagogical purposes rather than heterogeneous
audiences and instrumental, professional purposes. For example, it is in-
teresting to note that students in one department at Michigan (Economics) will
be writing for an undergraduate journal modeled on the professional journals in
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non-specialists; it is quite another actually to try it.

The completely heterogeneous class could of course provide the students with useful experience. In such a class the Naval Architect would have to address the nurse, the geologist, and the political scientist. Yet such a course would be useful primarily in training students to write for an audience such as one might have in popular journalism. It would not be as useful in training specialists to write the sorts of documents—letters, memoranda, reports, proposals, articles, conference papers, speeches—that most will write in their professional lives. While the Naval Architect routinely must communicate with engineers, lawyers, businessmen, and federal bureaucrats, it would be rare indeed that he or she would write to the bacteriologist or to the biologist. Thus, although the completely heterogeneous course would be more effective than the homogeneous one in budging students loose from their disciplines, the completely heterogeneous course is perhaps most appropriate only for some students, for those who plan to spend their working lives in situations that require them to write to the general public. In other words, I see this second alternative as a better alternative than the first, but not as an alternative appropriate for all students.

The partly heterogeneous class seems to me to be most appropriate for an upper division writing course. In it, students from different but complementary disciplines could be mixed and could be taught to understand and to deal with the conventions and needs that arise in the professional interaction of those disciplines. Thus the students could be taught to transcend the closed worlds of their own disciplines, and at the same time to realize the implications of the professional roles to which they aspire.

Perhaps an illustration would help. Just recently I was working with a student in Industrial Hygiene. This student, a master's candidate, is a specialist in occupational safety and health. His professional role will require him to understand and to make himself understood by other different sorts of specialists. This fact was illustrated by his summer job. In a noise abatement project for a large petroleum company, this student had to write to OSHA officials, layers, medical personnel, and to labor and management personnel to untangle the results of a faculty machine design. The badly designed machines caused workers to be subjected to sustained noise levels of approximately 130 decibles, a level at the threshold of pain and which can cause instantaneous and permanent hearing impairment. Dealing with the problems required machine shutdown, some $800,000 worth of redesign work, $5000 per week worth of medical testing, and an extended set of law suits, all yet unresolved. The varied aspects of the problem required my students to write for very specific but quite different audiences.

For this student, then, the chance to have a classroom audience of engineers, lawyers, medical and business administration personnel would have been extremely valuable and would have helped to prepare him for the "real world" to which he will return when he finishes his master's degree. Of course it might have helped this student to have a completely heterogeneous audience in the classroom. Yet I believe it would have helped him more to realize that an engineer or lawyer did not understand the term "ergonomic" than to realize that a botanist did not understand it. A homogeneous classroom audience might not have made the point at all; a heterogeneous classroom might have made it in such a way as to invite his dismissing it; but a partly heterogeneous classroom would make the point in a way he could not ignore.

To design an upper level writing class, one must first answer the question, "who shall the students be?" The easy answers are in my judgement not the best answers. Certainly it requires more course planning to determine which disciplines best combine to form complementary groups. And certainly offering such courses poses problems of staffing, scheduling, and even departmental
professors. Similarly, an elementary business writing or technical writing course might be seen as training students to understand and observe the conventions of other, more specialized communities - academic, disciplinary, or corporate. These courses train students to participate in business and technical communities by selecting appropriate information, arranging it in conventional ways, expressing it in language suitable to the situation and audiences, and embodying the value system of the community.

The sort of course I propose as an upper-level writing course is similar to those two courses but different in fundamental ways. As I envision it, this upper-level course goes beyond the limited academic and disciplinary communities to a larger community still. It assumes that the students are professionals - or near-professional - whose communities are the larger social systems within which professions interact. Thus the aim of the course is not just to train writers to follow the conventions and style standards of their own disciplines, but to understand and deal with the differences in 1) conventions, 2) cognitive styles, and 3) value systems of the interacting disciplines and public constituencies which they serve. The aim of the course, then, is to prepare the students to join the professional communities in which they will write when they have left the university.

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1981 MLA PROGRAM

A special session at the 1981 MLA convention in New York City will be devoted to "Advanced Composition: New Approaches." Tim Lally, who organized the session, will chair, and Robert Kelton of North Carolina State University will be respondent. Panelists include Ulle E. Lewes of Ohio Wesleyan University, Arline Gabarini of the Dominican College of Blauvelt, Jasper Neel of Franciscan Marion College, and Richard Larson of Lehman College, CUNY. If you attend the MLA meeting, please attend this special session. It is important that such sessions appear on the programs of major national meetings which include English studies, and they will continue to appear if they are well attended and successful.
Obviously there are several signs of change that might be mentioned. I focus on the sign closest to me, but other experimental models are being tried at Beaver College, Yale, and elsewhere.

Interestingly it is extremely difficult in a large university even to discover how many students there are likely to be in an upper division writing program at any one time. That is another dimension of the problem. I have used Michigan's "Summary of degrees conferred July 1, 1976 through June 30, 1977" to extrapolate the probable numbers of students involved. My estimates are probably safe, but they indeed estimates.

See J.C. Mathes, Dwight W. Stevenson and Peter R. Klaver "Technical Communication: The Engineering Educator's Responsibility," Engineering Education, 69 (1979), 331-32. There we argue that some individual technical faculty are able and should involve themselves in the teaching of writing to technical students. The principal thrust of our argument however is that the administrative and financial responsibility for writing instruction should be assumed by technical schools. We doubt that, in the numbers necessary, technical faculty ever could -- or would -- assume the main teaching responsibility.


Notes