Advanced Exposition: A Survey of Patterns and Problems

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Recent developments in English studies suggest a renewed interest in reading and teaching expository essays. The work of Chris Anderson, John Warnock, and others has produced articles and books directing professional attention to "literary nonfiction." New anthologies seek to engage students with classic essays as well as current essays by influential contemporary writers. Generating much of this work is an awareness that the essay is a powerful modern genre, a major vehicle for public discourse. Paradoxically, however, this public respect for the expository essay does not seem to be shared in university English departments. As Anderson has asked, "Why has the essay as a form declined in the academic world even as it has gained in popularity outside the academic world" (300)?

Although Anderson's question refers to the reluctance of English scholars to write and teach the essay, it raises a related issue for teachers of writing. In our experience, the advanced composition course traditionally has asked students to write expository essays aimed at public discourse and to strive for the style and sophistication of accomplished essayists. It may be, however, that the last several years have taken advanced writing instruction away from that expository, public focus. The proliferation of new courses in advanced writing is healthy and laudable, but the very titles of such courses often suggest narrowly defined audiences: Scientific Writing, Technical Writing, Business Writing, Writing for the Professions, Writing in the Disciplines. The specialized skills and voices these courses engender may come at the expense of a broader advanced writing course. Moreover, this specializing trend comes in the midst of calls for student empowerment and increased cultural literacy. If the profession is at last recognizing the power of the essay as a mode of public discourse, are we, paradoxically, abandoning the kind of instruction in advanced exposition that might enable our students to join in that discourse?

As teachers of advanced composition, we share the impression that this paradoxical development is indeed taking place. Few textbooks exist for general courses in advanced writing. Little of the professional literature on composition theory addresses itself to such courses. Even a cursory examination of catalog course descriptions indicates extremely diverse visions of what such a course should do. Discussions with colleagues at other institu-

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tions reveal uncertainties like ours about the nature and content of advanced writing instruction. Suspecting that the place of advanced expository writing courses is increasingly problematic, we conducted a survey to examine the current institutional situation of courses named "advanced composition."

Advanced Composition: A Survey

First, we examined more than 600 institutional catalogs to cull descriptions of courses labeled "advanced composition" or what appeared to be its equivalent. Then we prepared and mailed questionnaires to 300 representative institutions across the country. The questionnaire covered four areas: organization of courses, instructors, pedagogy, and theory. A fifth section invited respondents to volunteer comments on issues of concern. Under "Organization," we asked about the existence and form of advanced composition courses, their size, student populations, prerequisites, and definition of acceptable performance. The section about "Instructors" asked who assigned instructors to the course and the qualifications required of those who teach it. The section on "Pedagogy" asked about texts, numbers and types of writing assignments, instructional modes, and course focus (such as, research writing, writing for publication, writing about literature). The section on "Theory" examined the theoretical base of the course as well as the theorists who have shaped the thinking of instructors. This section also asked about the place of the course in relation to writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

Of the 300 institutions queried, 124 returned the questionnaire. Our findings represent 42 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Responding schools included 68 public institutions and 47 private. Nine were two-year institutions. Of 115 four-year plus schools, 59 were large multipurpose universities, 54 were predominately undergraduate schools, and two were military academies. Our respondents, then, represent a relatively broad range of institutions.

Like many similar studies, this survey raises as many questions as it answers. On the other hand, it indicates some clear patterns and problems important to colleagues who teach advanced composition courses and who face the uncertainties and program configurations sketched above. In this article, therefore, we offer first some statistical highlights and then some consideration of the implications of responses. Together, the patterns and problems suggest disarray in courses identified as "advanced composition." Such courses seem not to have benefitted fully from the paradigm shift that has fundamentally altered our approach to developmental and freshman writing in the university.

Two surveys of advanced composition from earlier in this decade provide a background against which to measure the results of our study. The first, published by Bernice Dicks in the Journal of Advanced Composition, expresses cautious optimism about the national situation of courses in advanced writing. Dicks' title, "State of the Art in Advanced Expository
Writing: One Genus, Many Species," suggests both the optimism and the caution. While "one genus" finds a core of commonality among such courses, "many species" conveys some uneasiness about the Protean nature of the surface forms taken by them. Dicks' report reaches a carefully measured conclusion:

To sum up as briefly as possible: the models I collected . . . indicate that there is a multitude of species available to teachers of advanced expository writing: we can invent, imitate, cull, combine . . . . Unfortunately, the wealth of models suggests again that advanced composition may well prove impossible to define once and for all. (186)

The second survey, conducted by Priscilla Tate, reaches a more optimistic conclusion. In an unpublished summary, Tate notes the increasing use of contemporary theory and pedagogy among her 115 respondents and concludes, "I believe that this segment of our discipline is in good hands" (2).

So long as we look at the individual responses to the questionnaire, we concur in Tate's optimism. Many of our respondents provided thorough accounts of their course, based on clear theoretical convictions and pedagogical justifications. When, on the other hand, we try to place the various responses against each other, to draw some composite image of courses in advanced exposition, we find our position closer to Dicks' ambivalent summation. Finally, when we reflect on the implications of the data we collected, we are inclined to a rather sober assessment.

The Shape of Advanced Composition

Approximately 70% of the institutions have a course titled "advanced composition" among their listings. The remaining 30% have a comparable course under other titles. The course is typically upper division, for majors in English, Communications, English Education, or Education. It appears that the course does not reach a heterogeneous audience within the academic community. This may be cause for concern. Where do other student writers receive the advanced training in public discourse that the traditional course in advanced composition offers?

In about 90% of the institutions, advanced composition has prerequisites. In 50% of the cases, a single composition course is required; in 33% of the cases, two prior composition courses are required (7% indicated some prerequisite but did not specify its nature). At nearly two-thirds of the institutions, the course is strictly elective. This finding suggests that even many English majors are not required to take advanced writing, corroborating the recent MLA Newsletter assertion that only 31% of English major programs require advanced composition.

Class size is limited to twenty students in 53% of the institutions, to twenty-one to twenty-five at 28% of the schools, and to more than twenty-five at 19% of the schools.
In 88% of the institutions, grades determine acceptable performance; at 12% portfolios or publishable articles do so.

Our selection of institutions came from the Writing Program Administrators membership rolls. However, teaching assignments for advanced composition were made by the Director of Writing at only 9% of the schools. Department chairs assigned staff at 56% of the institutions, with the remaining respondents indicating alternative methods of selecting staff. Our findings seem to suggest that the leadership role of Directors of Writing rarely extends to advanced composition.

At 82% of the institutions, graduate assistants are not involved in the teaching of advanced writing courses. At 9% they serve as instructors, and at another 9% they work as aides. With so little involvement by graduate students, where do future teachers of advanced composition receive training?

At 72% of the schools, instructors work independently of one another, while 25% indicate coordination among teachers of the course. A broad coordination with considerable flexibility was noted by 3%. These findings parallel the absence of a standard syllabus at 77% of the institutions.

Textbooks are used by 65% of the respondents. Almost half use a reader; nearly a third use a rhetoric; a fifth use a handbook (other respondents indicated that a text is required but did not define the type). Of those respondents who use a text, two-thirds expressed dissatisfaction with current choices. Those who do not use a book employ student writings and instructor handouts.

Nearly 37% of respondents require six to eight papers in the advanced course; 33% require one to five papers; 30% require more than eight papers. More than half of the respondents see two or more revisions of each paper, while more than half also require a journal or portfolio.

Nearly 60% of the institutions incorporate peer groups into advanced writing instruction. Lecturing or workshops are cited by more than a third as primary instructional approaches.

Respondents indicate many different points of focus for advanced courses, ranging from research writing to writing for publication, and from argumentation to autobiography. It seems to be impossible to predict the content of a course named "advanced composition."

Nearly half of the institutions have writing-across-the-curriculum programs, and nearly 80% of those without current programs are considering their implementation. Writing-across-the-curriculum has increased demand for advanced writing courses at 24% of the schools where it exists and has decreased demand at only 4%. Other institutions report no significant impact.

**Problems with Advanced Composition**

The fifth section of the questionnaire gave respondents the opportunity to comment freely on the issues facing advanced exposition courses. From these and other comments scattered throughout their responses arose some of the
most interesting and disturbing implications of the study. These implications recurred in several patterns, enabling us to construct a view of the attitudes and worries of many of us who teach advanced courses, and of some who administer them. The remainder of this article considers those implications.

First, a number of respondents indicated doubt about the future of general courses in advanced exposition at their institutions. Noting that the course is offered irregularly, the English department chair of a private university in New England commented on the few students who enroll, even in the occasional section offered: “Usually they are a handful of students majoring in English with a concentration in writing for whom the course is required.” At a public university in the midwest, similar enrollment problems prompted the department chair to say that because the course has “virtually no population . . . we are going to stop offering it. Last time offered there were four students in it.” He continued, in a vein shared by some other responses, “We are not going to offer the course any more. No students take it. It has no purpose. Our upper-division and graduate writing courses (tech writing, creative writing, professional writing) have large enrollments and seem to fill a need; advanced composition doesn’t.”

That ominous prospect has already arrived at a few schools. The writing director at a university in one of the plains states mused, “I do think that one advanced composition course is less desirable than a breakdown. Such a course exists only in academia, whereas reports, arguments, and personal essays go beyond the academy.”

At some institutions, then, the general advanced composition course is already gone or is on its way out of its traditional place in the curricula. Poignant testimony to this came in a mystifying response from the writing director of a large eastern university whose answers were usually question marks or the word “yes” followed by a question mark. The mystery vanished when, at the end of the questionnaire, we found this laconic comment: “We have advanced comp. on our books. To my knowledge it has never been offered.”

Certainly the picture, as our statistics indicate, is not everywhere so negative. Many institutions reported a stable population for advanced composition courses, and a few reported burgeoning enrollments. In many cases, however, these are institutions in which the expository emphasis has
already disappeared in favor of sequences of courses in technical, business, disciplinary, or personal writing. The situation is sufficiently confused to make it necessary, it seems to us, that we as a profession develop some clearer sense of what we mean when we label a course by the general title "advanced composition."

That necessity underscores a second problem indicated by the research: the variety of course contents and points of focus in the courses described by respondents. Anything that can serve as the matter of a writing course appeared somewhere among the responses. Several clusters were evident. Writing for publication appeared frequently, as did research writing. Personal or autobiographical writing of some sort formed still another cluster. Writing about a theme or problem which differs with each offering of the course recurred, along with writing about literature. While most responses fit one or another of these clusters, a bewildering variety of other points of focus surfaced, enough to make one cautious about accepting in transfer a course named "advanced composition" at another institution.

For example, several responses indicated that traditional grammar is the focus of the course; others concentrate on the writing of "family histories." One description emphasized the "basic paragraph" as the central feature. Another, from a private college in the west, evoked echoes of an earlier era in the teaching of writing: "Study of the sentence; correctness in the use of parts of speech, punctuation, capitalization, syntax, and idiom." Some instructors indicated that the work of a single essayist forms the subject of the course. One response even indicated that the work is conducted individually, by mail and by telephone conferences.

Indicative of the uncertainty about what constitutes advanced composition were a number of responses which expressed, sometimes wistfully, sometimes tartly, the disagreements among instructors of advanced composition in the same program. One such comment was especially revealing. After indicating the contemporary approach of the respondent's own classes, the informant added: "The other primary instructor of advanced expository writing approaches the course in a totally different way. It is a grammar/literature course using a literary anthology and a freshman handbook." This comment suggests how very different might be the experience of two advanced writing students at the same university in the south.

We do not mean to challenge any of these approaches as invalid or unjustifiable. Our concern is with the impossibility of identifying what advanced composition means, given the threats and confusions noted earlier in this report. A student, an advisor, or an administrator examining a program could legitimately ask what common experience will be shared by students in different sections of such courses.

A third problem emerging from the study discloses the theoretical divisions among those who teach advanced courses. One of the questions asked for an assessment of the effect of process theory on the respondent's
teaching. Responses reflected the theoretical divergences which mark the current professional discourse on writing theory. Some clearly thought the question simply unnecessary. One writing director asserted, "I can’t recall teaching any other way." Another replied, "I’ve been using process since 1968." Still another huffed that process theory had influenced her teaching, "vastly, obviously." The tone of such answers bespoke the conviction that we all agree, that the question hardly need be asked.

Other responses, by contrast, dramatized our reasons for asking the question and the theoretical cleavage noted above. One respondent expressed deep concern about the assumptions of the question: "Your question about process-oriented theory alarms me. Do not try to pour human clay into ceramic molds." Another attacked process theorists: "Process people are arrogant and simple-minded." Still another condemned the products of process teaching: "Process-trained students turn out feeble, emotional junk, not well-reasoned and stylish essays. The content of their essays is pathetic." An experienced instructor passed summary judgment on two decades of work on process theory:

I have been dismayed at the practical results of the process orientation over the past fifteen or so years. It simply has not produced better writers. We need to return to a writing-centered, not student-centered pedagogy.

Another response left us chastened:

The "process" people, not well trained in literature and classical rhetoric, should be kept out if possible. They are subjective, romantic, anti-intellectual, and arrogant, as a rule.

Two other responses indicate the problems still facing this twenty year-old "new" pedagogy. The first answered the question about process theory succinctly: "Can’t answer. Don’t know what you mean." The second was even more economical: "What is ‘process-oriented’ theory?"

While many responses to questions about theory grow from current debates and competing ideas about rhetoric and pedagogy, others betray the impatience of writing directors who are prevented from staffing advanced courses with instructors trained in any contemporary theory. Some respondents noted the tendency in their departments to give advanced courses to senior faculty averse to teaching freshman writing. Asked what changes they would like to see in the teaching of advanced writing in their departments, several directors gave answers typified by this comment from a western state university: "I would like to see it put entirely in the hands of the rhet/comp faculty."

Whatever view one takes of the complex and delicate politics of assignment of staff, several responses attest to the benefits of contemporary
pedagogy in advanced courses. A director at a public university in New England adopted a "textless, tutorial, revision-centered" method eight years ago. Since then, "students fill every section we offer; other departments send their majors to us for final polish. Faculty like to teach it." Clearly, advanced composition courses thrive at that institution.

Areas of Agreement

Despite the problems we have indicated, broad areas of agreement emerge from responses to the questionnaire. First, the relationship between writing across the curriculum (WAC) and advanced exposition is generally perceived as positive. Some do see a conflict, as does a respondent from a private college in New England who mused, "I think there is room for advanced composition courses distinct from WAC courses. I realize this is increasingly coming to be a minority position." Two other comments, on the other hand, are more representative. A western director saw WAC as "broadening the base, not subsuming our courses." A chairperson from a midwestern institution argued, "Surprisingly there is an even greater demand for advanced composition courses than before WAC." This relationship requires more investigation. Asked if a special area remains for traditional courses in advanced exposition as WAC programs develop, many respondents answered affirmatively but declined to define that special area.

Another frequent area of agreement urges the inclusion of rhetorical theory, ancient and modern, in the student's encounter with advanced exposition. Undeniably, as previous quotations illustrate, there is some resistance to theory in any of its contemporary manifestations. One instructor at a private college in the south denounced our survey and the recent direction of the profession for this injection of theory: "Your excessive concern with 'theory' is symptomatic of turning away from writing to ephemeral ideas about writing." More frequently, however, respondents said that they already introduce their advanced students to formal writing theory.

A third emerging consensus stresses the need for advanced composition faculty trained in contemporary and classical theory. One director yearned for "more informed faculty." A western university requires that all instructors in advanced composition classes be composition specialists. Still other institutions require that advanced writing instructors themselves be published writers. Such comments suggest a trend toward using trained and experienced writers, as opposed to faculty for whom advanced courses are rewards for long service or high rank. One director, for example, noting that the course is taught by a senior American literature specialist, hastened to point out that the professor is also a good writer who has published on more than just his academic specialization.

Finally, many respondents admitted their uncertainties about what constitutes "advanced" writing. Several mused thoughtfully about that designation. An instructor at a California school wrote, "Advanced might mean much
fuller engagement with processes, or more experienced in the composing role, or able to participate more fully in a writing community, or even able to engage in a writing community that continues past the class." An instructor from the midwest would emphasize "what Flower calls 'reader-based prose' over 'writer-based prose.'" Some stressed attention to style and grace as the hallmark of an advanced course. Others regarded the turn to argumentation as the demarcation between freshman writing and advanced discourse. A recurrent emphasis was the development of audience-awareness as the central feature of advanced instruction. A writing director from Missouri, for example, granted that her course shares the "amorphous quality of its ilk across the nation," but decided that "the role of audience and purpose becomes crucial."

Clearly, our survey unearthed a variety of problems and patterns in advanced general writing courses. It also uncovered little genuine conviction about what these courses should do. While we recognize that what we have gathered is more often opinion than hard data about classroom performance, we can see in these survey responses a series of major issues calling for more professional dialogue. Among those issues is the very survival of the advanced exposition course which aims itself not at the specific audiences of specialized advanced courses but at the broad audience necessary to public discourse in a democratic society. Truly empowered students speak and write not only within a discipline but within a public forum, to a myriad of issues. Writing in College English, Chris Anderson has argued that in the expository essay, "we can accomplish at least the pleasure of discourse on important ideas" (307). We concur. The advanced exposition course should continue to enable students to join that discourse and to enhance their pleasure in doing so.

Works Cited


Clarion University
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