**The Writing Program Bulletin 4/5/07**

**Quotes of the Week:**

Those of us who have been doomed to read manuscripts written in an examination room...have found the work of even good scholars disfigured by bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions. Everyone who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges has known men who could not write a letter describing their own Commencement without making blunders which would disgrace a boy 12 years old. (46)

--“An Answer to the Cry for More English” (1879), Harvard University professor Adams Sherman Hill, qtd. in *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College*: 1875-1925, John C. Bereton, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995

A great outcry has been made lately, on every side, about the inability of the students admitted to Harvard College to write English clearly and correctly….The schools are to-day paying more attention to composition than they did twenty or thirty years ago; and yet, notwithstanding this increased study and practice, the writing of schoolboys has been growing steadily worse . . . . With all this practice in writing and time devoted to English, why do we not obtain better results?

--"The English Question," James Jay Greenough, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1893

Recently, I've heard several people from different departments express concern about the quality of student writing, and specifically, whether transformation has perhaps had a negative effect because we no longer require a writing class for all incoming students. There are many conversations that we could have about this issue, and many that we should and no doubt **\*will\*** have in future. In the meantime, however, I'd like to offer just a few thoughts for everyone's consideration, whether you're generally happy with your students' writing or not. Here are five points for reflection. They're in response to a range of comments I've heard over the semester, but presented here in no particular order:

1. Despite high SAT scores, students are still 18, 19, 20, and 21 years old. They are young, and although they may know correct usage (even if they can’t verbalize the “rule”), they won't always proofread. That's a matter of discipline, habit, and motivation. Moreover, students simply may not have the life experience to understand the conventions and rhetoric appropriate to all kinds of writing situations. They're here to learn this, among many other things. Keep in mind, too, that regardless of whether they are computer and tech savvy, they read less on average than most previous generations due to the array of other forms of entertainment and ways to spend time. Less reading = less familiarity with models of good writing.

2. Are your expectations realistic? Decide what kinds of writing you expect to be perfect and what kinds of writing are OK if they contain minor mistakes. I myself write daily in a journal. I often write fragments. I even occasionally (!) use their when I mean they're, despite my Ph.D. in English. The **\*purpose\*** of this writing is not publication; it is to explore ideas, and if there are portions I want to develop, I then expand, elaborate, and polish them. Sometimes this difference is called "writerly" versus "readerly" writing. The first is done for the writer to get ideas down on the page; the second is done for
readers so that the ideas are accessible, persuasive, etc.

Some kinds of writing assignments (often called write-to-learn assignments) need not produce stylistically perfect prose ready for publication in The New Yorker or The Journal of Applied Microbiology. They may serve other, VERY important purposes. You are not neglecting your responsibility as a professor if you do not "correct" this prose. However, you should make two things explicit to students:

a) They should develop the habit of proofreading anything they submit (even if it's "informal" writing) simply out of pride, satisfaction, thoroughness, and the good practice it will afford them in catching minor errors.

b) They may indeed take some of this material and develop it for more formal writing, and at that later stage, they will be expected to revise their prose so that it is effective, clear, polished, and error-free.

*\*Note, if you have a student who consistently cannot compose coherent sentences in standard English, please contact me*.

3. Writing is not separate from content; it's not a skill that can be mastered first (in a vacuum?) and then be applied in all future situations. We are teaching students how to think (often in our disciplinary context) and we express complex thinking in and through writing. The two are not discrete. Therefore, if a student seems to be writing "poorly," it may be an indication that they are simply struggling with new concepts.
4. Are your assignments engaging? Do they provoke students to think about and apply ideas in relevant ways? I'm sorry if this question offends anyone, but I have seen a fair share of assignments over the years (at other institutions) which students see as nothing more than "busy work." I always advise faculty: design assignments that will produce papers that you want to read!

5. At a recent conference, I heard about a study that tried to examine the extent to which students are able to transfer what they gained in a first year composition course to both general education and major courses. The answer? Transfer is a difficult thing to measure! However, one thing the study did discover is that for transfer to happen at all, students need to encounter a lot of writing in their other courses. The drop off in numbers of writing assignments in the sophomore year at this institution was striking, followed by an even more striking spike in assignments in the junior year. Too much time had passed for students to be able to transfer what they'd gained in their first year. Motivation and engagement in the material also played a key role. In other words, if students were not engaged in their writing, they didn't put much effort into it, and it therefore may have seemed as if they didn't have good writing skills.

Again, I welcome your ideas and concerns, and look forward to future dialogues about how we can all work toward this important learning outcome. I also invite you to register for this year's Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking workshop, funded through an AFT Career Development grant, which will be held on Monday and Tuesday, May 14th & 15th, from 8:30-4:30. The workshop is free, and lunch is provided. See <http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/index.html>.

It's facilitated by an experienced Bard Associate, and uses hands-on activities to allow participants to explore ways to effectively incorporate writing into disciplinary courses. I attended back in 2005, and I can honestly say that it was one of the best workshops I've been to: stimulating, supportive, and fun. I still use many of the techniques I learned there, and it was a wonderful way to interact with colleagues, share ideas, discuss challenges, problem-solve, etc.

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