

Abstract. Practice in a small curriculum could have an impact college-wide by posing challenges to widely held beliefs and conventional wisdom. Community College of Philadelphia Honors faculty make recommendations for both individual and wide-ranging pedagogical changes that offer the possibility of transforming college writing from a one-department enterprise into a school-wide written public dialogue.

Everywhere the complaint is the same: “College students these days just can’t write – and they can’t read either.” At Community College of Philadelphia the response to this problem has been to multiply the number of English Composition and Reading courses, sections, and faculty that the students are required to encounter before they are allowed to move forward in their curricula. Thus a student may spend two or three semesters in remedial Composition and Reading classes, followed by two or three semesters of English 101, followed by one or two semesters of English 102, followed by.... And so it is that Community College of Philadelphia’s English Department has 130 full time and 200 part time faculty. Such numbers reflect both the seriousness of the problem and the magnitude of the College’s response.

In the face of such numbers, to suggest that Community College of Philadelphia’s relatively tiny and isolated Honors Curriculum has anything to contribute to the problem of teaching writing and reading to typical Community College of Philadelphia students may well seem the height ofchutzpah. After all, widespread belief holds that Honors has skimmed the cream off the top: surely such an elite program has little to say to the rest of the College.

Perhaps. But a perusal of the first papers written by entering Honors students would cause most observers to drop all talk

Recent Changes in Honors Writing Instruction: Do They Make Any Difference to the Rest of Us?

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of “cream” and “elite.” Yes, entering Honors students have done fairly well in their Community College of Philadelphia courses – earning B’s or better – but their writing at the start of Honors could be taken for that of fair-to-middling high school students. Their writing at the end of a year in Honors, however, often could be taken to have been done by talented college juniors, seniors, or even graduate students. So what happens to students in Community College of Philadelphia’s Honors Curriculum and how it happens might well be of interest to all faculty concerned with moving Community College of Philadelphia students from where we find them to where we and they want them to be.

Writing in Honors: The Old Scandals

Since it was founded in 1979, Community College of Philadelphia’s Honors Program (now Honors Curriculum) has scandalized many Community College of Philadelphia faculty members by having most of its writing instruction conducted not by English faculty but by the entire Honors faculty. Though Honors students regularly encounter English Department faculty in various writing instruction venues, they are even more likely to encounter professors of Sociology, History, Philosophy, and Art History. Composition textbooks and the modes of instruction associated with them have been entirely missing. Little or no attention has been paid to such Composition staples as five-paragraph themes, thesis

statements, topic sentences, and modes of paragraph development. Instead, writing in Honors has proceeded on a decentralized writing-across-the-curriculum model, with assignments and the practices associated with assignments driven more by concerns of the academic disciplines than by typical interests of Composition instructors. The standard writing-across-the-curriculum line to the effect that professors in disciplines outside the English Department have much to offer to a writing program is usually heard more often than it is practiced, but for at least two decades student instruction in writing in the Honors Program has been guided equally – maybe even primarily – by non-Composition-teachers.

From the very beginning at the heart of Honors has been concern with developing students' competencies with academically rigorous reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Every Honors faculty member, whatever her or his academic discipline, participates in that; it is so fundamental a matter that it can't reasonably be thought to be passed off to a specialist. Densely packed, and rhetorically sensitive thought is largely what academics is all about, so that is where the Honors faculty have focused their attention -- obsessively one might think. Everyone who teaches in Honors has learned, to pick texts, to shape lectures and seminar discussions, and to develop writing assignments and practices in such a way that the dense packing of thought and its rhetorical sensitivity is prominently displayed.

Things have changed so much recently -- for reasons that will be discussed later -- that it may be well to appreciate first what the routine in Honors about writing has been for so long. Fairly early in the semester, students receive "The Writing Assignment," a sort of academic call for papers in which some puzzle or problem that has long been the subject of scholarly and academic controversy is presented. The problem on which the call for papers focus is one that

involves a number of texts featured in seminars and lectures early in the semester. In the Spring semester, for instance, a standard assignment has been the puzzle of Achilles's rejection of the embassy in Book IX of *The Iliad*. In the Fall semester, a frequent assignment concerns the survival of Christianity following the attacks by Hume and other Enlightenment figures. For each of these issues -- what really turn out to be complex clusters of issues -- students are tempted toward simple forms of response, which is what one sees in about two or three weeks, when the first version of students' responses to the call for papers is due. And then the fun begins.

- Twice a week for the rest of the semester students are given a paper from one of their peers to read overnight and which will be formally discussed in class.
- The discussion is led by one faculty member with one or two others present and prominently participating.
- The focus of these discussions is primarily rhetoric, so such questions as the following are raised: Who is the appropriate audience for this paper? How is that audience projected to be thinking about the matters taken up by the paper? What particular change in that thinking does the paper attempt to accomplish? What strategies does the paper employ to attempt that effect? What particular features and details of the paper can be analyzed (and in what way) to produce answers to such questions about the paper?

Though students sometimes have conversations with individual faculty about their papers, the primary mode of writing instruction is carried by these writing classes. In them students learn to analyze the

strategies of their peers' papers and then take those analytic skills home to reread, rethink, and rewrite their own papers.

During the course of the semester students write new versions of their papers. Where the first versions tend to be four or so typed pages, later versions are ten or more pages. But the most significant feature of the later versions is not the greater length but a certain kind of increased complexity: the later papers respond to the papers other students have written and to other relevant texts introduced in seminars and lectures throughout the semester. Along the way, the original problem or puzzle often fades away: what started out, for instance, as the puzzle of Achilles's rejection of the embassy becomes a question of just what sort of text *The Iliad* should be taken to be – a record of a culture with particular rules and customs or a primarily literary text with certain purely formal conventions? The interplay of thought in a writing community inevitably is somewhat wild and unpredictable. What Tom or Jill writes in response to what Bill or Harry wrote is very likely to take their papers into denser regions, along more subtle trails, than was dreamed of in the "first draft."

What students take away from all of this is a way of thinking about academic writing and some routines and practices for producing academic writing. That thinking and those routines center on writing modeled dialectically as a *conversation*, that is:

- including in their papers an account of the conversation into which the paper at hand is entering;
- shaping the paper at hand to do some particular thing in that conversation, to have some particular effect on it, and
- in order do to all of that, carefully rereading, rethinking, and rewriting their papers in response to others.

A Small Revolution

Such has been writing instruction in Honors in the 80's, 90's, and into the first decade of this century. It grew like Topsy. There was no grand plan, and the founders would hardly recognize some of the forms that have evolved. But it has been guided by two principles. The first is more an obsession than a principle, and that is that what will matter most to our students becoming significantly better as students is improving their abilities with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Those things don't just happen along the way in Honors; in a very real sense they are what Honors is all about. The second principle is that the faculty are jointly committed to the practices that strengthen student abilities, that responsibility for student progress belongs to the corporate Honors faculty. It is not something vested in one professor, or one department. Every professor involved in Honors has had to change for that to happen; and everyone's learning curve has had to stay steep.

Those principles remain. But two very large recent events have accelerated the evolution of Honors and shifted it from a gradualist to a punctuated mode. One is social/demographic and was anticipated. The other is technological, unanticipated, and simply astonishing.

The social/demographic change is the fact that Honors has been transformed from a program into a curriculum. That brings in its wake new opportunities, but also begets a demand for an increase in faculty members participating in the curriculum. Since Honors has primarily been staffed by a core of 'lifers', who are approaching retirement, the demand for new faculty participation brought with it the imperative to reflectively codify the evolution of Honors practices, so that new faculty can pick up where the older staff left off, rather than imagining they would just invent anew from scratch.

The truly startling change – which will change just about everything about how we teach and how students learn – is the penetration of computer and internet technologies sufficiently far to fundamentally reshape the social and cognitive structures of higher education. Sometimes there really is something new under the sun.

Maybe it takes someone who started his career two-finger typing on mimeograph stencils to really appreciate what it means for a classroom or a class to have student and teacher generated texts produced and re-produced easily and distributed widely.

Of course, professors mostly can be counted on to be content with putting their familiar old wine into the new technological bottles, perhaps thinking “oh good. No more trips to the copy center.” Fair enough, and not to be gainsaid. But this particular new bottle suggests new wine – new audiences for papers, new roles for student and faculty reading and writing, new intellectual structures in courses, and new cognitive forms in the classroom. When history handed us the printing press we didn’t respond by using it just to speed up scribal copying. We used it to change the nature of thought itself, to create the modern world, and the political analogue of the printing press – democracy. During the most recent incunabula, with the full cultural significance of the new communicative technologies lying ahead of us, no one can speak with certainty about what the consequences will finally be. Probably the most we can say with confidence is that it won’t be “same old, same old.”

An awful lot of people have expressed reservations about the impact of the new technologies on print literacy. Certainly the vast hypertext library that is the internet threatens academic literacy, and fascination with images online certainly seems troublesome. So you should not read us as hinting at a wholesale “technology fix” for education. There are more than enough

apostles of technology getting that one wrong. On the other hand, while online chat-rooms would be a clear debasement of the educational currency, some features of even current webcourse technology are pure gold.

The use of computer, internet, and webcourse technology has suggested practices in the Honors Curriculum that were literally impossible using prior print technology, which have strengthened writing instruction dramatically, and which have produced a new role for Composition professors. While writing instruction in Honors has always been strongly decentralized, it has now split into decentralized and centralized components. As before, the decentralized component directly involves all professors from all disciplines. The new ‘centralized’ component is guided directly by members of the English Department, although professors from the other disciplines continue to make ongoing important contributions.

This article is concerned primarily with the implications of the recent changes in the Honors Curriculum for formal Composition instruction, so fine detailing of the decentralized component will have to wait for Part II of this series. However, since some allusion to it will appear later, here is a somewhat sketchy description of it:

In addition to the major writing assignments already mentioned, students now submit weekly essays as online forum submissions to the student forum section of the Honors webcourse. These essays are a minimum of about 500 words, and are made in response to faculty generated questions about an upcoming seminar text. They are read by both students and faculty prior to the seminars, are compiled into a standard printable form and distributed so they can be available for reference during the seminar discussion. These essays are not “graded” individually. Instead, shortly after each seminar, i.e., twice a week, designated faculty members construct and electronically distribute a “global commentary” both on

the student essays and the seminar discussions. These global commentaries attempt to tie together the intellectual challenges of the seminar text, the various ways students met those challenges in their postings, and an account of the intellectual twists and turns of the seminar discussions themselves. Thus students and faculty are engaged in a kind of dialogue, much of it conducted in writing.

For student learning, what this all comprises is a powerful reflective learning arc. First they read a complex text, perhaps influenced by the guidance of some faculty-generated reading and study questions. After that thoughtful reading, and perhaps after informal discussions with their classmates, they write a response to what is usually a somewhat abstract question about the text. Accompanying that activity is the reading of the essay responses of their classmates – with their sometimes dizzying variation. All of this feeds into the seminar discussion of a text, usually mediated by the work of the designated seminar commentators for the day. “Feedback from the professors” takes the form of global commentary. Students are then encouraged to put their own reading of the text, and their own written response to the forum question, into relation to that global commentary – essentially to see themselves from the outside, as purveyors of thought, of theory, and of rhetoric. You will not be surprised to learn – or maybe you will be, since we were taken aback – that over the course of the semester the essays become longer, more careful, more self-conscious, more of just about everything you would want to see if you were an upper division Liberal Arts professor.

The student “forum post” process continues some traditional features of the decentralized Honors writing process and intensifies them:

- Student writing is public. Honors has never modeled its writing project on those traditional composition

classroom practices which embody the reality of ‘teacher as audience’ by the device of designating the teacher as the only real reader.

- Student essays are compiled into a single document. This is easy to do with any widely available webcourse software. Thus every student’s essay is presented back to the class as part of the public package.
- Therefore, any particular student submission is contextualized by other submission and may actually even be a response to other submissions.
- The compilation of essay submissions – and often even individual essay submissions – is often used explicitly by the seminar leaders and even by formal student oral commentators in seminar. Student texts become part of the class text. Students are practiced in the routine rigorous interaction with others in a primarily text-environment.
- Faculty commentaries on student writings tend toward the global rather than the individual, focused on metacommentary rather than practical fix-it-up advice.

The new decentralized writing activity has proven so successful that it has had the additional unintended consequence of opening up space for the intensive study of specifically rhetorical modes of understanding writing, which is carried primarily by members of the English Department in formal composition classes.

A New Role for Composition Teachers

In the Honors Program – even in its prior completely decentralized form – the writing project was always imagined to proceed on a rhetorical model, and in fact almost always involved a careful close classroom reading of some particular lucky

student's paper. Formally, those classroom discussions followed suggestions drawn from a one-page "Reading and Writing Heuristic" that asks a series of questions about various rhetorical dimensions of the text at (audience, the paper's task relative to that audience, relations among ideas in the paper, etc.). The advantage of such general framing is that students are free to discover for themselves exactly what particular rhetorical issues are most relevant to the paper at hand. And of course, since there is no good way to separate the rhetorical features of a text from its theoretical components (what vocabulary it draws on, what theories and theoreticians it invokes, and so on), the pursuit of even so basic a rhetorical issue as what constitutes the rhetorical task of the paper inevitably gave rise to substantive theoretical issues about the nuancing of theoretical positions. The upside of the use of that generalized heuristic is that it provided ample opportunity for the luxuriant density of thought in a paper to be revealed— even to faculty members whose formal training was not in composition but in Sociology, for example. As is usually the case, the downside of that approach is precisely the flip of the upside. Over the course of the semester, discussions would tend to re-tread familiar moves again and again, especially when the faculty were professors perhaps more comfortable with the abstract and theoretical than with the precise rhetorical forms students would benefit from learning.

Once again technology suggested a solution we had not anticipated. As we have already indicated, the "student-forum-essay/seminar-discussion/global-commentary" sequence repeated twice a week took up much of the burden of identifying for students their own, and their classmates' forms of thought, and of self-consciously developing alternatives to them. This opened up curricular space for instruction in rhetorical strategies to be somewhat more formal and rigorous. Also,

the same electronic technologies that make the forum-sequence mechanically easy for everyone, also makes a new writing class sequence easy. Thus, all student drafts of papers are posted by every student in the 'presentations' area of the Honors webcourse, making them all available to everyone. Distributing a paper or two for tomorrow's writing class then turns out to be a matter of sending an email to the class instructing them to print a copy of Jill's second draft. Finally, Composition faculty electronically distribute detailed "prep sheets" to the entire class, which alert them to the specific issues to which they should devote their attention in preparation for the classroom discussion of the paper.

These prep sheets are indeed more focused on the particular paper at hand than is the long-used Reading and Writing Heuristic, but still call on students to think big, to see the paper at hand as a contribution to a increasingly complex conversation, and as one which makes some standard rhetorical moves. To give a flavor of what this means, here, for instance are two excerpts from prep sheets from the Spring 2007 semester.

The first focuses on the title of the student essay at hand (by Andrew Smith), "The Iliad: History, Commentary or Empty Vessel?":

In Chapter 10 of They Say / I Say, Graff and Birkenstein explain that the title of a text is a significant form of metacommentary, lauding it for its ability to tell readers what to expect from a text before they begin to read. Graff and Birkenstein also say that subtitles – which appear on the far side of the academic colon – further explain or elaborate on the main title (127-128). What does the title of Andrew's essay tell you to expect? What does the subtitle explain or elaborate? Having read the text,

were your expectations met? How does the essay support your view?

The discussion that followed this faculty prompt did indeed focus on the title, especially how it signals the essay's tone towards its subject and its audience. A second prep sheet on another student essay (by Ketevan Abutidze) focuses on relations between her essay, the student essay (by Nina Shinn) on which Ketevan's essay comments, and the audience:

Some inside information, perhaps as such not legitimate, but possibly useful: shortly after the visit by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein to an Honors Curriculum Writing Class, Ketevan said to a faculty member: "I know what's wrong with my first draft. It's monologic, not dialogic. I'm not in conversation with anybody." Or words to that effect.

So: is this second draft of Ketevan's paper dialogic? With whom is it in conversation? With Nina Shinn, you say? That might seem obvious. But what exactly is the relation between Nina's paper and Ketevan's? That is, is Ketevan's paper the sort of text that might better have been sent to Nina as a private letter? Or is Ketevan's dialogue with Nina in fact part of a dialogue with some other audience?

The discussion that followed focused on the accuracy, tone, and attitude displayed by Ketevan's essay's handling of Nina's essay.

The disadvantage of the prep sheet system is clear: students are less likely to discover in the essay under discussion important rhetorical issues that the faculty has chosen to ignore and thus not be as likely to discover in their own essays those same issues. But you can't have everything;

sufficient unto the day, etc. Eventually over the course of a semester, all the major rhetorical challenges faced by writers of academic essays are brought into Writing class discussion by the prep sheets.

The Dangers and Rewards of "Templates"

As can be seen from the prep sheet excerpts just above, another new element in Honors, one that helps shape the discussion of rhetoric, is Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's little book *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. This is the first Composition text to be used in the twenty nine year history of the Honors Program and Curriculum. Like the Honors Program from the beginning, and like Graff's *Clueless in Academe*, *They Say / I Say* conceives academic writing as an ongoing dialogue. Like others before them, Graff and Birkenstein invoke Kenneth Burke's account of intellectual life:

You come late. When you arrive, others have preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about.... You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you.... The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (12)

But the *They Say / I Say* approach to getting students into academic dialogues is a surprising one that on the surface would seem inimical to Honors' insistence that students discover for themselves the sentence, paragraph, and essay structures

appropriate to the thoughts they wish to convey: *They Say / I Say* has students practicing a series of “templates” that represent particular “moves,” particular forms of thought characteristic of academic and professional writing. For instance, when having students practice forms appropriate for entering an ongoing debate, *They Say / I Say* has them develop the following template:

*In the discussions of X, one controversial issue has been
 On the one hand,
 argues
 On the other hand, contends
 Others even maintain My own view is (24)*

The strengths and weaknesses of having students develop and play with templates are perhaps evident in this example. On the one hand, students are given patterns that are indeed widely used in academic and professional writing. This giving also requires them to develop (and discover) on their own ideas appropriate for the template at hand and simultaneously for the “content,” the issue, text, conversation at hand.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of having students play with templates may also be immediately apparent: as with any prescribed form (the five-paragraph theme comes to mind), templates can put students in danger of seeing thought as a merely mechanical matter – plugging in this template and that here and there in their essays, giving their readers sleep-producing patchworks. To put this danger another way: templates risk pushing students towards separating language from thought, towards thinking of words as mere surface decorations, rather than the very form thought takes in the mind, in the air, on the page. This danger can be seen in some

possible responses to the last two sentences of the template cited above (“Others even maintain My own view is”): a merely mechanical approach would have students filling in the blanks with ideas that are only *different* from one another but not seriously *related*, in no real conversation with one another, as in “Others even maintain that Achilles is a mere brute. My own view is that Homer is being very poetic in Book IX.” Homer being poetic and Achilles being (or not being) a brute might be ideas related to one another, but to get to real relations between them and beyond merely filling in the blanks, a student would have to help *create* thought, to create a relation between Achilles the brute and Homer the poet.

Such dangers presented by templates can be overcome, the Honors faculty has discovered – in Honors itself and in other classes where Honors faculty have used *They Say / I Say* – by the way the templates are handled. Though some merely mechanical uses of templates by students inevitably occurs early in the semester, when faculty present templates as a way of thinking and talking about writing – especially about forms of thought at the sentence level and the relations between that level and such larger structures as the paragraph and the essay – then the exercise and practice constructing complete templates is turned into rhetorical analysis.

Such analysis has recently taken a new direction in Honors: more than has been the case in the past, students are encouraged to see any student essay (or other text) that they read (or write) as having an underlying *theory*. Such theory is unlikely to be directly expressed in an essay, for an essay’s theory is not a summary of what the essay *says* but rather a brief, unstated, but comprehensive account of what that the essay is trying to *do* and exactly how it sets out to accomplish that. Typically Writing class discussion of a student essay reveals that the essay’s underlying theory about what it is trying to

do to whom and how is only *in formation*, only *beginning to emerge*, a situation students then find to be the case when they return to reread their own essays.

A final change in Honors Writing instruction results from the first four: the practices just described are bringing about an interesting change in faculty / student relations. The Honors faculty has always striven for collegial relations with students: neither buddies nor bosses, but senior colleagues who invite students to join an active intellectual community. Recent changes in Writing instruction and parallel changes in seminar practices (e.g., weekly postings from students and weekly global commentaries from faculty) have not altered those basic collegial relations between students and faculty. But within that basic framework, some things have changed.

Writing. Writing has become not just the subject taught but, more importantly, the means by which students establish and maintain relations among themselves and by which faculty and students develop relations. Students post each week responses to a faculty question about the upcoming seminar text. They read each other's postings, the later postings often commenting on the earlier. The faculty respond to the postings and the seminars in writing, the "global commentaries" that describe the general direction of the conversation and various contributions to it. In their essays students respond to the faculty-generated call for papers but also to each other's essays. The recent addition of faculty-generated prep sheets for discussion of student essays has brought more faculty writing into the conversation.

Back and forth, back and forth: students are encouraged by these routines to see writing as something people do when they take thinking seriously. Thinking becomes a public act in which student writers and faculty writers are in conversation if not as equals, at least as

long-standing and recently-joining participants in the conversation.

Pedagogical Exports from Honors?

Such are the recent changes in the Honors Curriculum. But the question remains: does any of this matter? In these changes, is there any potential benefit for students and faculty in other areas of the College?

The quick answer is no. All the changes arise from a tiny curriculum with its own peculiar character. Wholesale exportation of Honors practices therefore would be not only unpopular, but unwise. But perhaps recent changes in Honors could perform an heuristic role at Community College of Philadelphia, raising questions about teaching and learning useful in other settings.

For some very good reasons Community College of Philadelphia faculty are deeply suspicious of educational reform. Frequently outside the College and occasionally inside, we have seen attempts from above to change what we do in the classroom. Outside, the big example is No Child Left Behind, which, for all its good intentions, has forced K-12 teachers to test constantly, teach to the test, and abandon many of the teaching practices they have in the past found effective. Inside Community College of Philadelphia such administrative-generated reforms as behavioral objectives and assessment have met with serious and often passive but effective resistance. Even curricular reforms initiated by the faculty (e.g., General Studies reform and what was eventually labeled "Dimensional" reform) have met with the same resistance. The gain from this resistance is clear: the preservation of individual faculty autonomy. Likewise, the loss: preservation of individual faculty autonomy. That is, we are each free to do pretty much what we please in our own classrooms, and we are not free to join a collective faculty curricular enterprise, for

the creation of the latter is largely blocked by the power of the former.

Such is not the case with the entire College, of course. Faculty in a number of “vocational” curricula – Art, various Health Sciences, etc. – have created and sustained programs of study marked by a high degree of curricular coherence, deep agreement among the faculty, intense day-to-day cooperation, and a high degree of student success. Individual faculty autonomy, isolation, fragmentation of experience: that is to be found in the lives of the rest of us: English, Math, Social Sciences, Humanities; in short, those who teach “general education” and “service courses.”

Retail Pedagogical Changes

Thus it appears the best Honors has to offer other areas of the College is “retail” change: devices and practices appropriate for individual faculty members who are tweaking the conduct of their courses. One such change is using Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. In their regular classes Honors faculty from various disciplines have been using this little book, as have some English Composition faculty; across the country, the text is one of Norton’s biggest sellers. For good reason, we think. Whether as a supplementary text in a “content” course like Sociology or a central text in a Composition course, Graff / Birkenstein is capable of drawing students towards a more fully conscious experience in both reading and writing academic essays. As noted earlier, the trick here is to present the Graff / Birkenstein templates as they are intended, as something more than fill-in-the-blank exercises, but rather as challenging forms of thought that shape ongoing academic conversations.

A second retail change suggested by recent Honors Curriculum developments is the use of regular, brief electronic (or hard copy) student “postings” on a course’s reading material. Such periodic

commentaries from students on course readings in response to faculty comments and questions about those readings makes *public* (especially if student postings are circulated among classmates) the ways students are thinking about their week-to-week encounters with the ideas that shape the course. The circulation of these postings becomes a major part of the dialogue among students and between students and faculty about the course of study. A truly academic conversation is created. And though it might seem that the electronic circulation of these student and faculty writings is merely more convenient (faster, easier) than hard copy circulation, in fact such electronic circulation turns out to be something new in itself. The quality of the writing, the strength of social / intellectual relations among students and between students and faculty, and the intensity of the conversation all are dramatically changed for the better by the electronic medium. Perhaps the secret here is that the thoughtfulness of written communication is joined with the immediacy of spoken conversation. In any case, something new under the sun.

The faculty’s role in such a conversation constitutes the third retail change that might be adopted and adapted from recent Honors Curriculum practices: “global commentaries” on student writings. In some ways global commentaries are like a common practice in many college courses: the professor returns students’ exams and spends at least a few minutes describing how the class as a whole did on the exam, which questions presented what kinds of challenges, and how various responses dealt with those challenges. Often such faculty presentations go well beyond indicating merely what the right and wrong answers are and instead explore how professionals in the course’s academic discipline think about such problems as those that appear on the exam. Such is the spirit of “global commentaries,” but there are some important differences between them and

post-exam comments by the professor. To begin with, global commentaries are part of a conversation among students about readings in the course; they are the faculty's contribution to that conversation. Secondly, global commentaries stand back from the conversation and characterize it in a more abstract way than most students new to the particular course of study are capable. Finally, and most importantly, global commentaries are *written* communication, signaling, again, to students that when members of an academic community are truly serious about thinking, they *write*. And how they write and what they write displays the modes of thought characteristic of the academic discipline to which the course at hand belongs. The writing by the faculty invites writing by the students. And so the conversation continues.

Chutzpah Returns: Wholesale Changes

Probably, as suggested earlier, we should be satisfied with recommending individual, retail changes in pedagogy, but the temptation to speculate about wider, wholesale curricular changes is tempting. And we hereby fall into that temptation.

Such curriculum changes as we recommend do not come in the form of proposals but rather as questions, challenges even, concerning widely-held beliefs about Writing instruction in community colleges in particular and in the first two years of college in general.

One surprising feature of widely-held beliefs about Writing instruction in the early years of college is that they are grounded in two contradictory underlying agreements: first, that college students these days just can't read and write and, second, that in this area of instruction we should keep doing pretty much what we always have been doing. If, therefore, our students don't get it, there must be something irreparably wrong with them (bad high

school education, anti-intellectual cultural background, laziness, too much TV, etc., etc.). The idea that *we* might think differently about what we are doing sadly takes a bad turn when it too often mirrors these understandable but misguided characterizations of students. Faculty, it is said, haven't been properly trained to deal with "these students"; faculty are either too attached to "irrelevant" graduate school intellectualism or are so burned out that they have given up on offering college level instruction; faculty have become too comfortable in their routines; and faculty seek their intellectual and cultural engagement far away from the pale intellectual culture of teaching introductory courses decade after decade. As important as these psychological and cultural half truths may be, they get in the way of our thinking *institutionally* about how Community College of Philadelphia serves the students who walk through our doors.

One strongly held belief to be challenged by past and present practices in Honors concerns *who* should be teaching writing (and reading) in the first two years of college. Both inside and outside the English Department the received wisdom on this question is: the English Department. According to this view, the role of English professors is to teach correct writing, which writing students will then deploy on those rare occasions when professors in other departments ask them to put ideas on paper. But that system hasn't worked. For all the multiple courses and sections of Composition (and Reading), students are still found to be not able to write and read at a college level. And so in many courses little or no writing is required, and reading requirements have long since been watered down. The challenge to this way of thinking presented by Honors practices is this: perhaps everybody should be teaching writing (and reading). On this model, everywhere students turn they should encounter instruction in how to write and

read in each of the academic disciplines in which they find themselves. Such instruction would not focus on correctness (though professors in all disciplines should insist on students following such standards of correctness with which they in fact are already familiar), but rather on those ways of thinking characteristic of the academic discipline at hand.

Such a way of thinking challenges another widely-held belief: that learning to write in college should be thought of as a gaining of a set of discrete skills which naturally fall into a particular sequence (e.g., correct words, correct sentence patterns, correct paragraph structure, correct essay organization). Perhaps throwing students into the deep end of the pool makes more sense; perhaps that immersion will not result in drowning but rather in a rapid gaining of language skills similar to that experienced by young learners of a new language who find themselves suddenly surrounded by speakers (and in this case writers and readers) of that new language.

Yet another belief that this way of thinking might challenge concerns relations between students and faculty in the area of writing instruction: students write and faculty correct. An alternative relation would have students write and faculty write. Here the faculty writing is in response to student writing but not primarily in the corrective mode, but rather the descriptive, as in: here are some patterns of student response to the recently-raised issue that has in fact been much discussed in this field of study. And here is how those patterns of response fit into that ongoing academic conversation.

With the rise of Distance Education, webcourses, etc., many faculty have come to believe, often with good reason, that computer-based instruction indeed puts greater *distance* between students and between professors and students. But it doesn't have to be that way. As described earlier, Honors has discovered (stumbled

into) an electronic means of closing the distance between student and student, between students and professors. That is, the student electronic postings in response to course readings, postings read by students and professors alike, the latter of whom respond to those and other student writings and to class discussions with written global commentaries, draws all the participants into a truly academic conversation. Students do not become pals through such communication; they become the newest members of an academic and professional community.

That such faculty global commentaries in response to student writing are collective rather than individual -- and respond to patterns in the conversation rather than to particular individual contributors to that conversation -- points to a final deep belief to be challenged by current Honors Writing instruction practices. That belief, of course, is that Writing instructors' main task is to give regular and detailed individualized written (sometimes spoken, as in "student conferences") responses to individual student writings. For Composition teachers in particular this belief is the most sacred of sacred cows. To shift the religious metaphor somewhat, our identity as Writing instructors is very much tied to martyrdom: we, unlike the heathen, are who we are because of the stacks of student papers we wade through day by day, decade by decade. That is the cross we have taken up. To put aside or at least to seriously diminish the role of individualized responses to student writing in favor of more generalized responses -- such as faculty global commentaries and Writing class prep sheets described earlier -- would indeed threaten the martyr identity of us English Composition teachers, even as it opens up a way of generating and responding to student writing in every academic discipline, a way that might well avoid the taking on such martyrdom.

Finally, what these challenges to some conventional wisdom have to offer both English and “content” course faculty is the possibility of transforming college

writing from a private, one-department enterprise into a school-wide written public dialogue.

Some examples of student forum compilations and faculty “global commentary” are posted online. A set centering on Gorgias' "Encomium to Helen” can be found at http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/mspear/viewpoints/gorgias_discussion_compile.pdf for the student forum and http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/mspear/viewpoints/global_commentary_on_gorgias.pdf for the faculty global commentary. A different set, focusing on an article by Rudolf Bultmann can be found at http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/mspear/viewpoints/transcription_bultmann_forum.pdf for the student forum compilation, and http://faculty.ccp.edu/faculty/mspear/viewpoints/global_commentary_bultmann.pdf for the faculty's global commentary.

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