

EVERYBODY'S COMPOSITION PROGRAM

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Two years ago the University of Minnesota, Morris decided to revise its freshman English program. Certainly that's nothing new; freshman English has been revised, abbreviated, done away with, innovated, strangled and rejuvenated by just about every English department everywhere. We read a great deal in journals about the successes and/or failures of many courses within these new or revised programs. Seldom, however, do we read about the successes and/or failures of composition programs. Perhaps some account of just how we went about devising our new program, some description of what that program entails, and some very brief remarks on the success and/or failure of our program will be useful to other struggling program revisers. In any case, our staff would welcome an interchange of program ideas - including some sharing of frustrations and joys. Misery can often be relieved by another's bright idess.

We began our revision by assembling a list of Exemplary Ideals. In other words, we tried to decide just what kind of composition experiences would prove useful to our students. Morris is a four-year liberal arts branch of the University of Minnesota with a student body of approximately two thousand. Our students come for the most part from rural Minnesota; they are relatively bright but, especially in English and composition, they are usually the products of somewhat rigidly structured high school courses. They are accustomed to approaching composition as a process which can easily be reduced to a sequence of school-marmish procedures.

We hoped to find a program, a group of related courses, that would break down our student's rigid attitude without destroying his ability to communicate effectively. To return to those Exemplary Ideals. After much paring and refining, we dedided on the following:

1. Flexibility and the Freedom to Experiment: we would need a program that encouraged the discovery of fresh forms and styles, styles which a particular student, given rigid background training, might not discover without an experimental environment. Every student, as the linguists tell us, has a wealth of everyday talk in him. We hoped our students would become conscious of their language, in an environment free of social and academic censure.
2. The Discovery of Form in Freedom: we would need a program that, after it had helped the student to discover the

richness of his language, would assist him in finding a suitable mode, a suitable form, for any particular context.

3. Provide the Opportunity to Analyze and Write About Various Kinds of Language: we would require a program that offered the opportunity to read, write and discuss imaginative and discursive language and the language of the media. Students should be able to draw from their own culture, as well as established composition "masterpieces," in preliminary reading.

We used these Exemplary Ideals to produce the following sequence of four courses. Each student is required to take two of the four courses: the introductory course and one of the three advanced courses. I shall include an account of the pedagogy and goals of each course and conclude with some brief remarks on how our program has failed or succeeded.

Writing From Experience (English 10)

This is our introductory composition course; every student is required to begin his composition sequence with "Writing from Experience." In this course we provide a workshop experience for students who have varying interests, and varying attitudes toward writing. We limit the course to twenty-two students and encourage instructors to be flexible in their arrangement of class meetings. We hope that smaller group meetings and conferences can become a standard procedure in English 10. English 10 asks the student to draw from his own experience, his own culture, in whatever he writes. We spend a great deal of time working with persona and the perceptual process in the hope that we can instill in our students a greater sense of drama and a more precise use of detail. We encourage role-playing and a consciousness of one's writing personality as compared to one's oral personality. The instructor in English 10 is a diagnostician - he analyzes writing problems in conference, contributes his opinions to class discussions, suggests methods of improvement and generally encourages students to experiment with many styles and forms. As a staff we wanted to avoid penalizing one student for a faulty English background or for inadequacies in any particular aspect of writing. On the other hand, we also wanted to avoid rewarding those students who had developed a flair for certain kinds of writing. As a result, we made English 10 a non-graded, credit-only course; a course in which students would be free to experiment with various styles, modes and subject-matters, free from any form of academic censure. We hoped to have engineers writing creative narratives, physical education majors writing poetry and future English majors trying their hand at a technical paper.

English 11 approaches the problems of teaching persuasive writing from several related perspectives. The course includes a basic review of traditional rhetorical principles and applies these principles to contemporary polemical writings. This class should also attempt to develop new perspectives, rhetorical perspectives which lend themselves to fruitful application to the non-verbal language of contemporary media, especially the film and the spoken word. In general, this course aims to transfer traditional rhetorical skills - both in reading and writing - to a contemporary language environment. This course sharpens the expository and argumentative skills of students, while recognizing that such skills must continually be adapted to meet the needs which are produced by a changing language environment.

Writing About Literature (English 12)

English 12 uses literature as experience or subject matter for writing. The course is not a standard introduction to the techniques of literary criticism, nor is it a standard introduction to Literary Masterpieces. English 12 encourages the student to organize and evaluate his responses to imaginative writing, to try his hand at creative writing, and to relate his literary experiences to his own life. Readings should include imaginative "classics" and examples of imaginative language drawn from student culture - including rock lyrics, contemporary poetry, popular novels and advertising. Some time should be allowed for extended analysis of a contemporary artist. Writing assignments should be creative as well as analytical.

Special Problems and Composition (English 13)

English 13 encourages students to approach composition through a specific area of subject-matter of a particular thematic perspective. Subject-matter and theme can be chosen by the instructor or by a group of students in consultation with an instructor. The early weeks of the course might be devoted to definition of subject; the middle weeks to gathering information and arguing different perspectives on the subject; the final weeks to organizing and writing a final paper on the subject. The course should include workshop discussions and individual conferences on various aspects of the subject as well as individualized presentations, by instructor and students, related to the subject. Writing should include practice assignments in which students experiment with different points of view and different styles. The final paper might be a formal research paper; it might be a relatively informal "position" paper in which the student reflects his opinions at a particular stage in his thinking. Hopefully, the course will offer a creative perspective on the discovery, arrangement and presentation of in-

formation and ideas as they are gathered during extended study of a particular subject.

Final Remarks

Our program has succeeded in providing two opportunities that we now believe are essential for our students. First, the program provides the opportunity to take an introductory composition course (English 10) which is directed toward the solving of general compositional problems - problems that confront a writer regardless of his special interests or talents. Our English 10 students are experimenting; they are trying out personas, modes and styles they might have otherwise avoided. The course has developed into a functional and effective introductory experience in composition. Their fears and inhibitions, their belief that they really have nothing to say, seems to diminish after they have experienced the flexible, workshop atmosphere of English 10.

Our program also provides the student with the opportunity to choose among a variety of courses (English 11, 12 and 13) which reflect a variety of perspectives and subject-matters. The combination of introductory workshops and advanced courses seems to please at least a majority of our students. Students are able to choose the kind of writing course they prefer after they have been exposed to a variety of styles and techniques in the introductory course. As a result, they are usually more highly motivated and their performances in the advanced courses are subsequently improved.

Where, then, has our program been deficient? We seem to have failed, at least in some cases, to provide the necessary skills for the successful transfer of students from our introductory writing workshop to the more specialized courses in the program. The freedom and flexible format of English 10 sometimes produce students who are, at least initially, stifled by the more structured approaches of English 11, 12 and 13. We have attempted to rectify this deficiency by preparing the students, during the final weeks of English 10, for the formal problems in the advanced courses. We begin to discuss problems of form - organization, invention, and arrangement and some elementary rhetorical principles - and to apply at least a few of these strategies to the experimental writing produced earlier in the introductory course. We by no means force students to apply specific rhetorical forms; we merely suggest in class discussion conferences and workshops the possible usefulness of a particular rhetorical structure. Most students seem to find these suggestions more palatable when they are not given them in outline form (say as in a classical rhetoric book) and they usually adopt such suggestions only when they become a natural development within the process of composing.

We found yet another deficiency developing in English 10. Like most composition workshops, ours needs resource materials, materials other than textbooks and printed matter, to use as catalysts for writing assignments and discussion. We hoped to have students use their own experience and their own culture as subject matter; yet, we wanted them to learn improved methods of observation, to learn to "see" their experience in ever more complex ways. We have developed a short film library (no film is longer than twenty minutes) which has proven indispensable in solving our resource problem. The films bring experience into the classroom; they allow for precise discussion and detailed writing about problems closely related to student experience. The camera, in a sense, becomes a metaphor for the pen. The organizational principles and perspective of the filmmaker are valuable metaphors for the student writer. The short films, used in correlation with reproductions of paintings, tapes of interviews and sound tracks, helps us to bring student experience into the classroom for discussion and writing.

We are not euphoric. Our program occasionally has failed to meet our needs. We know that our attempt to combine the best of the contemporary and the traditional may result in our developing a program which combines the worst of both. But our meagre successes do encourage us to believe that with constant revision and refinement we may yet produce "Everybody's Composition Program." A composition program which meets the needs of inexperienced writers while allowing every student the opportunity to develop his skills in whatever direction he chooses.

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