

Excerpt from a 'Proposal for developing the first-year curriculum in Hispanic Studies', *Josep-Anton Fernàndez, 2002*

Developing thinking and writing: Writing in the Disciplines

The place of student writing development within mainstream academic practice is problematic for a number of reasons:

- An excessive focus on the concept of writing as a *product* (the exam, the essay) rather than as a *process* prevents us from seeing the links between writing, thinking and learning.
- The students do not have a clear idea of what is expected of them in terms of writing and thinking, and are left to deal with what Theresa Lillis calls 'the institutional practice of mystery': they have to guess what they are supposed to do, and more often than not they get it wrong.
- We tend to think that it's not our job to teach writing. However, *the teaching of writing is central to the learning of the discipline*, because the intellectual exchange into which we are introducing our students takes place for the most part through writing, and it is through the medium of writing that most of the assessment is done.
- We tend to think of the teaching of writing as a *remedial* task. However, even the brightest, most gifted writers among our students need to practice and hone their cognitive and expressive abilities. Writing is *not just a technical skill; it is an integral part of learning*.

By contrast, WiD proposes that writing development should spread across all facets of the teaching and learning experience and that it should be embedded in the teaching of each discipline. WiD regards writing as a complex process integrally related to thinking. While working within the specific parameters of each discipline is one of its essential principles, WiD acknowledges that curriculum change depends on scholarly exchange among teachers, not only within but also across disciplines. Thus, WiD is not only about developing skills, but also about making links: it aims at helping students make connections (between different parts of a course, and between courses, for example); and it helps teachers make connections — with students and with each other. What experience in other institutions (mainly in the USA) shows is that WiD leads to other reforms in pedagogy, curriculum, and administration.

In practice, a WiD course would typically include some of the following characteristics:

- The course carries a title similar to any other, 'normal' content course (it is in fact a content course), but it is labelled 'writing-intensive' and the description mentions the development of writing abilities.
- Writing development is the backbone of the course. The course is organised around a coherent assignment sequence, which is the result of careful planning of tasks with thought-through objectives. The content is 'dressed around' the skeleton provided by the writing objectives and planning. Readings are selected in function of the tasks students are asked to do.
- The course has less content and more practical work than ordinary courses. Coverage of content has to be limited to allow sufficient time and mental space to writing and thinking. This is not a problem: the syllabus of a course is always a selection of the knowledge available in its area, and a WiD course is simply making an alternative

selection. The content not covered in class will be made up for by the students thanks to a better use of the material that is covered (much emphasis is placed on reading comprehension) and to independent research.

- The course invites the students to see themselves and their teacher as writers. It aims at showing the students the role of writing in the production of knowledge and in academic exchange within the discipline. It aims at helping students find their own voice as writers.
- Writing practice in the course typically includes: short formative writing tasks; exploratory and reflective work that develops the students' voice and their sensitivity to context and purpose; opportunities for peer-review and rewriting.

My own experience of teaching a WiD course during the last couple of years is extremely positive. 'Catalan Culture: History, Language, Art' (HSP/657) provides an overview of 20th-century Catalan history, art, cultural movements, sociolinguistics, and politics. It is open to Y1 students only; last year it had a ceiling of 12 students, and this year it was raised to 16 (these, incidentally, are the largest Y1 groups I have ever had; there is clearly a demand for this kind of course).

The course deals with the preliminary stages of writing (reading, thinking, research by enquiry, planning and organising ideas, structuring a text). Revision and rewriting are fully integrated into the mechanics of the course and the assessment method: students write one short essay (1,250 words) that is peer-reviewed, re-drafted, and re-submitted (only then it is formally marked). There is an important reflective element: students keep a writing journal and are asked to send me email. Exercises can be classified in three groups: warm-ups at the start of class; short writing tasks, either to do in class or as homework; and longer, assessed essays.

Assessment is by coursework only, and it consists of several components: a 2,000-word essay, independently produced (50%); a 1,250-word essay, peer-reviewed, re-drafted and re-submitted (20%); critical review of another student's essay (15%); writing journal and selection of short writing tasks (15%). (This is just one possible method of assessment; there are other, less complicated models!)

The results have been in general very positive: students become more confident and aware of their weaknesses and strengths; they become much more aware of audience and argument; they understand better why plagiarism is a problem; they produce clearer, better structured essays which take less time to mark; above all, they become independent learners who are more likely to use library and other resources on their own initiative.

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