INSTRUCTION at ILLINOIS

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Writing center to teach how to incorporate writing into courses

By Kevin Lund

The general education requirement of two semesters of composition has yet to be implemented, but the Center for Writing Studies is ready to help faculty members introduce writing across the curriculum into their courses.

In addition, the center provides tutorial help to students through the Writer's Workshop, and is developing a multidisciplinary graduate program in rhetoric and composition.

Gail Hawisher, a former UI graduate student and university associate in rhetoric, in August became director of the center and professor of English. Previously, she taught at Purdue and Illinois State universities.

"What we're trying to do with the writing-across-the-curriculum program is show faculty members that writing can be used to enhance their students' learning," Hawisher said.

"When faculty members say that our students can't write, some of that is because the students haven't mastered the subject matter.

"Oftentimes, when we think of writing, we think of it in terms of punctuation, usage, all under the rubric of what we might call grammar," she said. "One of the things that writing across the curriculum wants to stress is that writing also is a way of making knowledge and that it's not restricted to professionals. Students can make knowledge – inform, develop new ideas, synthesize subject matter in a course they are taking – through writing. They are capable of discovering ideas through this process."

The center is planning writing-across-the-curriculum workshops, for which each participating faculty member will receive a $1,000 stipend.

"We can show professors that by having the students do five-minute writings – such as to write about one thing they found interesting in their readings the night before or, at the end of class, to summarize the major points made in class – we find the students can synthesize the material of the course better.

In the writing-across-the-curriculum workshops, Hawisher said, they will stress "writing to learn."

"The professors will learn of this concept of writing to learn. They will tell us something about what it means to write in their particular disciplines. We will help them with making assignments, creating the syllabus; we'll help them in as many ways as we can."

Working directly with students is the center's Writer's Workshop, which opened in mid-September 1989 as the Writing Clinic. The name change reflects a different way of looking at the students who come for help, said the workshop's new director, Michael Pemberton.

"We call it the 'workshop' because we work *with* students rather than calling it a 'clinic,' where we help sick students," Pemberton said. "I think that's an important distinction to make."

Pemberton, a recent doctoral graduate from the University of California at San Diego, also is the associate director of the center and a professor of English.

The workshop, located in Room 251 of the Undergraduate Library, is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and 6 to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday; and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Although the workshop is primarily for undergraduates, Pemberton said, its staff – 13 graduate students in English, linguistics and English as an international language – also has worked with some graduate students and faculty members.

"The tutors focus most particularly on higher-order problems, such as focus, development and organization," he said.

They also can help with grammar, syntax and mechanics, "and whether or not a person is using a comma correctly or incorrectly," Pemberton said. "If there are students who come in who have severe grammar problems, we'll try to deal with those to some extent. But for the most part, we're concerned with the higher-order problems.

"A lot of the research has shown that students who exhibit a lot of grammatical and mechanical problems oftentimes are doing so because they're struggling with the content of the material," he said. "If we can help them get a clearer sense of what it is they're trying to say, and how to develop their ideas, a number of those sorts of lower-order problems will disappear almost by themselves."

One of the basic philosophies behind the workshop is that it is important for students to get a response from an audience if their writing is to improve.

"In the workshop, we are not there to judge, or to evaluate, or to point out errors, per se, in a student composition, as much as we are there to be a sounding board," he said. "We can provide some assistance and help them to find new ways that they can look at what they've written and restructure it and turn it into something that they really want it to be."

The third element of the Center for Writing Studies is the development of a multidisciplinary graduate program in rhetoric and composition. Such a program would complement the other two components of the center, Hawisher said.

"By taking a series of courses, students working on doctorates in English, speech communication or related fields could emerge with a concentration in rhetoric and composition," she said.

The center also is sponsoring a lecture series this semester. Upcoming lectures, scheduled for 3 to 5 p.m. in 314 Lincoln Hall, are:

•Tuesday, Arthur Young, Clemson University, "The Writing/Thinking Connection."

•March 5, Joseph Williams, University of Chicago.

•April 2, Michael Joyce, Jackson Community College, Jackson, Mich.

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Photo by Bill Haegele

Michael Pemberton and Gail Hawisher

Writing across the curriculum: Facts and fictions

Fictions:

1. Writing is simply a skill that can be mastered once and for all.
2. Writing across the curriculum consists of adding a few writing assignments to existing syllabuses.
3. WAC programs aim to improve students' writing by emphasizing a back-to-basics approach to instruction.
4. WAC programs stress the traditional term paper as the major vehicle for improving students' writing in a course.
5. WAC programs advocate long, extensive writing assignments and usually require a set number of pages for each student to produce.
6. WAC programs primarily emphasize the surface "correctness" of a piece of writing.
7. WAC programs promote the notion that instructors are the only appropriate audience for students' writing assignments.
8. WAC programs represent an intrusion by English faculty members into disciplines of which they have little knowledge.
9. WAC programs concentrate primarily on the students' final product.
10. WAC programs increase instructors' workloads.

Facts:

1. Writing, thinking and learning are lifelong activities that are inextricably tied to one another.
2. WAC aims to change the ways in which students learn (and instructors teach).
3. WAC programs aim to improve students' learning (and writing) by emphasizing writing as an effective means of mastering subject matter.
4. WAC programs stress some form of writing during each class meeting as one way of improving students' understanding (and writing) in a course.
5. WAC programs advocate a variety of writing assignments, often short responses that nevertheless require a great deal of thinking.
6. WAC programs emphasize clarity of expression and complexity of thought, along with an adherence to the conventions and mechanics of writing.
7. WAC programs promote the notion that classmates, along with instructors, are an appropriate audience for student writing.
8. WAC programs are guided by the belief that writing is integral to ALL disciplines and that professionals in those disciplines are the experts.
9. WAC programs offer students the opportunity to revise many writing tasks.
10. WAC programs change instructors' workloads.