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Guest Post: You Know More Than You Think About Teaching Writing

Submitted by John Warner on January 31, 2019 - 3:05am

Blog: [Just Visiting](#) ^[1]

This is an exciting guest post for me. Elizabeth Wardle is co-editor (along with Linda Adler-Kassner) of [Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies](#) ^[2] a book that I think is indispensable when it comes to considering how writing works. She's also responding to a previous guest post from Paul Hanstedt about approaches to writing across the curriculum. We got an honest-to-goodness conversation among some serious disciplinary experts happening here and it's in my little blog home. Enjoy. - JW

You Know More Than You Think About Teaching Writing

By Elizabeth Wardle

It was gratifying to read [Paul Hanstedt's January 9 guest blog post](#) ^[3] in IHE. He succinctly summarizes some of the most important tenets of writing instruction and learning to write:

The problem isn't first-year writing, but rather what doesn't come afterward.

Writing is hard.

Teaching writing is everyone's responsibility.

Faculty will only be motivated to teach writing in their disciplines if the project is an intellectual one.

Miami University has been pursuing these goals for a long time, most recently in our [Faculty Writing Fellows Program](#) ^[4] through the [Roger and Joyce Howe](#)

Center for Writing Excellence ^[5]. We designed this Fellows seminar, part of our larger writing across the curriculum program ^[5], to be an expertise-based model of professional development grounded in theory and cross-disciplinary dialogue. But Hanstedt's description is better: it's an intellectual approach to professional development based on the idea that "what drives us is the life of the mind."

After graduating 71 faculty members from 19 departments in less than two years, the data we are collecting suggests this theory-based approach succeeds in encouraging innovation.

The seminar hinges on three guiding assumptions:

First: initiating grassroots change around writing in departments can't be an individual endeavor.

Second: appreciating the specialized nature of disciplinary written practices is easier when faculty can see practices that differ from their own.

Third: all faculty have the expertise to innovate writing instruction and will do so if they have the language and theoretical lenses to aid them.

The Faculty Fellows seminar is designed to enable disciplinary teams to talk with other disciplinary teams as they acquire theoretical lenses for understanding how writing works. Faculty enroll with colleagues from their fields, and spend a full semester working weekly with teams from other fields. This combination is proving to be powerful. As one participant from philosophy explained afterward: "[T]he balance of having people who do understand me and people who don't understand me at the same time was... immensely helpful."

Early in the semester, faculty read theory and research about disciplinary knowledge. They identify "threshold concepts ^[6]" (Meyer and Land) of their fields in order to get explicit about the practices and processes that inform their expectations and conventions around writing and disciplinary knowledge. Naming them is an effort to make visible to students how disciplinary practitioners see and talk about the world. Examples from our Fellows groups include:

- Gerontology: aging is a social and cultural construction of a biological phenomenon; intersectionality
- Family Science & Social Work: empowerment; dignity; unconditional positive regard
- Philosophy: Philosophy operates at a conceptual—not only at an empirical—level, pursuing conceptual clarity, evaluating the adequacy of concepts, modifying concepts, and creating concepts; the goal of reading philosophical texts is to enter into different conceptual frameworks, by following lines of reasoning and allowing them to speak to us; Philosophy practices hermeneutical reading skills, including reading a text for purpose, significance, structure, interconnection of ideas, presuppositions and implications, and non-argumentative as well as argumentative elements.

Participants then explore some of the threshold concepts about writing as outlined in [Naming What We Know](#) [2]: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies (Adler-Kassner and Wardle, 2015). This book was the result of a modified version of crowdsourcing, wherein twenty-nine writing scholars debated in a wiki over several months about what threshold concepts of writing might be. The results include ideas such as “writing is a social and rhetorical activity,” “writing is not natural,” “all writers have more to learn,” and “revision is central to developing writing,” among many others. Many of these ideas might seem too obvious to mention in current writing scholarship, though they are implicit in much of that scholarship.

One of the key characteristics of threshold concepts is that while they are obvious to insiders they are often [troublesome](#) [7] while potentially [transformative](#) [8] for outsiders. For example, if all writers have more to learn, then it is normal to struggle with writing, and not something to be ashamed of. Writers might be ashamed of the time and effort it takes them to write because they incorrectly believe that “good writers” are people for whom writing is easy. They might embrace different practices and feel differently about themselves after being introduced to more accurate conceptions of writing. And teachers might change their practices if they enact these accurate conceptions when assigning writing to students.

Faculty in the Fellows program interrogate ideas about how writing works, and how people learn to write--and consider implications for their teaching. For example, the first activity asks faculty to list all of the reasons they write, and then to list all of the forms those purposes for writing take (for example, one

purpose is “to remember” and forms are as varied as grocery lists, marginal notes, lab notebooks, etc). Faculty consider how much of what is true in their own writing lives is making its way into their classrooms. Does form follow function, or do we get hung up on rigid rules? Do we provide students opportunities to engage with many purposes and forms of writing, or do we assign one or two rigid text types that were assigned to us?

We interrogate a number of ideas about writing, testing them in terms of faculty members’ own lived experiences (if writing is a way of enacting disciplinarity, and all writers have more to learn, and failure is a part of writing development, then how did faculty learn to write in their disciplines? What helped them? What didn’t? And how can they extrapolate from these ideas and their own experiences in order to help their own students?)

If our emerging follow up research is any indication, these revised conceptions of writing seem to stick with faculty long after the program is over. A faculty member from family science and social work told us, for example, that the threshold concept “writing is not natural” has become central for her: “I repeat that now way more now than I used to ... [Writing] is a skill [and] you can get better at it. That takes practice. And these are going to be the opportunities to practice.”

We do a number of other things in the program including relying on linguists Ken Hyland and John Swales to gain a lens for looking at research articles brought by other teams and asking, “What and how are these people writing? Why do they write like this? What is strange and familiar here?” This “article swap” is a seminal moment, when faculty see their disciplinary writing in new ways. As another participant from philosophy succinctly explained, “[T]here's something invisible that has been made visible for me, and now I can make it visible for my students as well” (see “[Something Invisible](#)”^[9]). Faculty also try to name characteristics of “good” writing in their own disciplines, and teach these to colleagues from other disciplines. They quickly come to recognize that what makes writing “good” varies quite a lot by context. These disciplinary differences underscore that teaching students to write across the university takes sustained effort and time, and is everyone’s shared responsibility. (For

an example of a revised description of “good” disciplinary writing, see “[Writing in Philosophy](#).^[10]”).

The guiding belief of this program is that faculty who have language and theory for understanding and explaining disciplinary writing can innovate writing assignments and instruction in their various fields in ways that disciplinary outsiders could never do for them. In other words, that our job as writing specialists is not to give other faculty cool “tips and tricks” or proselytize assignments or activities we think they should use. Rather, that if they have the tools they need, then as disciplinary experts they will come up with innovations that meet their students’ needs in context.

So far, our research suggests this is exactly what is happening. The gerontology faculty, for example, redesigned their graduate curriculum to respond to problems their students had in understanding the interdisciplinary nature of their field, and they innovated assignments to teach what they call the “gerontological voice” through activities such as “reverse genealogy,” working backward from a current article’s reference list in order to learn how a particular idea has developed over time, and having gerontology faculty share with students their own writing processes and struggles with writing (see “[Discovering the Voice of Gerontology](#).^[11]”). The developmental psychology faculty designed a “scavenger hunt” to help students understand the features of research articles in their field, an assignment designed to respond to a performance gap they had noticed between majors and non-majors in their courses (see “[A Howe Fellows Journey](#).^[12]”). You can read about more innovations in our [Miami Writing Spotlight feature](#).^[13]

Of course, we at Miami are fortunate to have a long tradition of including writing in courses across the curriculum. We are also fortunate to have strong administrative support for writing, a very large endowment to support the teaching and learning of writing through the [Howe Center for Writing Excellence](#)^[5], and a [culture that is committed to undergraduate teaching](#)^[14]. So it might be easy for faculty at schools where writing and teaching are less well-supported to imagine that such a model wouldn’t work for them. But I think it could work. The basic tenets are pretty simple: get some faculty teams together, provide them with language and theory to talk about how writing

works, and give them time to talk with one another and with faculty who write and think differently than they do.

True, this can't be done in one or two meetings, so faculty need some incentives to make time in their busy schedules. While we can pay a generous stipend for the work here, we also have learned that most faculty don't come (and certainly don't stay) for the stipend. They come because they are intellectually curious, like talking with colleagues, and enjoy what Handsted described in his blog post as the opportunity to engage in the life of the mind. There need to be some pay offs, though, if faculty are going to be asked to spend extended time in the program. WAC leaders can build in ways for the seminar work to lead to publication (for example, by sharing their revised assignments in [Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments](#) ^[15]), encourage participants to apply for scholarship of teaching and learning grants and awards, and write letters for participants to include in promotion and tenure files.

So: is it possible to improve the teaching and learning of writing by providing faculty with language and theory to help them understand what they already do with writing as disciplinary experts? We think so, and we are finding this method to be a promising means of responding to the challenges and realities that Hanstedt laid out: that teaching writing is hard, and that doing so is the shared responsibility of all faculty, and that faculty will only be motivated to take on this responsibility if doing so is an engaging intellectual project.

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THANKS

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BIO

Elizabeth Wardle is Roger and Joyce Howe Professor of Written Communication and Director of the Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University (OH). She has been directing writing programs of various kinds since she was a doctoral student, and previously served as the director of writing programs at both the University of Central Florida and the University of Dayton. She is the co-editor of the first-year writing textbook Writing about Writing ^[17] (Bedford/St Martins, 4th edition 2019), Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies ^[2] (Utah State University press, 2015), and Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity ^[18] (Utah State University press, 2018), as well as many peer-reviewed articles on learning to writing, writing transfer, and writing program administration.

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[4] <http://miamioh.edu/hcwe/hwac/writing-fellows/index.html>

[5] <http://miamioh.edu/hcwe/index.html>

[6] <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>

- [7] <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholdsT.html#troubness>
- [8] <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholdsT.html#transform>
- [9] <http://miamioh.edu/hcwe/hwac/about/miami-writing-spotlight/philosophy/index.html>
- [10] <http://www.miamioh.edu/hcwe/disciplinary-writing/philosophy/>
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