What Our Graduates Write: Making Program Assessment Both Authentic and Persuasive
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What Our Graduates Write: Making Program Assessment Both Authentic and Persuasive

This article argues for and models an approach to writing program assessment that relies on study of the writing practices of program graduates as a way to inform revisions in curriculum and teaching practices. The article also examines how conducting such assessments can help nondisciplinary publics understand the nature of composition studies.

It was a moment that captured, for me, several of the concerns I had accumulated over the years regarding how our discipline's knowledge might be applied in the classroom, how that same knowledge might become visible to a larger audience outside classrooms, and how we could best renew our knowledge to reflect an ever-changing world of writing.

I was sitting next to an accreditation officer in a large room, talking of assessment activities at my university. The accreditation officer prided herself on her expertise regarding assessment of student learning, extolled its virtues in workshops and publications, and was convinced the practice had made a significant contribution to what she sees as a twenty-year evolution of college teaching from primarily lecture to more student- and activity-based classrooms. I had also spent years involved with assessment, organizing placements of

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first-year students into composition courses based on writing samples, help-ing develop a process of bottom-up, faculty-initiated program assessments at my university, and eventually trying to sustain that process while helping my university out with regional re-accreditation.

Having spent the past several months surveying and interviewing gradu-ates of five undergraduate degree programs offered by my university and mining the data for information about the genres, the processes, and the tools employed by those graduates, I was arguing for the value of such program assessment in guiding faculty when they make decisions about the course work and teaching approaches within programs so examined. The accreditation officer immedi-ately raised the issue at the heart of much assessment: none of my data could tell her whether or not the contacted graduates were "good" writers. Would my assessment provide evidence to "stakeholders" that the programs in ques-tion were producing graduates who could demonstrate measurable traits of successful writing?

No, my assessment would not provide such evidence. So I replied that these graduates *were* writers, writing as part of their jobs or as involved mem-bers of their various communities. While the success of the writing they did

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in influencing or moving their readers was important, whether these alumni could be easily characterized as good writers or not was somewhat beside the point. What was germane to the assessment I was conducting was the question of how well undergraduate courses and instruction prepared alumni for the writing practices that would be a part of their post-academic lives. This assessment had as a primary audience fellow profession-als looking to make informed choices about curriculum and teaching. But then there was that other potential audience, made up of administrators, students, government bureaucrats, regional accreditation commission members, and politicians seeking clear, direct illustrations of the value of our entire enterprise.

The discipline of composition studies hasn't done a very good job of defining itself for that larger group of people who do not share our particular expertise. We haven't been able to convincingly explain to nondisciplinary audiences just why so many attempts at assessment of student writing abilities are problematic—because they ignore the variety of contingencies involving intent, historical circumstance, genre, and reader/audience that may influence

conclusions as to whether any particular piece of writing is successful. This article, however, asserts that assessment of degree programs emphasizing the development of writing ability and seeking qualitative information about the writing practices of those programs' alumni can be employed both to enact meaningful curriculum reform and to educate larger publics about writing in our time. We can argue, along with Brian Huot, that for any assessment to have validity the "decisions made on its behalf must have a positive effect on the educational environment" (18). To have such an effect, Huot later contends, "the complete assessment procedure" should reflect in its design "the purpose and context of the specific writing ability to be described and evaluated" (102). How will we know what those writing abilities are that we want to measure unless we learn something of the contexts in which they are employed? That question motivates the program assessment I describe, one keyed to alumni reports. It may be, in fact, that the observations of alumni have a persuasive power that other forms of assessment lack. Les Perelman, for example, has recently observed that a writing requirement and the years-long urging of involved faculty members had little impact on the role of writing in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology undergraduate curriculum. But when 85 percent of MIT's graduates reported in a survey that they regarded writing ability as important, and only 25 percent of those same graduates "reported [that] MIT's contribution" to the development of that ability was "significant," a Communications-in-the-Disciplines program was quickly developed and implemented (Perelman 4). In MIT's case, the kind of assessment that had the most impact on curricular change was a survey of alumni, not a "direct measure of student writing ability" that showed a lack of correlation between such abilities and a student's "overall grade" at the university (Perelman 2–3).

Assessing Writing Programs at a Comprehensive Public University

In the winter of 2008 our English department of around thirty faculty members, in a smallish public comprehensive university located in western Pennsylvania, had just completed a five-year "program review." The review noted that English faculty taught three courses in the university's general education program required of all undergraduates—two first-year composition courses and an introductory literature course. In addition, the department offered degree

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programs in literature and professional and creative writing, and taught the majority of credit hours for a program in English education housed in another department. An outside evaluator, brought in to chair the five-year review, wrote in her report that

> because of the sheer numbers in the Liberal Studies program [General Education], the department offerings are heavily encumbered with teaching the required two writing courses ... and the required literature. ... This leaves radically reduced time for faculty to concentrate on the development of the majors. (External Evaluator)

One could sense a drift in our first-year and professional writing programs, as the reviewer had noted, that was largely attributable to a lack of necessary personnel and to the impossibility of keeping abreast with rapid change in the modes and forms of contemporary writing, regardless of our best efforts. We had been losing students in our professional writing track, and exit interviews with students graduating from that track suggested that one reason was our failure to keep up. The situation seemed to demand further program assessment, more specifically an investigation of what graduates of university programs that emphasized writing ability (B.A. in literature, B.S. in creative or professional writing, B.S. in journalism, and B.S. in public relations) were currently doing in their writing practice, particularly when it came to the persuasive and public writing performed (1) as professionals in their occupations, or (2) as concerned and active citizens.

My decision to ask alumni about their consciously persuasive and public writing, within their occupations but also outside of those occupations, was based on a variety of factors. First, only the undergraduate writing experiences of the literature students seemed geared to the possibility of further academic writing. Moreover, among the graduates of our literature program who responded to my survey, some had gone on to positions that were not going to require academic writing: human resources manager, marketing and promotions coordinator, and seasonal park ranger. In contrast, graduates of our programs in professional and creative writing were receiving instruction in creative forms, but also in technical and advertising writing, grant writing, business writing, editing, and document production. Several graduates from our programs also ended up doing journalistic and public relations writing, so it made sense to contact alumni of those programs as well, even though

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they were housed in the university's communications department, and not the English department.[1]

Majors enrolled in undergraduate programs taught by English faculty, it can be argued, are also learning the liberal arts and are not involved in a strictly vocational set of studies. Our writing programs required the study of both rhetorical and critical theory, the history of English, linguistics, and some literature. Precisely because they are liberal arts programs, I thought it important to also assess the programs' impact on the civic writing of our alumni. I was in agreement with scholars like Janet Atwill, Linda Flower, and Thomas P. Miller, who have forcefully argued in recent years that writing instruction needs to reflect "the civic tradition in education" (Flower 85–86). Miller specifically considers both first-year and advanced writing courses as the educational location for learning Aristotle's *phronesis* or "practical wisdom." To Miller, that practical wisdom can serve as "a model for political agency in situations where what needs to be done cannot be known, but must be acted upon" (74). The study of rhetoric or, as Aristotle put it, "the available means of persuasion," fits into what Miller calls "civic humanism," an "understanding of moral action in the uncertain realm of human affairs" that can serve as a necessary counterbalance within academe to the disciplinary emphasis on "theoretical knowledge of what can be known with certainty and a technical mastery of how to do things" (76–77). Whether our graduates were acting as private citizens, as agents of a nonprofit organization, or as agents of a for-profit business, providing them with access to *phronesis* struck me as an important element of their education and of any assessment of the programs aiming to provide that education.

Creating the Assessment

I conducted my program assessment through a series of steps: first, I surveyed the selected graduates; then I identified those graduates willing to be interviewed, interviewed them, and transcribed the interviews. Analysis of the survey results and interview transcripts allowed me to draw inferences about what in our programs had helped our alumni in their current writing, and about what might be added to our programs to better prepare students for the writing they would do once they graduated.

The survey was sent to several hundred graduates, from the years 2001 to 2008, of the above-mentioned programs. One of its goals was to discover people who would agree to an hour-long interview about their current writing practices, but at the same time the survey could provide information about

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the graduates' occupations, the extent of writing they perceived as related to citizenship, and whether they considered any of their writing as "persuasive" or public in nature. The survey questions were worded to guide respondents in defining the central terms. For example, one question asked the respondents if they spent a "significant" amount of time writing while performing their job and used as an example "more than one hour per week." This was setting the bar low, perhaps, but previous experience querying graduates about their writing suggested that underreporting would be prevalent (Cosgrove 184).[2]

The subsequent question asked, "Outside of your job, do you ever write on concerns you have or issues you confront as a citizen of your locality, state, or nation?" Here I was looking for some evidence that graduates were engaging in written civic discourse that was "self-sponsored," to borrow from Deborah Brandt's analytical vocabulary (17–21), and I could not anticipate what level of response I would receive, especially among a group of subjects who were for the most part in their mid- to late-twenties. The result was that 38 of the 105 graduates who filled in the survey answered the question in the affirmative. (Sixty of the 105 reported doing significant writing on the job, with some evidence of underreporting.) This writing as "concerned citizens" took such forms as emails and letters to officials, letters to the editor, brochures, and blog posts.

The strategy of embedding a definition into the question carried over into questions regarding "persuasive" and "public" writing, which had only 71 total respondents because subjects had to answer either of the previous two questions (concerning workplace and citizenship writing) in the affirmative before progressing further. Of those 71 respondents, 47 characterized at least some of the writing they did as a professional or as a citizen as "attempting to persuade intended readers to reach certain conclusions or to take specific actions." The definition is intentionally broad; one might assume that much writing intends to accomplish at least one of those aims. But, again, the interviews confirmed my suspicion that some subjects would manifest the prevailing cultural confusion over being persuasive and being argumentative.[3]

The survey's question on "public" writing asked respondents if their writing ever sought "a readership beyond that of your fellow employees or social acquaintances." Forty-three of the 71 answered "yes." The definition of "public" provided by this question is not the pre-existing "public sphere" of Habermas or even the Burkean parlor that potential readers of this article resemble (Burke 94–96), although it encompasses those entities. The governing characteristic is the lack of prior occupational or social contact, which addresses one key element of "a public" identified by Michael Warner: "a public is a relation

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among strangers" (74). Once it was discovered that a graduate does write for "strangers," the interviews could reveal details about the kinds of texts around which the writer's readers have organized themselves (67). It could be a public that has already formed as readers of a newspaper for whom the interviewee (in our case, two journalism graduates, one professional writing graduate, and one creative writing graduate) regularly writes, or of the newsletter produced by a nonprofit that employs a public relations graduate; it could be a public that writers have developed through their own efforts, like the publics formed by the gardening blog created by one of our creative writing graduates, or by the blog and forum entries created by a creative writing graduate concerned with international adoptions; or it could be a public that a writer hopes to form in the future, such as the readers the fiction writer wishes to attract one day, or the patients, families, and medical personnel a professional writing graduate hopes will read and act upon brochures and websites advocating the increased use of palliative care.

In fact, my inquiries suggest one curricular element that both writing programs and general education writing courses should include is a discussion of the nature of "publics" (pre-existing and possible groups of readers), and of how those publics come into being, especially via the electronic media. I'll admit to a mindset I expect has been shared by many academics of my generation, and that is to think of *the* public, or even of varied public*s*, as pre-existing entities we hope will discover writers, whether ourselves, our students, or others. Because publication was an extended and often difficult process featuring gatekeeping editors and peer reviewers, it was understandable that we would consider a public as readers we would encounter only after a series of fortunate events, rather than as readers we might have a hand in organizing through the generation of texts that could be published almost immediately after, if not during, their creation. This reality has arrived, and it is hard to imagine our students returning to a world that more closely resembles the one we may have occupied as recently as fifteen years ago.

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Cognizant of the need for students to write with audiences other than ourselves in mind, we have incorporated into classes everything from magazines to web pages, chat rooms, and blogs. But have students embraced the reality that they can, and will, organize their own sets of potentially loyal readers without our help? And could the teaching of our own new awareness of the nature of publics and how they are formed allow us to establish a public presence beyond our own professional discourse?

As academics, we have tended to institutionalize certain genres of writing, such as the term paper meant to teach and then evaluate students' ability to construct reasoned arguments based on varied source material and researched data. The problem, as Elizabeth Wardle's research highlights, is that not even this genre duplicates what students will encounter in major-specific academic writing (including writing we ourselves assign), nor is there much evidence that those students will successfully transfer what they learn by composing a first-year "argument" paper to the arguments they will need to execute in later courses (775, 770). On the other hand, genres that students may already find familiar are also available to them as writers, on the web in the form of websites (many of which also link to both essay and academic forms of argument written using a traditional structure and style), blogs, forums, and so on. Our job could be to help students grasp the dynamics of contemporary public discourse, while still applying what remains current and has been current for millennia, the rhetorical tools of invention and analysis that address a writer's "persuasiveness" (Miller 76).

Drawing Curricular Inferences from Graduates' Experience

The return rate for my surveys was 28.3 percent: 105 of 371 delivered, with 18 of the graduates eventually interviewed, including 5 creative writing, 5 public relations, 3 professional writing, 3 journalism, and 2 literature majors. While the rate of return falls within the normal range for such studies, survey information is always self-selected and subject to variable interpretations. The same can be said of the interview information, only more so. My own analysis suggests that graduates who had managed to land jobs or pursue education related to their undergraduate fields of study were more likely to volunteer than others, although one could argue that it is those very graduates who can be most informative regarding curricular renewal. Moreover, many who were pursuing related work declined interviews for various reasons, including the sensitivity of their writing within the workplace. So the kind of program assessment I am modeling does not lend itself to statistical inference.

At the same time, we could summarize the history of educational inquiry, whether termed as "research" or "assessment," as follows: the more quantifiable and amenable to generalization the data are, the less useful to classroom applications; the more reflective the data are of individual experience, the more useful the data are to teachers, and the less convincing they are as evidence that can support generalizations. This sentence from Neil Patten works as well: "To paraphrase Einstein, the more perfect the discourse, the less it has to do with reality, and the less perfect it is, the more it has to do with reality" (350).

To learn about individual experiences, the interviews followed a set schedule of questions (see the appendix), sought to clarify survey responses, and often involved conversation meant to elicit unanticipated threads of emerging information. After transcription, description, and careful analysis of these interviews, I can vouch for their efficacy as stimulants of curricular change, at least in the following areas.

Invention

The gathering of information and the drafting of material were the activities that most hearkened graduates back to their undergraduate practices. Several identified learning how to use article databases hosted by our library's website as essential to their undergraduate writing and to subsequent writing as graduate students. (Three of the eighteen had completed master's programs, and four others were enrolled, either full- or part-time, in graduate studies.) But almost all currently consult websites related to their occupational and civic interests, and several mentioned the need to train students in evaluating the credibility of those websites, including the inherent biases of organizational and advocacy sites. The need for experiences with specific kinds of websites often depended on current occupation or interest, including a public relations graduate managing a hotel and wanting more practice researching legal information, and a journalist reporting for a small-circulation daily wanting more experience navigating government websites.

What may warrant close examination here is a trait general education writing students often share with graduates of programs in professional and creative writing, literature, journalism, and public relations—that is, a lack of expertise in subject areas their writing will necessarily encompass, in situations Miller characterizes as "where what needs to be done cannot be known, but must be acted upon" (74). These are the situations for which participatory democracies were conceived, when the technocrats can inform but not decide. Journalists, but also activists, concerned citizens, and professional communica-

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tion specialists of varied stripes, must commonly perform this kind of writing. For example:

- A professional writing graduate who is now editor of a small-town weekly must immerse herself in local civic history, in the relationships between local, county, and state governments, and in the struggles of school boards seeking to balance property tax revenues with state al- locations.

- A journalism graduate assigned to the courthouse beat must familiar- ize herself with the state penal code and learn her way around state- and county-sponsored websites dedicated to the criminal and civil justice systems.

- A creative writing graduate who evolved into a critic of international adoption practices must transform herself into an astute reader of the professional literature in psychology and counseling, putting to use what she learned from article databases as both an undergraduate and a graduate student.

- Another professional writing graduate must learn to adjust her advo- cacy of palliative care to such varied genres as grant applications, bro- chures, newsletters, fund-raising letters, journal articles, and website material, and to skillfully integrate visual material with her prose in most of those genres.

While the experiences of these graduates cannot be extrapolated statisti- cally, they are certainly reinforced by the experiences of others who, through occupational and civic commitments, also serve as writers within the situations Miller cites, writers whose careers are marked by writing in multiple contexts. A few years ago, for example, I interviewed a set of speechwriters affiliated with the DC Speechwriters Roundtable in Washington. One, a history graduate from a university in the South, became a speechwriter for President Carter because of her experience with energy policy, then developed expertise in copyright law while working for a member of Congress and in nuclear weapons while in Clinton's Department of Energy, and eventually ended up as a "senior analyst" for a large defense contractor. As she explains: "I mean I had this thing in my mind that everybody has, . . . sort of like a cartoon bomb with a fuse on it. . . . [But] if you have some scientific interest and . . . I do, you can kind of glom onto it. I can't do the calculations, but I can get the ideas." Another, a child

development graduate, parlayed a communications job with U.S. Airways into a position with the Federal Aviation Administration. Her job, when I interviewed her, involved dividing her time between speech writing and forms of "technical writing" in the FAA's aviation safety division.

In order to prepare students for a myriad of writing situations, one course in writing for the major, required of both our professional and creative writing majors, combines an introduction to rhetorical theory with ongoing written composition. Such a course could focus on civic concerns for writing content but in so doing would have to provide students with the experience of "glomming" onto the information generated by disciplinary activity, so it could be applied to instances where action is uncertain but necessary (Miller). Just what might be the best way to provide that experience is beyond this article's scope. But one possible approach might be to allow the devotion of a full semester to the struggle with a single issue or area of inquiry, in teams of students with similar interests (Lynch, George, and Cooper).

Some graduates also reported beginning research in ways some college writing instructors mistrust, such as by using Google searches or visits to Wikipedia. Left without the support of library databases and eager-to-help reference librarians and professors, or even easy access to a library building, alumni found the rough introduction to basic concepts or entities afforded by Wikipedia an appropriate place to begin. A Google search, or one conducted via some other well-known search engine, could take them to governmental, organizational, and educational websites with introductory material and links to information from a variety of sources, including magazines, newspapers, professional journals, blogs, and official reports. From there, our interviewees could begin to apply the analytical skills they had developed as undergraduates, or wished they had developed, for navigating and making critical judgments about material they encountered.

Some assessments may hope for quick, definitive evidence of the "value added" by an educational program, but experienced educators know that the development of critical acumen is a lifelong task, a cumulative process that often will not manifest itself at those moments when we hope it would. This observation was illustrated by a creative writing graduate now deeply involved in issues attached to international adoptions, who credited her graduate studies in English with giving her the confidence to tackle complex subject matter, to write in online environments to readers with highly diverse positions, and to imagine a book project that preoccupies her. As an undergrad, she explains,

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> I would have been out there searching right now. If I came across me, I'm thinking
> ... "that person ..., they know everything." Or if I had found it, I would come on
> the other side of the coin, "Okay, these people are totally, they know everything."
> That would be good enough, and I don't really have to go any further. Where now,
> through the graduate work, "Yeah right. I'm one opinion in a sea of others. Yes, I
> have some expertise." However, you have to look at these other sides. ...

In the "information age," when celebrities hand out diet advice or warn against childhood immunization on *Oprah*, our best hope may be to plunge our students into this sea of messages as soon as possible, with the motivation that they need to know because they need to decide and act, and to give them practice in sorting the credible from the risible.

Through the interviews, we saw as well that the non-expert must continuously judge the appropriate use of disciplinary knowledge, particularly when such use must be drawn from professional literature but also through interviews of experts. Both the speechwriters and the graduates I interviewed emphasized the need for personal contact with the knowledgeable. Graduates from the professional and creative writing, journalism, and public relations programs mentioned the frequency with which they interviewed people, and often accompanied that observation with the wish they had more practice while undergraduates with interviewing

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and interviewing techniques. Writing programs can teach our students how to conduct interviews and compose surveys. Success in the interpretation and application of disciplinary knowledge would also seem to depend on an effective introduction, through general education courses, to the practices of scientific inquiry and statistical inference. Integrating that material into a student's own thought and writing, two interviewed graduates implied, can also get an assist from the critical work of literature and philosophy courses. A baccalaureate in literature, for example, found that material in his undergraduate literature courses, like Roland Barthes on the American dust bowl, had created a context for the series of newsletters on social justice issues he was writing as a graduate assistant with the university's Institute for Community, Service-Learning, and Non-Profit Leadership. The advocate for increased palliative care mentioned that courses in world literature, women in French literature, and literary criticism helped her "conceptualize and make connections between different types of authors or different bodies of work." Our English department had insisted that

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the professional writing majors take some upper-division literature courses, which this graduate initially thought a "pain" but now saw as rounding "out some space for the way that I think, and I think that it helps my writing."

The importance of a varied yet clear-in-purpose general education curriculum looms particularly large when considering whether the preparation of students for engaging in civic discourse is as significant an educational value as preparation for writing in specific forms and within specific disciplines. Nothing may be of greater assistance to the composition of the kind of writing to which Miller alludes than what one Washington speechwriter I interviewed called a "breadth of knowledge, curiosity, and imagination." A foreign policy speechwriter for Bill Clinton when he was president, this interviewee said the presence of such wide-ranging interest was also a great asset for the speaker of the writer's prose. "He had a tremendous grasp of history. He was very contemporary. . . . you could use anything. You could use pop culture, you could use the Bible, you could use jokes, you could use history, you could use world events, you could use literature. . . . my favorite speech of all time is Bobby Kennedy's impromptu eulogy of Martin Luther King, which I think is extraordinary. And in it he quotes Aeschylus, you know, his poetry from memory."

Composing and Its Tools

For the past few years, through other surveys and interviews as well as conversations with our advisory boards, our graduates have been telling us they would have appreciated more experience with various composing tools as they progressed through our programs—tools for desktop publishing, for the integration of visual elements into their texts, and for web applications of their writing. As a faculty, we are acutely aware of their criticisms but somewhat stymied by two factors. One is the difficulty in updating our computer lab and mobile laptop carts to accommodate the latest software applications, especially when such applications require a substantial expenditure. A second difficulty, given our teaching loads, is the challenge faculty members face in educating themselves in the use of various applications and in developing enough familiarity with the tools to introduce their use in our courses confidently. This difficulty is compounded by the ephemeral nature of some software applications: what

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seems both promising and popular at one moment may be supplanted by an application still more promising and popular when another academic term rolls around. As researcher Derek Van Ittersum has observed, the very way that individual students may use a particular application could change over the course of their academic study, and it may be preferable to focus our inquiries "not on particular software packages" but on "facilitating writers efforts to select and act with technologies" (276–77).

In my interviewing I set out to discover just what applications our graduates were using, and I found a similar state of flux. For instance, while we had equipped our labs several years ago with PageMaker as a document design tool, discussions with several graduates suggested that tools like PageMaker and Quark Express, in their evolving versions, had been recently eclipsed by InDesign. And while both faculty and students chafed under the quirks and limitations of one web editor, in hopes of obtaining another, graduates' experience suggests the actual software for producing or managing website content is dependent on individual work places, with no apparent commonality. One professional writing graduate who had to maintain a website reported moving from Dreamweaver to "a new content management system; I don't know what that will be for the web." A journalism graduate who used Dreamweaver expressed a desire to obtain InDesign and then just import material from that application into the website of the radio station for which she worked.

Not surprisingly, all eighteen of the graduates I interviewed used a computer while writing, but eleven also mentioned using pen and paper at some stage in the process, usually for notetaking and for revision and proofreading. The advocate for palliative care often took notes in longhand when meeting with her institute's director, but she added that her "ability to write with a pen on paper is rapidly declining." As it did for a few other subjects, pen and paper sometimes functioned for her as an invention device. "I write things down on paper and then I don't ever refer to it again. It's just that . . . because of the way I learned as a kid, the process of writing something out on paper is helpful, and then I'll just turn and start typing things on the keyboard, or whatever." The public relations graduate now managing a hotel keeps notebooks with him constantly, to generate ideas and record information. "I forget half the things that are a great idea. . . . So as long as I write them down maybe at some point they'll make it to the computer." The creative writing graduate who is pursuing his fiction writing used pen and paper to keep a "writer's journal" that contains "writing ideas, story ideas, basically just quick notes I've written."

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That subject also printed out material drafted on a computer for revision and editing, a practice also mentioned by other interviewees.

Notetaking and other "prewriting" activities may be areas where Van Ittersum's suggestion that we encourage and facilitate students' own creativity in selecting and applying various technologies is particularly applicable (277–78). Traditionally, students received training in notetaking through the use of index cards, and educational software has since been devised to simulate this process digitally for retaining and organizing researched material and for tracking the source material that will have to be cited in an academic manner (Van Ittersum 263). However, no interviewee mentioned employing the "index card" approach, for either academic or non-academic writing, and two of them, including one high-school English teacher, rejected the approach outright. The teacher abandoned index cards as soon as she left high school herself, replacing notetaking with the printing out and then highlighting of information, an approach that, while obviously not paper-less, depends on the easy accessibility of source material characteristic of the Internet age. "Maybe on a piece of paper I'd say, here's the subject, here's all the resources I can go to. I'd have bookmark after bookmark sticking out of any textbooks that I had." A literature graduate, now enrolled in a master's program in education, prepares newsletter articles by keeping a digital journal, typing "out everything either in a bulleted-list or just a big long paragraph of what I know about the subject . . . like a free write on what I know." This subject also eschewed index cards when developing citations for his course papers, instead creating a bibliography or works cited page via an Excel spread sheet.

The editor of a small-town weekly uses adhesive-backed notes and highlighting but also lifts digital material directly into her drafts and then edits out whatever is extraneous. "Take that information, take all of it, put it in your document, and then look at that in the context of what you're writing, and then take out what you need, put in what you need." The sports editor on a small-circulation daily, a journalism graduate, transcribes interviews he's conducted using a digital voice recorder, because "they're not real long, like two or three minutes." The transcript will then help him decide how to structure his story and where quotes from the interview will be placed, usually by copying and pasting directly from the transcript. A creative writing graduate who now produces both a weekly gardening column in a local newspaper and a gardening blog will reduce the windows on his computer screen to two, his emerging draft and an article found on the net he is consulting, so he can examine both as he composes.

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Given the writing tasks our graduates seek to perform, and the constraints of time, equipment, software, and personnel under which they operate, there is no magic technological bullet. And for some alumni, the workarounds are especially ingenious. The editor of a weekly paper functions as *the* editorial office for her publication, and apart from the contributions of a sports stringer, she produces all of the copy, including the headlines. Since she knows everyone needs help with revising and proofreading, she has established a system with the editor of another weekly in a nearby town. They exchange copy via email attachment and use the review tool bar in Microsoft Word to edit each other's work. They serve, in other words, as each other's copyeditor, because they do not have one of their own. But they do have two digital tools that would not have been available to them more than fifteen years ago, email and word-processing software with a review enhancement.

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Does my program assessment consequently let faculty off the hook in terms of keeping up with various technologies for producing drafts, documents, and web copy? The answer is no; it's just that the practice we provide our undergraduates should probably be driven more by the texts they are likely to produce than by the software applications that are extant at the moment when they are producing them. And the characteristics of those texts are determined by the ever-evolving digital technologies that now serve as the primary media for our writing. It is just not very likely that the future writing of contemporary college students will feature nothing but conventional academic prose, and the resources they will call upon when doing that writing are unknown. One professional writing graduate may have a graphic designer colleague whom she can call upon, while another will not. Both, and other graduates I interviewed, recommended that our professional and creative writing majors receive more practice using tools like Photoshop and InDesign. "Even if in the end they don't end up having to use it in their job," said the one without the designer nearby, "I don't know how you could not end up having to interface with people that use it. . . . If you have at least some clue you can talk with the graphic design people in a more intelligent way, and you hopefully can keep yourself from getting taken advantage of." And then, of course, there are the "self-sponsored" writers, writing blogs or websites, or even paper texts as involved citizens, who will have no "staff" at all to whom they may turn, but who will be expected,

because of the very existence of digital technology, to produce writing that integrates the verbal and visual, and sometimes the aural as well.

Emphasizing a particular computer application, rather than the rhetorical task at hand, encourages students to limit their text to the "templates of managed software," according to Rice and Yancey (cited in Rice 378). Better to create assignments and activities in which, as Rice puts it, students can function as rhetorical mechanics or "*logomechanics*, or creators who can imagine, improvise, and enact the material deployments of meaning and its operation" (372; italics in original). In such activities and assignments, students can practice employing any instrument that will help them generate or structure their material, whether those instruments are pen and paper, or digital cameras and voice recorders, or scanners, or software like Photoshop and InDesign. As for the teachers, Rice urges us to expand our sense of mechanics beyond standard linguistic usage to encompass actual rhetorical production (368). How can we execute such a move? Do we have to become "experts" in all the various tools now available? Perhaps not. But just as composition specialists realized years ago that one way writing teachers could remain useful and sympathetic to their students was to consistently write themselves (Brooke 150), contemporary teachers can write using the media prevalent in the composing practices of the worlds beyond their classrooms and formal professional discourse. Rice terms this approach "personal exploratory pedagogy" and commends those composition specialists already seriously engaged in blogging and other forms of multimedia text production (384).[4] For the faculty members in my department, including myself, such practice seems somewhat daunting, although less so than trying to develop a bona fide mastery of Photoshop. Hearkening back to my conversation with an accreditation officer, program assessment of the kind I am demonstrating suggests an urgency for embarking on such practice, while an assessment based on quick and reductive judgments of students' writing prowess would yield no such insights.

Style and Genre

Style, as we know, is not "mechanics" but, rather, a rhetorical canon inseparable from the contingencies of purpose, audience, form, and historical or social context in which a communicative act takes place. Exposing students to the consciously "persuasive" or "public" writing our graduates described may drive that lesson home with more force and efficacy than confining ourselves to anticipating the demands of their future academic writing. The very decision

to act (via inquiry, reflection, exposition, and argument) upon some "uncertain realm of human affairs" (Miller 77) walks students into chambers filled with multiple potential textual modes and audiences. The choices they make, whether verbal or visual, will demand a level of consciousness that writing either for their current instructor or, in a leap of imagination, for some future instructor will hardly elicit.[5] A survey of some of my graduates' concerns about style makes this observation apparent.

- The sports editor for a small daily (circulation of less than 2,700) must use a vocabulary accessible to readers without college experience, and he worries about demeaning student athletes in his rural community. "They're playing to the best of their ability, and really, a lot of them just do it to do it, for something to do. So I think there has to be a little level of sensitivity."

- The gardening columnist and blogger, aware of the varying ages and educational levels of his potential readers, seeks a balance between explaining his subject matter in an accessible way and not appearing to talk down to any member of his audience. "I've been told by certain editors at papers that you need to keep in mind the level of a sixth-grader . . . . I give my readers more credit than that."

- A single mother serves as an advocate for her asthmatic youngest son, who had occasionally been declared truant and had experienced some difficulty with bullies. Her correspondence with school officials seeks to convey a business-like attitude and a command of her subject matter. "If I'm writing to anybody in the school district, I'm more formal. So I avoid contractions, my sentences will be longer, I'll use vocabulary . . . to impress upon them that I'm just not a stupid person, that I get what's going on."

- The advocate for palliative care tries to break the bond in the minds of both "health care practitioners and the public" between its application and impending death, to argue that anyone suffering from "huge symptom burdens" should receive palliative care. So she seeks to avoid phrases like "terminal illness" and "end of life care" while simultaneously recognizing that if a reader is "anyone who works in hospice, they often get very touchy about pussy footing around the fact that people are dying."

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- The high school English teacher, in an article she wrote for a community-based magazine on an animal rescue shelter, didn't want to frighten her readers into not visiting the shelter for fear "that they're going to see malnourished animals." To illustrate the style choices she made, she read a sentence from her article: "'Pumpkin the lion was found in a dog crate that was made for an animal half her size.' . . . the web site goes into further detail about how she couldn't walk, four months afterward her bones were sticking out, her paws were deformed. I just figured telling them a dog crate half her size was enough information to show them how horrible it was."

- A "product development project manager," once a public relations major and English writing minor, has written both a trade magazine and product information materials for an industrial and construction supplies company, with her primary audiences being internal sales people and "end users." She implies that she and her group have rebelled to some extent against linguistic conventions inherent to the culture of her company. She avoids "talking in circles or redundant messages. . . . I always remember who our audience is and sometimes saying too much is confusing."

As Paul Butler has observed, the field of composition studies is still plagued by public perceptions that writing instruction is, or should be, primarily concerned with matters of style and structural conventions, that style is conflated with perceptions of what constitutes appropriate usage, and that appropriate usage is equated with "grammar" (62). In response, we grumble about how unfair, reductive, and demeaning such characterizations of our professional commitments are, although our grumbling fails to penetrate the hardened casement of whatever public commentary about our work exists. It may be that program assessments that are made public and that open a window into our deliberations about curriculum and pedagogy would at least expose, in a way that conferences, journals, and books cannot, the complexities of our disciplinary inquiry, especially when it comes to issues of style and usage. Since there are people who claim they

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want to know what we are doing, let's show them, in a way that forces us to be conscious of the expectations of that larger and not necessarily sympathetic audience. How will such consciousness affect *our* style?

If we keep the public focus only on the academic applications of writing instruction, then interested publics may continue to think of style as merely demonstrating a student's worthiness regarding academic work. But if we shift the focus to writing "beyond the curriculum" (Parks and Goldblatt), then even usage may come to be seen as the context-dependent, and therefore evolving, rhetorical challenge that it is. For writing teachers, there is no question that we want our students to write "persuasively," which entails writing in a manner some specific audience will accept and attend to. Publics that congregate outside of our own disciplinary coteries must become aware of the intent and value of our inquiry through their desire to discover *how* composition instruction can lead to rhetorically effective writing. Framed that way, the demand for "accountability" becomes a public opportunity, but only if we can steer assessment toward deliberations about curriculum and away from snapshots of student texts that seem more like sculpting clubs with which to beat us over the head than mounting windows so the neighbors can peer into our parlor.

Reforming Curriculum and Developing Public Awareness

Assessment of student learning in higher education is a phenomenon that is now pervasive, through the agency of institutional governing bodies, regional and discipline-specific accreditation commissions, and government funding offices. If performed in a manner that is external to the practice of a discipline, and without respect for the knowledge and the framework of inquiry developed by the disciplines, such assessments can wreak damage on the very learning they aspire to evaluate. This danger is particularly apparent for composition studies, an academic discipline that is often grossly misunderstood by larger publics. On the other hand, if composition faculty can initiate assessments of student learning reflecting our knowledge and frameworks of inquiry, then such assessments resemble much of what we already perform as scholarship, since our focus has been on teaching throughout our evolution, and may serve as an opportunity for publicizing what we do and why it is so important for us to do what we do. Unlike the customary disciplinary discourse of journal articles, conference papers, and books, assessment discourse gears our writing to interested publics that include the politically influential and the directly impacted, such as students and their families, in forms that may range from reports to web pages and blogs.

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To shift the focus of those larger publics from writing assessments that are, by necessity, decontextualized singularities devoid of information concerning what students have learned about writing practice, we must shift at least some of the focus of our own discourse to accommodate those same publics. And because so much of what non-expert publics think of our discipline is connected to first-year composition courses, we must strive to demonstrate the connections between the study of writing, degree programs in writing, and those same courses.

Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have recently suggested that the first-year composition course function as an "introduction to writing studies," that we teach what our scholarship and the accumulated knowledge of the rhetorical tradition tell us, much like the introductory general education courses familiar to other disciplines (553). Such an approach presents many challenges, not the least of which are the assumptions and expectations created by more than a century of practice. But applying scholarship and assessment to connecting degree programs with "freshman comp" at least holds out the promise of greater disciplinary "wholeness," as well as a release from always being tied to a course in the service of other disciplines. If general education courses are traditionally introductions to the knowledge base and the modes of inquiry and practice of the disciplines offering the courses, then basing first-year composition on the learning goals of degree programs that *primarily* seek to enhance consciously persuasive writing aimed at varied publics would seem to put that course (and our own disciplinary status) on firmer ground than some vague sense that we are preparing a student for future writing in biology or the law or psychology or health administration. All the courses we teach can then reflect what we believe students can learn from us. No longer will the emphasis be on "mutt genres" (Wardle) or on illusions about what constitutes linguistic conformity (Butler). The emphasis will, instead, be on the actual work of writing our graduates perform once they leave the academy, writing that our own program assessments have helped us discover and publicize.

The model of program assessment I present here involves refining our learning goals by taking the following steps. First, we consider those major programs that seek to directly enhance critical thinking and writing ability, rather than train students into particular modes of inquiry meant to yield certainty. (It is hard for me to imagine critical thinking without writing, or writing without critical thinking.) Then, we examine the current curricular goals of those programs and compare them to our graduates' experience, through various forms of qualitative inquiry that may include surveys, interviews, and

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the collection of samples of writing. Do those experiences suggest adjustments in the curricula of our programs and perhaps in our learning goals? Can those same experiences allow us to inform larger publics of both the complexity and the salience of our educational mission? My own modest attempt at such assessment clearly answers the first question affirmatively and suggests the possibility of a similar answer to the second.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Can you give us examples of writing you have done that is persuasive and/or public, as defined by the question on the survey?

2. What was your intent in doing each of those pieces of writing? What was the situation that prompted the writing? Who did you think of as the potential readers of what you wrote?

3. When doing these pieces of writing, are there certain things you consciously avoid saying or doing?

4. Are you conscious, when performing persuasive and/or public writing, of word choices, of sentence construction, of sentence length? Can you think of some examples?

5. What writing technologies did you use when performing the writing, e.g., personal computer, pen and ink, recording device?

6. In creating the writing, did you use any particular software, or different kinds of software?

7. When writing, do you recall particular practices or pieces of information from your time as an undergraduate doing written composition?

8. When you reflect upon your undergraduate experiences as a writer, what kind of connections can you make between those experiences and your current writing practices?

9. What should we include in an undergraduate writing curriculum that you believe would prepare someone for your current writing practices?

10. Do you have to research material as part of the writing that you do? How do you conduct that research?

11. Do you still follow any research processes that you learned or developed while an undergraduate?

12. Are there any research processes you had to learn after graduation, in order to effectively produce the writing you do now?

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. Just why such programs can be found in communications departments, not English departments, is a historical circumstance that has received ongoing disciplinary attention. In the case of my university, they are also housed in a different college.

2. A subsequent interview with one journalism graduate indicated that despite the low bar, some subjects in my current study probably had underreported their writing. Describing herself as an "on-air radio personality," this graduate checked "no" when asked if she spent significant time writing on the job. But during the interview it turned out she wrote some of the advertisements she delivered on the air, "blurbs" concerning city council meetings and spot news (essentially three- or four-sentence paragraphs that function much like the lead in a newspaper story), and material for the radio station's website. Later in the interview the graduate admitted to writing "more than anybody else in the entire building." Because she had never worked in radio before her current job, not even at the campus radio station, she overcame her fear of saying something inappropriate or of stumbling by habitually writing out, while the music was playing, what she was going to say next.

3. Another journalism graduate, working as a reporter for a small daily newspaper, thought she couldn't be persuasive because she conscientiously adhered to the professional code of journalistic "objectivity." As our conversation progressed, she did agree that her writing was seeking to persuade readers of her impartial stance and of the verisimilitude contained in her stories: "I'm trying to get as much information as possible to make a good story. Make it interesting to someone. Talk to as many people as I think is necessary to put something good together."

Using research to develop verisimilitude was also on the mind of a creative writing graduate deep into fiction writing, even though he also had answered the question about persuasion in the negative. One short story he was writing featured the contemporary issue of male unemployment as a propelling component of both plot and character development. In his case, and even though he would rather create a convincing point of view through an artfully told story than through overt polemic, persuasiveness did appear to bleed into argument. "It's my production," he reflected. "It's my art and it reflects things that I believe and know, the world, so, kind of hard to avoid me pushing my beliefs about these."

4. Taking Rice's admonition seriously, I have been writing a blog since January 2010 in which I discuss our writing programs, program assessment, and the results of

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my interviews with our graduates, mostly with fellow faculty and university alumni who have followed the postings. I continue to hope for a wider readership and invite readers to visit the blog at http://blog.sru.edu.

5. In spring of 2010 I experimented with this idea by asking students in a first-year composition course to convert an academic argument paper they had just completed into a "public form of writing." The students responded by creating magazine articles, a series of blog postings, websites, social networking sites, and PowerPoint presentations. The assignment clearly taught them something about the shifts in style, formatting, and lines of argument necessitated by applying different genres to their research material, and for that reason I would have to conclude it was a success.

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