

WRITING FROM THE CENTER

FEBRUARY 2003 VOL. 3 ISSUE 2

THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE WRITING CENTER
016 MEMORIAL HALL, NEWARK, DE 19716 (302) 831 1168

Writing in the Disciplines -Stephen A. Bernhardt, Professor of English, Andrew B. Kirkpatrick Chair in Writing

Editor's note: We thought it would be good to use this issue to introduce Stephen A. Bernhardt, Andrew B. Kirkpatrick Chair in Writing, to the broader University community. Dr. Bernhardt's Chair was created to promote the development of writing, reading, and communication across campus—in the high-sounding words of those who wrote the description, "to raise the culture of writing throughout the University." In what follows, Dr. Bernhardt summarizes some of his thinking about writing, communication, and academic literacy on our campus.

"... to raise the culture of writing throughout the University"

For too long, at UD as on many campuses, we have viewed communication skills as something students are deficient in, as something that should be fixed. And so we require courses, believing that seat time in a required course, offered as a service by one department or another within Arts and Sciences, will ensure our students have the skills they need to read, write, and communicate within our various programs and as they move into the workplace. A problem with this approach is attitudinal—it allows many to believe that helping students develop their communication skills is someone else's responsibility. There are other problems with this approach, both philosophically and pragmatically.

Writing (and speaking) is surely a skill, but it is an extremely complex one. One of my colleagues at UC-Santa Barbara, Susan MacLeod, suggests that writing is a skill like piano playing. We recognize

Dr. Bernhardt co-chairs with John Courtright (Director of Undergraduate Studies) a **University Task Force on Oral and Written Communication**. This Task Force brings together representatives of each of the University's colleges to develop a plan for addressing issues associated with encouraging students to graduate with strong communication skills. The work of the Task Force to this point can be viewed at its website (<http://www.udel.edu/it-us/woctf/index.html>).

piano playing as a skill that develops through practice, guidance, expert feedback, and experience across many types of music and many performance settings. We don't expect a required course in playing the piano to *fix* a problem of musical performance. There is something mistaken in expecting students will get what they need to know about writing in a required course taught within English. Such a course is not a bad start, but it can only be a start.

We have some pragmatic problems as well on this campus with regard to communication instruction. Students load into the available seats in such courses as English 312 (Written Communications in Business) or Communication 312 (the parallel course in oral communication), taxing the ability of our system to offer enough seats. Demand outstrips supply by a factor of 3 to 1, 5 to 1, or sometimes 9 to 1. Most students are prevented from enrolling until they gain priority as graduating seniors. This is not a rational approach. I won't dwell on other issues associated with the required course approach, but many question the effectiveness of the second writing requirement, as implemented within Arts and Sciences. We need to rethink our approach.

Seeking Disciplinary Definitions of Literacy

In the simplest terms, I believe our best hope for graduating strongly literate students who write and speak well lies in the disciplines. In general, we need to do everything we can within majors, programs, and departments to ensure that students gain the skills they need to become practicing professionals in those disciplines. Only those with the expertise that comes from inside the disciplines can hope to understand in deep ways the demands for professional communication and to define necessary or desired skills for their graduates. To this way of thinking, students of chemical engineering vs. art conservation need very different sets of skills to move into their professions. They are likely to read, write, and speak for quite different purposes, in different settings, using different kinds of data and arguments, and with different material conditions surrounding their communicative actions.

What we might hope to do is set students upon trajectories toward their chosen professions, helping them begin to understand and work within the discourse communities that will eventually constitute their areas of professional practice. Students need to begin working with the specific genres (particular kinds of texts within defined social settings) that make language use meaningful. A chemist might need to write a protocol to govern a particular kind of study or to keep a detailed lab notebook, recording observations as an experiment yields

View Online Video

On September 19, 2002, Dr. Bernhardt addressed the university through an inaugural lecture in honor of the newly endowed Kirkpatrick Chair in Writing at UD.

The talk was titled **"Writing in the Disciplines: What We Know About Teaching and Learning."** In that lecture, Dr. Bernhardt detailed what we know about how students gain skill in writing in university settings. He also discussed what has been done on various campuses to encourage writing in the disciplines.

The full lecture is available online as a digitized video with PowerPoint slides (<http://www.udel.edu/it-us/woctf/UDresources.html>).

(continued on reverse)



An Invitation from Dr. Bernhard:



The University Task Force on Oral and Written Communication will be mapping a strategy over the coming months to address faculty development, support for new initiatives, assessment of progress, and resource issues. Its work will be bolstered by a generous start-up grant from UNIDEL. The English and Communication Departments are both interested in helping departments and programs as they determine what approach best suits the needs of particular disciplines. **I welcome your thoughts on these issues**, and if there are issues you would like to discuss or new initiatives you would like to undertake, **please call me at 831-3351 or email me at sab@udel.edu**.

(continued from front)

data. At some point, the work would need to be reflected in a progress report or eventually be transformed into a research report. Students need to understand how such genres work.

Understanding how writing or communication works within particular settings we call *rhetoric*. Everything written (or spoken) must conform to some set of conventional expectations—the way things are done in this particular sort of chemistry, in this particular academic or industrial context. Beyond what is conventional, an experiment would likely produce a set of issues—challenges or trouble-spots, anomalous observations or unexpected findings—that the researcher would need to account for and interpret. Data are rarely clean, predictable, and uncontested—the data are typically equivocal and rarely speak for themselves. Writing is thus always persuasion, argument, interpretation. Writing and commu-

nication is always highly situated—what counts as effective persuasion is highly conditioned by the purposes, audiences, and uses of language in those situations. Students need rhetorical understanding so they can move into and across various communication situations. Since rhetoric only arises within particular settings of work, students must learn to be readers, writers, and speakers within those settings.

Getting the Needed Skills

Where do students learn such skills? A composition course or a business writing course can be a start, but such settings are extremely limited in how well they can approximate the natural communication situations that arise inside a laboratory, field station, or accounting firm. A better setting is advanced courses in the major, where students are engaged in projects and have developed expertise within their disciplines that can shape their writing and communication. Even more likely settings for developing strong communication skills are situations that place students in activity or work settings, where they can participate as professionals-in-training. In settings such as capstone courses, students work under the mentorship or guidance of experts, they make real contributions and participate in meaningful roles, and they communicate in the natural flow of activities. They are apprentices.

Research suggests that students *really* learn to read like a biologist or write like a historian only when they become deeply involved in their advanced seminars, as they begin to understand the kind of community that is formed by particular disciplines. UD's reputation as a center of excellence in problem-based learning offers an opportunity to exploit the natural development of communication skills as students work in teams to map out a problem, gather information, and deliver solutions in oral and written presentations.

Excellent potential for development of communication skills also presents itself in labs, coop positions, internships, field work, and clinical settings. A program like Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Management is able to offer students frequent communication practice within very realistic settings, such as Vita Nova and soon in the new Marriott Courtyard. Students enter work roles, work with customers and vendors, function as teams of workers, and communicate in the process of doing work. Other programs have similar natural advantages for enhancing student communication skills: nursing students spend a lot of time in clinical settings and students in natural resources are able to work with clients on environmental consulting projects. Because they are students, they also have access to faculty mentors who can focus attention on communicative practice and offer useful feedback.

What Do We Need to Do?

We have had a culture of expectations on this campus that attempts to address a perceived problem, like the need for writing skills, with a course requirement (Engl 110 or Tech Writing or the Second Writing Requirement). This approach is causing many problems: the need for a large corps of writing teachers on supplemental contracts, crushing demands for available seats in communication and writing courses, and various levels of unhappiness with the way things are working. It is time we started thinking in disciplinary terms about what we would like to see in our graduates, and it is time we began looking to the professionalizing experiences students gain within their majors. It is likely that different disciplines will have very different perceptions about what students need, what they are now getting, and how we should change our practices. By taking a discipline-centered approach, we can begin to fruitfully address issues of communication in context, the only place it really makes sense.

The University Writing Center supports the academic mission of the University of Delaware by emphasizing the fundamental role that writing plays in learning and reasoning. We serve all members of the University community at any stage of the writing process with intensive one-on-one and small group consultations, workshops, and classes. We are prepared to advise faculty and staff across the campus about writing and the teaching of writing.

Clyde Moneyhun, Director of Writing
Gilda Teixido Kelsey, Assistant Director of
Writing for the Writing Center
Carol-Anne Ritter, Office Supervisor
Dee Baer, Editor

www.udel.edu/writingcenter

Email: writingcenter@udel.edu



