

Writing Studies as Grounds for Professional Writing

The Major at the University of Minnesota Duluth

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Abstract. The Writing Studies major (with emphases in Professional Writing and in Journalism) at the University of Minnesota Duluth marks a curricular innovation. This article traces the intellectual arguments that defined Writing Studies as one of the disciplines defined by its object (akin to American Studies, Women's Studies, and so on). The object of Writing Studies at UMD is writing, defined as a practice, a tool for cognition and social action, and a force for sociocultural change. These arguments are manifest in the core curriculum of the major (16 credits across four years of student coursework) and serve as grounds for the Professional Writing curriculum. That Professional Writing curriculum places exploration of and practice in writing in specific cultural contexts as the central skill set of a professional writing major rooted in the disciplinary home of Writing Studies.

Keywords. curriculum development, disciplinarity, independent program, Writing Studies

This article explicates the intellectual arguments for an emphasis in Professional Writing within the Writing Studies major at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Unlike similar majors at other institutions (housed in English Departments, typically), this major merges the innovations of the new disciplinary field of Writing Studies with the skills necessary to succeed in technical and professional communication careers. What emerges, then, is something new and different—a curricular innovation.

The emerging field of Writing Studies enabled us to redefine work within one of the disciplines defined by its object (akin to American Studies, Women's Studies, and so on). The object of Writing Studies at UMD is writing, defined as a practice, as a tool for both cognition and for social action, and as a force for sociocultural change. These arguments are manifest in the core curriculum of the major (16 credits across all four years of student coursework). These six courses, required of all majors in Writing Studies, represent the common core

of intellectual work in our department. In addition to completing this core, students select an emphasis in either Journalism or Professional Writing. Those emphases explore the theoretical, practical, and sociocultural issues of writing in two contemporary contexts (the media and the workplace). This article focuses specifically on the Professional Writing emphasis: the core courses and electives that define professional writing skills within our disciplinary frame.

This article, then, makes three moves: it articulates the institutional resources available for the construction of our major (because, after all, curriculum is local), it defines the core Writing Studies courses in that major, and it outlines the courses required and/or available in the Professional Writing curriculum, including the nature and content of those courses, especially as inflected by our foundation in Writing Studies.¹

The Local Context for the New Major: A Department of Writing Studies

This new major in Writing Studies was born from two decades of evolution into a freestanding Department of Writing Studies, formerly Department of Composition. The Department of Composition separated, administratively, from the Department of English in 1988. At that point, the split was amicable, rooted in a largely budgetary desire to separate the costs of the first-year composition program from the costs of the English major.

At the undergraduate level, the two departments developed independently. The split, rooted largely in administrative, rather than intellectual, reasons, resulted in an odd amalgamation of programs that grew increasingly diversified. Over time, the Department of Composition came to house the following programs:

- First-Year Composition (an integral part of the liberal education program)
- Advanced Composition (Professional Writing, courses that serve multiple majors for accreditation and professional development)
- An undergraduate minor in Information Design (a selection of courses in web design and digital culture studies)
- An undergraduate minor in Linguistics
- An undergraduate minor in Professional Writing and Communication
- An undergraduate minor in Journalism

¹ This article describes our program monolithically; in fact, it is a complex melding of interdisciplinary perspectives that will inevitably result in overlaps, distinctions, and disagreements in the meaning of curriculum. I played a key role in synthesizing materials, such as course proposals, for the aggregate major proposal, giving me a bird's eye perspective on the process and a role in fashioning a whole from the parts. But in the end, this article speaks from that limited perspective.

Some of these programs developed due to faculty strengths (minors in Linguistics and Information Design). Some programs developed due to collaboration with other departments (minors in Professional Writing and Communication were developed with the Department of Communication). And one program was inherited as a legacy (the Journalism program migrated from the Department of English to the Department of Communication to the Department of Composition).

At the graduate level, the membership in the MA program in English was composed of faculty in both the English and Composition departments. This arrangement was both fiscal (because the teaching assistantships remained rooted in the Composition program) and intellectual. Over the decades, the Department of Composition faculty would increase intellectual contributions to the graduate program.

We had achieved the dream: a freestanding department with autonomy in research, funding, and tenure decisions. In 2008, we sought to be renamed the Department of Writing Studies, a term that at once differentiated us from our past (as a department with a largely service orientation) and that better collected the various strands of research extant in the Department. At the same time, we were independent yet entangled, freestanding yet intersecting with other departments and university-wide curriculum. These were the raw materials from which the major in Writing Studies would be built.

The Disciplinary Context for the New Major: Writing Studies

To articulate our new major, we needed a project that could unify the diverse interests of the department—that could pull the course offerings and the faculty into a single project. This project was important both for the culture of the department and for its public face within the University. “Writing Studies” was that public face.

Writing Studies is structured like similar disciplines with similar titles, defined by a newly recognized and important object of study. Similar disciplines include American Studies, Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies (African-American Studies, Asian-American Studies, and so on), Library and Information Studies, and Cultural Studies.

The appearance of these disciplines was an act of legitimating the object of study. It’s not that America was not the object of scholarly reflection prior to the rise of American Studies departments, but that its centrality as an object of study was established when those departments were established. These departments are also different from older, more traditional departments in

that they unite diverse methodological approaches in the study of the object. American Studies departments include literature scholars, historians, sociologists, art historians, and other scholars, united by their interest in a common object of study.

Our argument is that *writing* is now poised to take its place alongside those objects of study at the core of a discipline. In making that claim, we are dependent on and build on the ground broken by Charles Bazerman (2002), who claimed that “Writing Studies is the study of writing—its production, its circulation, its uses, its role in the development of individuals, societies and cultures” (p. 32). For our purposes, then, we understand writing in three ways. Each way shapes our curriculum and defines our claims to disciplinary status at Duluth. We research and teach writing as a practice (with its own theoretical grounds), as a tool (used in a variety of human activities), and as a historically embedded phenomenon that has transformed sociocultural structures.

The Study of Writing as a Practice

Our roots in composition studies mark our commitment to the study of writing as a practice. The major curriculum is built on the study and execution of the practice of writing. Positioned at the heart of the core curriculum is Introduction to Writing Studies (WRIT 2506). This course is both an introduction to theories of the writing process (rhetorical, humanistic, and social scientific) and an exploration of the writing process for students in the major. The theory of writing is explored through practice.²

The Study of Writing as a Tool

We research and teach writing as a tool. This perspective entails a complex hybrid perspective, combining insights from rhetorical theory and linguistics to argue that writing is a tool for cognition.

From rhetorical theory, Andrea Lunsford (2006) has recently thought think through this perspective of writing as well as articulated the ways in which writing is a technology for thinking. According to Lunsford, writing is

a technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media. (p. 171)

² This course was developed by Juli Parrish (PhD, English, University of Pittsburgh), an accomplished scholar and teacher of diverse forms of writing practice from professional writing to the amateur writing (fan fiction) that is the core of her research project.

Lunsford provides a fresh articulation of the key insight that writing is a tool for thinking. From collaboration with faculty in Linguistics (also housed in the Department of Writing Studies), we understand that the features of language map onto the processes of mind. Linguistics is therefore understood not just as the study of language as spoken practice (the perspective of sociolinguistics, a perspective that has been a part of composition studies since the 1970s). The core curriculum includes a course (LING 2506 Introduction to Language and Writing) that helps majors in Writing Studies connect diction and syntax to critical thinking and cognition.³

Writing and the Development of Human Societies

Writing has led to immense sociocultural change. We see this claim in the works of early scholars of literacy in the ancient world (Havelock, 1986; Chaytor, 1945; and Ong, 1982) who noted the transformative power of the written word in ancient Greece. We also see this claim in the works of media ecologists like Elizabeth Eisenstein (2005), who noted the transformation of Renaissance culture after the development of printing; Benedict Anderson (1983), who connected printing technologies to the development of nation states; Harold Innis (1986), who connected those same printing technologies to the development of empire; and Bolter and Grusin (1999), who explored the implications of online writing for an “electronically constituted society” at the turn of the twentieth century. Today, we find writing in politics, corporate life, journalism, education, online communities, photocopied zines on sale in record shops, and scrapbooks that map the lived experiences of families. Writing is embedded in these human activities and, in some cases, is constitutive of these activities.

Our curriculum reflects both the historical consciousness that stems from these important precedents in media ecology studies and a firm grasp of the contextualized nature of contemporary writing. Undecided students enter the major through a liberal education humanities course, Literacy, Technology and Society (WRIT 1506), which traces the social impact of writing on human sociocultural institutions.⁴ In exploring the complexities of the contemporary context, Media Law and Ethics (JOUR 3700) explores the current context for writing practice: issues of free speech, intellectual property, and the place of writing in contemporary legal and professional institutions. (The lower division core courses were the subject of a reflective essay in *Composition Forum*, vol. 21, Spring 2010.)

³ This course was developed by Chongwon Park (PhD, Linguistics, University of Illinois), a theoretical and computational linguist.

⁴ This course was designed by noted Walter Ong scholar Thomas Farrell, who taught courses in both Writing Studies and Cultural Studies prior to his retirement.

From the Foundation of Writing Studies: A Major in Professional Writing

From this foundational core, outlining for students the object of study (writing) from three fundamental perspectives, the major proceeds to advanced study of writing in context. Students explore the way that writing as a practice changes as the context for writing changes (for example, as students move into networked workplace environments). They explore the diversity of ways writing can be used as a tool as writers change contexts. And, they explore the ways writing continues to play a role in defining contemporary human institutions. This exploration begins with four core courses and continues across four elective courses.

At the core of the curriculum is the professional writing course at the junior/senior level (designated as an advanced writing course for many disciplines). This course introduces the contexts, strategies, and practices of workplace writing. Students select from courses focusing on writing in engineering, the social sciences, the sciences, the human service professions, and the arts, studying the context of writing from within a particular profession.

Explicit study of the interaction between “Writing and Cultures” (WRIT 4200) occurs in the course by that same name. In this course, literacy is studied as a component of a diversity of cultural backdrops: from rural (Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words*) to urban settings (Ralph Cintron’s *Angel’s Town*); from professional (Dorothy Winsor’s *Writing Like an Engineer*) to virtual settings (Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*). Building on the historical perspective of writing in human cultural institutions established in *Literacy, Technology and Society*, this course furthers exploration of contemporary sociocultural communities and creates more versatile writers across those communities.⁵

By exploring the relationship between “Visual Rhetoric and Culture” (WRIT 4260), students move beyond maxims for efficient visual communication that typically come packed into textbooks. Students enrolled in this course recognize that we live, work, and play in a variety of visual cultures. In that sense, our strategies for visual communication must go beyond effective software usage for efficient displays of information; it must assess the cultural norms for visual display. Then, as we expect effective professional writers to write with a sensitivity to the context of language use, we also expect effective professional writers to communicate visually with the same sensitivity.

Finally, the course “Research Methods for the Study of Writing” (WRIT 4300) places students in positions as critics and consultants, assessing writing in context. Students explore writing (as practice, tool, and sociocultural force) from the

⁵ This course was developed by Kenneth Marunowski (PhD, Kent State University) and reflects his enthusiasm for and expertise in the study of writing in and across cultures.

diversity of research perspectives in the department: qualitative, quantitative, and humanistic methods of research. These advanced tools for reflecting on the practice of writing in context helps move students closer to the ideal of the reflective practitioner.

The elective curriculum, in the meantime, takes advantage of the immense strengths of the Journalism curriculum—a sophisticated exploration of multiple media (broadcast, print, and, new media) for use in a variety of public writing contexts. These electives include the courses Reporting and Writing, Copy Editing and Layout, News Photography, Community and Journalism, and History of American Journalism. The elective curriculum also takes advantage of courses in linguistics of use to professional writers, including Introduction to Syntax (for advanced study of the relationship between language and mind) and Sociolinguistics (for the study of language variation across human communities). Finally, electives also draw from advanced courses in professional writing (Introduction to Grant Writing and Project Planning) and information design (Document Design and Graphics and Web Design and Digital Culture) and a seminar in The Rhetoric of Popular Culture—an array of courses that continues the exploration of writing from our three perspectives.

All students complete the curriculum with the course New Media Writing (WRIT 4250), which pushes students to explore the transformations in writing that occur within the new media environment, and with a one-credit portfolio preparation that pulls their various projects across each class into a clear demonstration of their versatility as professional writers.⁶

A Major in Professional Writing Can Be a Technical Writing Program

Readers of *Programmatic Perspectives* might well wonder whether this major constitutes a true technical communication major, or whether the varieties of writing in which students engage are too diverse to count as technical communication, or whether the focus on writing in the curriculum takes away from the traditionally interdisciplinary work of technical communication majors. But we find that our curriculum remains in line with the seminal definitions of technical communication programs, including the definition advanced by Wahlstrom and Meese (1988):

The best of the new programs offer more than instruction in writing, choosing to see technical communication as a broader field requiring training in visual and oral communication; skills associated with printing, graphic design, and publication management; information management; communications technologies; and often laboratory

⁶ The one-credit portfolio experience derives from the research expertise in portfolio assessment of Department Head Jill Jenson (EdD, University of Minnesota).

or production experiences in nonprint media, including video. (p. 33)

Although formal training in oral communication remains the domain of Communication Studies at UMD, it is clear that visual communication, communications technologies, and information management are essential to the required curriculum in Professional Writing. Meanwhile, our colleagues in Journalism bring to the table a highly refined pedagogy for publications management and production experiences in audio, video, and new media platforms. The major in Writing Studies achieves the goals of the major in technical communication, built from a slightly different pool of resources.

Conclusion

The core curriculum in Writing Studies reflects a new public face for the department—a distinction between the old Department of Composition (filling a primarily service role in the institution) and the new Department of Writing Studies. The emphasis on writing as a practice, a tool, and a force for change in human communities defines Writing Studies in our intellectual context.

A major in Professional Writing in the Department of Writing Studies is built upon a three-part foundation. The student experience is enhanced in particular by the advanced study of writing in professional contexts. It is complicated and enriched by reflection on and practice in generating texts within the diversity of print and visual cultures, including formal study of research methods for the study of writing in context. These courses, taken in tandem with a sophisticated array of electives in both Professional Writing and Journalism, achieve the goals typically set for a program in technical communication. Whether this model advances substantially and is transferable to other institutions or contexts is an open question and one we look forward to exploring.

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