

The Case for a Major in Writing Studies: The University of Minnesota Duluth



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Abstract: The Major in Writing Studies (with emphases in Professional Writing and in Journalism) at the University of Minnesota Duluth marks a curricular innovation. This profile traces the intellectual arguments that created space for a Department and Major in Writing Studies at UMD. Those arguments included a differentiation from the contested spaces of other disciplines (literary studies and communication studies) as well as from the prior disciplinary identity of the Department (composition studies). These arguments also included a positive identification of Writing Studies as one of the disciplines defined by its object (akin to American Studies, Women's Studies, etc.). 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 of courses across all four years of the students' coursework).

Introduction

This essay profiles the Department of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth to explicate the arguments for a major in Writing Studies. In one sense, it picks up work done in the forthcoming *What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors* (edited by Moriarty and Giberson). The title intentionally echoes the title of an essay by Charles Bazerman ("The Case for Writing Studies as a Major Field of Study"), from which this project took a great deal of direction. Therein, Bazerman defines Writing Studies by stipulation, claiming that "Writing Studies is the study of writing—its production, its circulation, its uses, its role in the development of individuals, societies and cultures" (32). As such, Writing Studies is a discipline structured like other disciplines with similar titles: American Studies, Women's Studies, Library & Information Studies, Communication Studies, Cultural Studies—with Writing as the object.

In other essays, Bazerman defines Writing Studies by differentiation. Within the larger umbrella of English studies, for example, Bazerman differentiates writing studies from literary studies: Writing studies differs from literary studies in part because it does not engage "the traditional historical work of rhetorical and literary studies in recovering, editing, and interpreting major texts" (as well as new additions to the canon) ("Theories of the Middle Range in Historical Studies of Writing Practice" 298). It may be helpful to think through "Writing Studies" as a broad term; in paraphrasing it to colleagues, I often appeal to the distinction between literary studies and literacy studies. Literacy studies entails reading and writing activities of great variety—multiple genres, multiple contexts—and so is clearly distinct from literary studies, which keeps its eye on a narrower range of writing and reading activities. Further, because we are interested in a broader array of writing and reading activities, we can focus on a greater variety of sociocultural effects of writing. We can be interested in the ways that a variety of writing forms sustain institutions, generate communities, and enable (or domesticate) individual and social cognition. Bazerman is not the only scholar to advance claims for the disciplinarity of Writing Studies, but at Minnesota Duluth, we found these claims particularly persuasive.

The arguments that Bazerman advances in these essays, however, were transformed when planted in the soil of the Department of Writing Studies at UMD. The intellectual resources and curricular raw material available in that context engaged the core claims of Bazerman's arguments in uniquely local ways. What emerges, then, is something new and different—a curricular innovation.

This profile traces the intellectual arguments that created space for a Department and Major in Writing Studies at UMD. Those arguments included a differentiation from the contested spaces of other disciplines (literary studies and communication studies). We needed the good will of colleagues in other departments—their support made curriculum development and approval easier. We also took this opportunity to differentiate the old Department of Composition (the service unit that offered primarily first year writing courses from 1988-2008) from the new Department of Writing

Studies (the unit which we became). In becoming the Department of Writing Studies, we found an opportunity to rebrand our department in terms of its intellectual project rather than only its service mission.

Our innovation, then, stems from our arguments about the object of the discipline of Writing Studies at UMD. We teach and research writing, defined as a practice, as a tool both for cognition & for social action, and as a force for sociocultural change.

These claims about the nature of writing are manifest in the core curriculum of the major (16 credits in six courses across all four years of the student's coursework). The following six core classes (see Table One below), required of all majors in Writing Studies, represent the common core of intellectual work in our Department. Following Bazerman's claims, we see the study of writing from a variety of perspectives. We study writing with a critical eye toward its role in the development of individuals, societies and cultures (Writ 1506; Writ 2506; Ling 2506). We examine its contemporary systems of circulation and uses (Writ 2506; Jour 3700). And across the curriculum, culminating in the portfolio class (Writ 4506) and in the New Media Writing class (Writ 4250), our students master its production—becoming skilled writers in their own right.

Course Number	Course Title	Course Description
WRIT 1506	Literacy, Technology and Society	Historical survey of cultures without writing systems and cultures with writing systems and then later with printing, telegraph, radio, telephone, television, computers as well as other forms of technology. Survey of attitudes toward technology from Thoreau to Gandhi and beyond.
WRIT 2506	Introduction to Writing Studies	Considers writing itself as both a practice and an object of study. Drawing on composition, journalism, linguistics, literary studies, and rhetoric, the course offers a survey of historical, critical, and theoretical issues in writing studies. Writing assignments ask students to apply a writing studies framework to produce and analyze specific texts.
LING 2506	Language and Writing	Different from a traditional linguistic approach, language and its system will be examined with emphasis on writing, as opposed to speech. Based on the formal theoretical foundations of language and linguistics, three main topics are discussed in detail. First, the world's major writing systems and a short history of writing are introduced. Second, the English sentence structures are studied from a contemporary theoretical and historical linguistic perspective. Third, language use in writing is discussed in various genres.
JOUR 3700	Media Law and Ethics	Examines laws, regulations and major court decisions that affect journalists and news organizations. Topics include First Amendment principles of press freedom, libel, invasion of privacy, prior restraint, access to information, and the regulation of electronic media content.
WRIT 4250	New Media Writing	Combines the theory and production of new media writing—digital, verbal practices in converged media—through the application of readings and discussion to five projects that progress from written, print-based genres to new-media presentation.
WRIT 4506	Capstone Course: Senior Portfolio Preparation	Required capstone course for all writing studies majors. Portfolios for multiple purposes will be prepared under the guidance of the student's adviser.

Table 1. Six Core Courses in Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

In addition to the completion of this core, students elect an emphasis in Journalism or in Professional Writing. Those emphases explore the theoretical, practical and sociocultural issues in writing in two contemporary contexts (the media and the workplace).[{1}](#)

In the first section of this profile, I describe how our local context yielded specific arguments for the major in Writing Studies—arguments that have implications for larger scholarly discussions concerning the disciplinary distinctions between and intellectual status of Rhetorical Studies, Composition Studies, Rhetoric & Composition, or Writing Studies. In the second section, I rehearse the arguments that located Writing Studies among its sibling disciplines at UMD; in the third section, I examine the arguments that defined the proper object of study of our new discipline and manifested that definition in our core curriculum.[{2}](#)

The Local Context and the Scholarly Conversation

The new Major in Writing Studies was born of two decades of evolution in 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 in time, the split was largely amicable, rooted in a largely budgetary desire to separate the costs of the first-year composition program from the costs of the large English major. (The very large department was allotted a single budget to serve the needs of a large number of English majors as well as a composition program serving 10,000 students with two semesters of required courses. Too often, courses in literature intended to serve the English majors were cancelled so that another liberal education writing course could be added to the schedule. The solution, it seemed, was to disentangle the two programs: to move the liberal education writing courses into a freestanding academic department.)

Generally speaking, collaboration characterized the relationship between the then newly-formed Department of Composition and the Department of English. Their joint role in maintaining the terminal MA in English necessitated the collaboration, as teaching assistantships remained allotted to the first-year writing program (and so administered by the Department of Composition). Faculty in both Departments were appointed with Graduate Faculty Status in the English MA Program; they were equally able to direct MA projects, teach MA courses, and advise MA students. Over time, the collaboration has become a strong point in positioning the MA competitively across the region. Together, we now offer two traditional curricula in English (with emphases either in a narrow form of Literary Studies or in a broader form of English Studies, composed of courses in Literature, Language, and Writing Studies). We also offer an emphasis in Publishing & Print Culture, a track designed to blend an emerging subfield of English (Print Culture Studies) with the practical skills to enter a career in writing and editing.

Nonetheless, at the undergraduate level, the two departments developed independently. Left to its own devices, over time, the Department of Composition grew as it entrepreneurially came to house the following academic programs:

- First-Year Composition (an integral part of the liberal education program)
- Advanced Composition (required courses in professional writing serving multiple majors for accreditation purposes, etc.)
- An undergraduate minor in Linguistics, the first formal minor available in the Department and the only graduate-level minor available in the Department
- An undergraduate minor in Professional Writing and Communication, developed to advance the status of the professional writing courses from “merely” service to a designated area of study for students
- An undergraduate minor in Information Design (a selection of courses in web design and digital culture studies)
- An undergraduate minor in Journalism

Some of these programs developed from faculty strengths (the Minors in Linguistics and Information Design). One program developed from collaboration with another unit (the Minor in Professional Writing and Communication, developed with the Department of Communication). One program was inherited as a legacy (as the Journalism program migrated from the Department of English to the Department of Communication to the Department of Composition over the span of three decades). Growth came like the root system of a tree—spreading in multiple directions over time.

Because the split was primarily administrative and the growth in programs within the department over the years was primarily entrepreneurial, there was little opportunity to engage, deliberately and as a department, some of the scholarly conversations that have come to define the questions of disciplinarity for rhetoric, composition and writing.

When Margaret Strain tells us that “we recognize when an area of professional inquiry has achieved the status of a discipline [when] its members begin to write its history” (57), she refers to the histories that focus on standard, intellectual measures of disciplinarity. Kitzhaber, Berlin, Connors and dozens of other scholars in composition studies write histories that focus on intellectual measures and measures of disciplinary prestige:

a defined subject of study; a canon of texts which theorizes and historicizes that subject; the establishment of a research community; the creation of apparatuses that insure the field’s continued visibility such as scholarly journals, presses, and professional organizations; and, the ability to authorize and reproduce practitioners through the establishment of graduate programs. (Strain 57)

As a freestanding department at a regional, MA-terminal university dedicated primarily to teaching, we had little place in the development of the discipline by these measures. As the number of programs grew and diversified, there was even less coherence in the object of study, it seemed. While our faculty published occasionally, there was not a vital position taken in the development of a canon of texts or a research community to study those texts. And while the graduate program would occasionally produce students who would pursue a PhD in English, it did not produce practitioners of composition studies.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps articulates a disciplinary history of rhetoric and composition that simply does not map onto the narrative of our then Department of Composition:

The formation of Rhetoric and Composition as a contemporary discipline is conventionally dated to around 1963, but founders saw it as reconnecting writing to a history of Western rhetoric stretching back to ancient Greece. In the sixties and seventies, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds brought this humanistic tradition together with the methods of social and behavioral sciences to develop a new field focused on studying written language. (1)

Phelps’ narrative is designed to justify a full and clean break from English as an intellectual umbrella (for purposes of National Research Council classification). She is “opposed [to] classifying Rhetoric and Composition as a subfield of English studies.... [S]uch a classification [is] historically inaccurate and misleading because of this field’s multiple source disciplines and the varied intellectual configurations and institutional locations of its doctoral programs” (5). Phelps needs to articulate rhetoric and composition as a unique intellectual enterprise to justify its administrative independence from English.

In a very real sense, because we were created as an administrative expedience, we achieved departmental independence before we had disciplinary coherence. We were the freestanding Department of Composition before we had a coherent intellectual mission beyond the service courses in first year composition and advanced composition that defined the bulk of our teaching. We existed outside the disciplinary narratives that have defined the field, in many ways, as a freestanding department with autonomy in funding and tenure decisions, but without a place within the larger scholarly conversation about the intellectual work of rhetoric and composition. And the entrepreneurial patterns of our growth, one academic minor at a time, only increased the diffusion of our voices.

By 2007, the Department was nearing the largest total number of tenure-line faculty it had ever held: one full professor of composition (noted Ong scholar Tom Farrell), one full professor of linguistics (sociolinguist Michael Linn), three associate professors of composition (Kenneth Risdon, Craig Stroupe, and Jill Jenson, who serves both as department head and director of composition), and five assistant professors (three in composition: David Beard, Kenneth Marunowski, and Juli Parrish; one in linguistics: Chongwon Park; one in Journalism: John Hatcher). The department is also staffed by eight teaching assistants and a dozen adjunct faculty and one full-time administrative assistant. There was a critical mass of scholars willing to collaborate toward a common vision—toward articulating a common intellectual project.

In 2008, we sought to be renamed the Department of Writing Studies. “Writing Studies” would replace “Composition” as a term to differentiate us from our past (as a department largely defined by the service composition courses that were the justification for our independence). But more importantly, “Writing Studies” better collected the various strands of research extant in the Department. “Writing Studies” would pull first year composition and professional writing, information design and journalism, and even some elements of linguistics into a coherent intellectual project that would be the backbone of our new, first major. This name change was important both for the culture of the Department and for the public face of the Department within the University. “Writing Studies” was to become our new public face.

Finding Writing Studies among the Disciplines

To craft that public face, we had to be able to define Writing Studies (for ourselves and for others) through a variety of strategies. We had to be able to define what Writing Studies *is not* (to differentiate a new public face from the old public face of the Department as a service unit; to differentiate the mission of the newly renamed department from extant departments at the university). We had to define what Writing Studies *is* (as a positive statement aligned with the research, teaching and service goals of the university). And, lastly, we needed to identify our complementarity—our points of intersection with other units.

Writing Studies is not identical with Literary Studies at Minnesota Duluth

The longest-standing academic discipline for the study of written texts in the United States is the discipline of English. And English as a disciplinary formation has come to include a wider and wider range of objects of study: film, popular culture, visual communication, creative writing, linguistics and much, much more.

But, over the course of the last 100 years, English as a departmental (as opposed to disciplinary) formation at Minnesota Duluth has become more and more narrow. Facets of language and literacy have split into other departments. Speech and theatre scholars divided from English in 1937 at UMD. When the “communications” minor in English moved into UMD’s Communication department in the 1960s, so did the study of mass communication and media texts. And when the faculty member who pioneered cultural studies at UMD saw his tenure line moved to Sociology, so did the range of courses in that area migrate with him. As a result, in many ways, the scope of English studies at Minnesota Duluth has narrowed to a strictly defined conception of literary studies.

Writing Studies, as a disciplinary practice, may use methods that overlap those developed in literary studies—drawing on the same bodies of critical theory, for example. But those methods are put to different political, intellectual and cultural ends. Scholars in Writing Studies do not suffer from what John Schilb has called “canonopia” (131)—here, Schilb means the contortions that followed the canon wars in literary studies at the end of the last century and that define the literary curriculum. By contrast, the nonliterary texts under analysis from a Writing Studies perspective are intentionally a-canonical, but no less important because they circulate and do work in the world. Such writings include workplace writings, political and civic writings, and student writings (the traditional domain of composition studies).

Writing Studies is not identical with Composition

Composition is a term that has only recently come into crystallization. Arguments for the disciplinary status of composition have multiplied in the last twenty years, from Steve North’s monograph *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* to Louise Wetherbee Phelps’ systematic arguments for rhetoric and composition as an “emerging field” (1). At UMD, composition, as a term for an intellectual enterprise, has generally become shorthand, however, for a particular component of Writing Studies: the pedagogical component. When David Bartholomae claims that composition is the “institutionally supported desire to organize and evaluate the writing of [student] writers and to define it as an object of professional scrutiny” (327), he is clarifying the particular commitment inherent in the term “composition” to the pedagogical project that defined our department. We were a Department of Composition for two decades, and the pedagogical project was foremost in the Department’s mission for much of that time. Part of the transformation in the change of our name to a Department of Writing Studies was an embrace of an intellectual project larger than just that of the best pedagogy for the first-year course. “Composition,” as a term for the public face of the department within the Minnesota Duluth context, was inextricable from the first-year course. Rather than attempt to redefine the term for our colleagues, we struck out for a new term.

Writing Studies is not Communication Studies

Writing Studies is, in many ways, roughly analogous to Communication Studies. Both draw deeply but not exclusively from the rhetorical tradition. We both use rhetoric as a field and method of inquiry, but the term was both bigger and smaller than what each discipline has been within the 20th century. And like the compositionists, the communicationists initially built their claims to disciplinarity in claims to pedagogy. (The first national association for communication faculty was the National Association for Academic Teachers of Public Speaking, as discussed in

Keith.)

Despite our clear similarities (common roots in pedagogy and common sources in the rhetorical tradition), Writing Studies is not identical with communication studies. Whole ranges of human communication overlap in these two fields (as, for example, scholars from both disciplines may be interested in print magazines as an object of study). But whole ranges of human communication do not overlap (as speech-communication scholars continue to explore areas like proxemics and nonverbal communication).

This differentiation was essential in the context of Duluth because of the relative size of the Communication faculty and the Communication major at Duluth. Within the College of Liberal Arts, the Communication faculty is the 800-pound gorilla, and we needed to articulate our mission as parallel to, rather than competing with, their mission. A sharp focus on writing helped make our argument that our major complemented, rather than competed with, the major in Communication.

In differentiating ourselves from our siblings (from literary studies and from communication studies) and from our own past (composition studies, to the extent that the term “composition” reflected only the service mission of the department), we had not yet articulated what it meant to be a new Department of Writing Studies. We needed to advance those positive arguments.

Writing Studies, Defined

Writing Studies, once differentiated from other disciplines, must be articulated on its own ground, one defined by a newly recognized and important object of study. Similar disciplines include American Studies, Women’s Studies, and Ethnic Studies (African-American Studies, Asian-American Studies, etc.). The appearance of these disciplines was an act of legitimating their objects of study and an act of facilitating interdisciplinary inquiry.

It is not the case that no one studied America prior to the rise of American Studies departments. However, the centrality of American culture as an object of study was established with departments and the discipline bearing that name. American Studies departments include literature scholars, historians, sociologists, art historians and other scholars, united by their interest in the 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 heavily dependent upon and build from the claims made by Charles Bazerman, transformed to understand Writing in three ways. These three ways shape our curriculum and define our claims to disciplinary status at Duluth.

1. We research and teach writing as a practice (with its own theoretical grounds).
2. We research and teach writing as a tool (used in a variety of human activities).
3. We research and teach writing as a historically embedded phenomenon that has transformed human socio-cultural structures.

The Study of Writing as a Practice

Our roots in composition studies mark our commitment to the study of writing as a practice. By far, the highest number of courses offered in the Department are still courses in writing (First Year Composition; Professional Writing; and the courses in Journalism, Professional Writing and Publishing that emphasize writing as a practice). Additionally, the single most vital contribution to the MA curriculum remains the course in “Teaching College Writing.”

The major curriculum is built upon the study and execution of the practice of writing. In the Core Curriculum (required of students in both the Journalism and Professional Writing emphases), students must complete New Media Writing (WRIT 4250)^[3] and the production of a Professional Portfolio (WRIT 4506).^[4] These courses put students through their paces, generating a body of writings that can demonstrate their mastery of the skill of writing. They signal our basic commitment to teaching writing as a practice.

Courses in journalism (in broadcast media production and online journalism, especially) and courses in the information design program (in visual rhetoric, in document design and in web design, especially) appear, to the casual observer, to not be courses in writing. The final product isn’t typed, doesn’t run through a laser printer, and cannot be photocopied; it must not be writing. But these surface observations fail to see the coherence behind the Latourian perspective on inscriptions that complements Bazerman’s perspective in our approach. Latour considers

meaningful marks of an immense variety that include the points on a line graph, the halftone dots that constitute a photograph in a newspaper, the pixels on a computer screen, the analogue waves on an audiotape (articulated in *Pandora's Hope*).

Following from that perspective, we define writing very broadly as we design experiences for our students, hoping that each will develop a truly multimedia portfolio (in Writ 4506). And the universal requirement of Writ 4250, New Media Writing, demonstrates our commitment to this broad conception of writing—a conception that informs courses across our curriculum.

The Study of Writing as a Tool

When we teach writing as a practice, we teach the skills of rhetorical production—of crafting texts to rhetorical situations. We also research and teach reflection on writing as a tool—a component in both complex human activity systems and in individual human cognition.

Writing is a material object, capable of doing work in the material world. The materiality of text has been mapped in the classical world, for example, by Robert Gaines who articulates the study of classical rhetoric as the study of “anything written using any medium that has survived complete or in fragments ... [including] original and copied writing on papyrus, wood, wax, or animal skin or writing on or in pottery, masonry, stone or metal... man-made objects of aesthetic, practical, religious or other cultural significance” (65). In the contemporary world, that materiality of the text is echoed in the writings of Latour and Woolgar, for example, when they discuss the variety of inscription machines that drive contemporary scientific practice (*Laboratory Life* 48-51). The text is an object, worthy of study, useful in a variety of human activities.

A variety of scholars trained in rhetorical genre theory (Aviva Freedman, David Russell, and others) have advanced the idea that writing is a tool and have made important connections to activity theory. Like these scholars, we want our students to see writing as an integral part of what activity theorists call goal-directed, historically-situated, cooperative human interactions. We want them to see the ways that writing can be the tool to mediate between a subject (a person or persons) and an objective (a goal or common task). *Résumés* mediate between job seekers (and their goal of securing a job) and interviewers (and their goal of finding the best applicant for a position). A Facebook page mediates between the desire of the individual to express himself or herself and the desire of the corporation to target advertising as tightly and efficiently as possible. The core course Writ 2506, Introduction to Writing Studies,^[5] introduces students to this perspective (among others) through readings like John Seeley Brown's and Paul Duiguid's “Social Life of Documents.”

We are particularly interested, within our curriculum, in the use of these material pieces of writing as tools for thinking. From the perspective of rhetoric and composition, this follows from adages as old as claims from the expressivist movement that writing enables thinking (roughly paraphrased in the teacherly question, “how do I know what I think until I write it down?”) through Patricia Bizzell's claims that writing enables a kind of critical consciousness. But from the important perspective of our collaboration with our faculty in Linguistics, we understand that the features and typifications of language map onto the processes of mind. Linguistics is 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^[6]) that helps majors in Writing Studies connect diction and syntax to thinking and cognition.

Andrea Lunsford has begun to think through this perspective, as well, in articulating that 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. (171)

Lunsford here provides a fresh articulation of the key insight: writing is a tool for thinking, an insight plumbed to the depths in Ling 2506.

Writing and the Development of Human Societies

To be sure that students recognize both the incredible power that comes from effective writing and the awesome responsibility that comes with being an effective writer, we ask them to encounter writing as historically

transformative. We ask them to recognize that writing is embedded in human social structures and human cultural institutions. This has been true since the classical period; again, we can turn to Gaines for the most complex articulation. Gaines gives us a survey of what he called “discourse venues,” or discourse “places culturally associated with purposive communication, including rostra, legislative assembly areas, courts, theaters, temples, salons, schools, libraries, festivals, and other public and private locations” (65-66). In the contemporary world, we find similar diversity: we find writing acting in politics, in corporate life, in journalism, in education, in online communities, in photocopied ‘zines on sale in record shops and in scrapbooks that map the lived experiences of families. Writing is embedded in these human activities and, in some cases, is constitutive of these activities.

Writing has led to immense sociocultural change. We see these claims in the early scholars of literacy in the ancient world (Havelock, Chaytor, and Ong) who noted the transformative power of the written word in ancient Greece. We see these claims in the works of media ecologists like Elizabeth Eisenstein (who noted the transformation of Renaissance culture after the development of printing), Benedict Anderson (who connected printing technologies to the development of nation states), Harold Innis (who connected those same printing technologies to the development of empire), and Bolter and Grusin (who explored the implications of online writing for an “electronically constituted society” at the turn of the 20th century).

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. Students enter the major through a liberal education humanities course called “Literacy, Technology and Society” (WRIT 1506^[7]) that traces the very social impacts of writing upon human sociocultural institutions indicated here. In exploring the complexities of the contemporary context, Media Law and Ethics (JOUR 3700^[8]) explores the current context for writing practice. In exploring issues of free speech, for example, students in Jour 3700 explore the ways that writing can effect personal and political change. In understanding contemporary media institutions, students understand the power of writing to shape popular opinion and cultural norms.

Conclusion

The core curriculum in Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth is an expression of our disciplinary and curricular identity. At once, we made clear that we were distinct in our intellectual project from the departments with whom we had collaborated so collegially for decades—and so we could continue to collaborate in the future. We created a new public face—a distinction between the old Department of Composition (filling a service role in the institution) and the new Department of Writing Studies. We are no longer defined entirely by our liberal education offerings; we have an object of study as coherent as any department on campus.

Reflecting Backward; Looking forward

This profile is too short to discuss in greater depth the kind of work that students do outside the core curriculum (in electives and in the core courses of the emphases in Journalism or Professional Writing). The goal of this profile has been to articulate the unique innovation of a major in Writing Studies—a clear break from prior examples of “Writing Intensive English” and “Technical Writing.”

Personally (and without consultation with any of my colleagues), I take a great deal of pride in the ways that the lower division curriculum of this major differs from, say, the lower division of typical majors in English. “Sophomore” courses in English majors tend to be surveys of genre, of national literature by period (e.g. BritLit I, II; AmLit I, II). Literary criticism and theory, on the other hand, tends to serve as a capstone course in the major—a terminal or exit experience. The emphasis on history and theory in the core curriculum at our first-year and sophomore level (in Writ 1506, Literacy, Technology and Society; in Ling 2506, Language and Writing; and in Writ 2506, Introduction to Writing Studies) helps students and faculty articulate the ways that our project is about more than just polishing academic essays or drafting feasibility studies. We study writing as an artifact, a tool for human activity and human cognition, and a historical force in human communities. As we move toward collecting portfolios from our graduating students (our first cohort graduates this year) for purposes of assessment, it will be interesting to see whether our students are prepared to reflect on the writing that they produce within those intellectual frames.

Whether this model advances substantially as a model transferable to other institutions or contexts (in which writing faculty maintain appointments in English or other departments) is an open question worthy of further reflection. We needed to demonstrate that we were developing something substantially different from an English major or a communication major. Many writing majors, of course, must demonstrate their consonance with literary studies to

survive departmental curriculum meetings. Instead of arguing a difference from literary studies, they must articulate ways that (for example) introductory courses in literary genres are also foundational to writing curricula. The intellectual and political challenge is entirely different.

Precisely for this very reason, we have some concerns about the possibilities for our students in graduate work, as well. As it presently stands, the admission requirements for the MA in English at UMD, for example, require a distribution of work in literature that our students would not meet; if admitted, they would need to take “catch up” coursework in British and American literature. (Of course, this is ironic because the Writing Studies department houses all of the teaching assistantships in the graduate program in English.) Whether a BA in Writing Studies serves as a disadvantage relative to a BA in English with a Minor in Writing for purposes of graduate admissions, for example, is also an open question. These are open questions, to be sure, that only time will tell and that we will revisit as our program is assessed externally.

We are a year and a half from the approval of the major and just one semester in from its first appearance in the catalog—and we are in the middle of the worst budget cuts I’ve seen in my short career. While it was easy to claim that our major was budget neutral when budgets were flush, those claims will be harder to make in the immediate future. As a department, we are equally committed to the advancement of writing across the university (in the first year writing and advanced writing curriculum) and to the growth of our major. The conditions that led to the split between the English major and the writing program (that led to the development of our department twenty years ago) face us today. At that moment, literature faculty splintered the service curriculum from the major curriculum—a move we will not repeat. How we will be able to sustain the major and the service curriculum is an ongoing challenge in these budgetary times, but a challenge that we welcome. This may very well be what makes Writing Studies unique: that our commitment to our service curriculum and our major curriculum is equal. How we negotiate these values in this budgetary environment remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Those emphases are outside the scope of the current profile. ([Return to text.](#))
2. This profile is, inevitably, partial in its perspective. It is composed by a faculty member intimately connected to the proposal process and largely responsible for pulling various contributions together for submission to administration, giving the profile something of a synoptic perspective. At the same time, each contributing faculty member would, undoubtedly, inflect the curriculum differently in its explication. This profile is not meant to replace or supersede any of those other perspectives. ([Return to text.](#))
3. This course was initially developed in the Minor in Information Design and has been refined by the faculty who have taught in that Minor over the years: Craig Stroupe, Kenneth Risdon and Rob Wittig. ([Return to text.](#))
4. This course is in large part developed under the expertise of Department Head Jill Jenson, a noted scholar in the uses of portfolio for assessment. ([Return to text.](#))
5. This course was developed by Juli Parrish. ([Return to text.](#))
6. This course was developed by linguist Chongwon Park. ([Return to text.](#))
7. This course was developed by noted Walter Ong scholar Thomas Farrell and re-imagined by Craig Stroupe. ([Return to text.](#))
8. This course has been redeveloped and taught by John Hatcher. ([Return to text.](#))

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"The Case for a Major in Writing Studies" from *Composition Forum* 21 (Spring 2010)

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