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"A Course No One Wants to Teach": A History of the Writing Methods Course

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Effective undergraduate writing teacher education often hinges on successful execution of the writing methods course (WMC). Though now a familiar topic in the *Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, the establishment of the undergraduate writing methods course is a relatively new development within college English departments. While calls for the course existed as early as 1923 (Breck), citing a need to wean new teachers from textbook advice about writing, sustained interest did not emerge until the late 1950s. Prior to this time, English education majors occasionally took a "general" English education methods course as a tentative link between content (English) and pedagogy (education). The connection between English and education was not strong as students sometimes received contradictory advice from the "imperfectly coordinated" areas (Harvard University Committee on the Preparation of Teachers for Secondary Schools 1942, 40). Though the general English education methods course attempted to cover all elements of secondary English, including composition, in practice the WMC "was mostly concerned with literature" (Tremmel 2002, 7). For example, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) found in a 1960 survey the general methods course spent more time on literature than the teaching of grammar and composition combined, with 89% of schools offering a general English Education methods course spending less than five weeks on composition instruction (NCTE 1961).

NCTE argued that there was a clear relationship between a lack of in depth training to teach composition and the general status of English teachers in 1960. Secondary English teachers were underprepared and overworked in the area of writing, yet one report noted that over a third of methods courses "frankly ignore problems in the teaching of composition" (NCTE 1961, 74). As a potential antidote to this lack of writing teacher training, The NCTE Curriculum Commission called for an advanced composition course for teachers that focused specifically on the pedagogy of writing (Grommon 1963).

While 50% of departments required or offered advanced composition course for teaching majors by 1968 the majority focused on the writing of teacher versus actual methods of teaching composition (Grommon 1968). In 1969, only one-third of universities

offering advanced composition courses had special sections for teachers that were specific writing "methods" courses, where preservice teachers were trained to analyze student errors and critique prose (Larson 1969). In the same year, Eugene Smith found that "the teaching of composition is in splendid disarray" as teachers admitted to "floundering," remarking that "what they do in class seems to have little perceptible effect upon pupils' capacity or desire to write (26). The solution to the disparity within these composition courses for teachers, Richard Larson (1969) argued, was a course that taught preservice teachers to appraise the value of various writing assignments for students (understanding the theory or rationale behind the assignment), to "describe strong and weak points in "substance, structure, and expression in any essay" (engage in practice), and to improve their own writing (and increase the possibility of transference to their students) (Larson 1969, 173). A course that could address theory, practice, and how these intersected with the teacher's own writing had a better chance of transference to future pupils.

Early research suggested a WMC that taught both methodology and theory did make a difference in preparing preservice teachers when combined with the study of how writing worked. Rider and Rusk (1967, 16) designed a new WMC at Michigan State University to address this gap between theory and practice, arguing the pilot WMC:

> [Introduced] the student teacher to some awareness of the incredible demands he will face when he must relate the theories and ideals he has learned about writing to a classroom of individuals with such varying competencies, personalities, and needs.

In a comparative study of an experimental group of preservice teachers who took the newly designed writing methods course and a control group who did not, MSU researchers found that the experimental group students "[appeared] to feel more confident about their ability to evaluate writing and about their ability to use appropriate methods" (Rider and Rusk 1967, 89). This confidence was sorely missing from most teacher preparation programs even when an advanced composition course was offered for teachers (Smith 1969; Larson 1969). In another study, Neville and Papillion (1969) similarly found that the WMC could potentially improve preparedness of preservice teachers to teach writing, comparing DePaul University's teachers who had taken a WMC with Loyola University's teachers who had not. The DePaul teachers had improved knowledge of composition and pedagogy and felt more confident teaching writing in the high schools. Still not all WMCs were not as successful, and one 1980 survey found that even when teachers had taken a required course, 30% felt unprepared and "their least successful teaching area was composition" out of the English curriculum (Laine and Fagan 1980, 205).

Despite some promising results and repeated calls for a course, teacher preparation programs either struggled to offer the WMC for administrative reasons or remained unconvinced of its necessity through the 1970s. By 1979, Hogan (1980) noted that only 52.9 percent of English programs required some type of advanced composition course for the English education major. These courses were similar to their predecessors, with little or no discussion of how to teach composition to students, and therefore the number of "teaching writing" courses was likely smaller. In a 1998 survey of 198 English departments, Werner, Thompson and Rothchild cite 39.7% as offering "teaching writing" courses (i.e., courses training future teachers to teach their own students to write through

theoretical or practical instruction). Though they acknowledge that this figure may be underreported "perhaps because English education is more usually the province of education departments rather than English departments" (Werner, Thompson, and Rothchild 1998, 213), this figure suggests that even fifteen years ago, the WMC was not considered essential to secondary English teacher training. As of 2008, using my survey of Ohio teacher preparation programs as a representative example of secondary English teacher preparation programs nationwide, 67% of undergraduate teacher preparation schools offered a course that provides training in composition theory or methods or both (Tulley 2013). This representative survey of programs suggests that a convincing case has been made for a required undergraduate writing methods course.

Getting the course on the books has proven to be only half the battle. In the remainder of this essay, I untangle two historically embedded challenges within the undergraduate writing methods course that continually reestablish divisions between theory and pedagogy (and often English and education departments by association) for preservice teachers. The two issues are:

1. The lack of status of the undergraduate writing methods course within English departments, entrenched by the historically marginalized reputations of both rhetoric and composition and English education programs; and
2. Internal disputes within the field of rhetoric and composition over a theoretical versus pedagogical emphasis for the undergraduate writing methods course, and external debates between the fields of rhetoric and composition and English education over content knowledge versus practical tools.

Understanding both of these embedded tensions is crucial for effective WMC course design because such knowledge can be used to rethink how to shape the undergraduate WMC course to avoid a reputation as a service course for teachers and the identity crisis present in many courses.

"A Second Rate Course for a Second Rate Clientele": The Lack of Status of the WMC Course

Historically, composition was seldom considered a worthy area of study in its own right as literature often remained the focus in writing courses, contributing to a cycle where literary study was more valued among English students and faculty. Advanced composition, of which the WMC is a specialized type, was only slightly more appealing to students and faculty. Many faculty "simply could not imagine composition as an independent discursive or pedagogical practice" from English studies at large (Crowley 1998, 102-103) and likely could not fathom why a separate course should exist to train writing teachers.

English faculty also recognized that teaching composition was difficult work. As Connors (1997, 198) acknowledges, English professors turned away from the teaching of writing because, "then, as now, literary courses were easier to teach…offered a lighter load". The heavy workload, combined with the negative reputation of composition in general, contributed to a culture where a writing methods course had a hard time breaking into the English curriculum. Avoidance of teaching writing as a distinct field of study was historically inherent in college courses labeled "composition" courses, likely trickling down to preservice teachers who then disliked teaching composition to their own students.

They also assumed the WMC, like first-year composition, to be a "service" course, and the lack of departmental prestige associated with this course further contributed to the reluctance of college faculty to teach future teachers writing pedagogy (and often, composition in general). No matter where the actual teacher preparation programs were housed, faculty were aware that students taking the WMC were majoring in "education" versus majoring in "English," and then, as more recent studies suggest, English education students were seen as pedagogically inferior to those studying literature by English departments (Harvard University Committee on the Preparation of Teachers for Secondary Schools 1942; Dilworth and McCracken 1997). Teaching writing, even to upper level English students, would likely seem undesirable as well. This perception made it highly unlikely that many English faculty were qualified to teach or interested in teaching "a second-rate course for a second-rate clientele and one beneath the dignity of the department to offer" (Christensen 1973, 164).

In cases where the WMC existed, and departments could staff it, it was often assumed that second-rate professors were teaching it, either from education (already considered second-rate professors by English departments in most cases), or from less prestigious faculty from the English department (Harvard University Committee on the Preparation of Teachers for Secondary Schools 1942). Historically, as Christensen (1979, 163) argued, the English department instructor unlucky enough to be assigned the WMC (if it existed) was assumed to be "anyone who has an empty slot on his load sheet" or "anyone who is too old to teach freshmen and too young to be turned out to pasture." Later studies suggested this perception of a lack of trained instructors teaching the WMC proves to be somewhat oversimplified, as Hogan (1980) found the top three ranks share advanced writing courses nearly equally. Still, the perception that the WMC was an undesirable course, and therefore taught by the weakest faculty members, persists, and Hogan's study does not break down the ranks of faculty teaching the WMC specifically, as the WMC is just one of several advanced writing courses.

This is not to say that some English professors were not trained in rhetoric. Though admittedly rare, programs such as Fred Newton Scott's rhetoric program at The University of Michigan granted roughly the same number of doctorates as the Department of English granted in literature between 1904 and 1930 (Kitzhaber 1953, 1963) suggesting that at least one university, and therefore some faculty, did have training in advanced rhetoric or composition. Still, numbers of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition did not begin to increase until the late 1970s (Rosner, Boehm, and Journet 1999), and thus faculty trained to teach an undergraduate writing methods course remained few. On the whole, teaching and research in advanced composition was not seen as prestigious as advanced work in literature (likely due to a lack of doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition), and faculty were likely anxious to teach courses where they had expertise. English professors often argued they were "most competent to teach literature" because of their own training in reading canonical texts (Wilcox 1973, 149). All of these factors made it difficult for the undergraduate WMC to penetrate the established English curriculum that in most institutions had remained static for over sixty years by the early 1980s. While today's numbers show that there is an increase in WMCs offered, the course has a historical

reputation of being unnecessary and devalued which likely slowed the progress of its addition to the teacher education curriculum.

Disciplinary Divides: Is Theory or Practice More Valuable for Writing Teachers?

In a 2013 article, I described survey results that indicated when the WMC is offered, it often suffers from an identity conflict particularly due to its affiliation with the field of rhetoric and composition (XXX, 2013).[1] Although the field of rhetoric and composition has recently "'boomed' by demonstrating that it has what it takes to fit in with its disciplinary siblings: a growing body of scholarly research and publications, graduate programs, national conferences, journals, and book series," as Shari Stenberg (2005, 34-35) points out, "our scholarship is often, explicitly or implicitly tied to the classroom." It is not surprising that the WMC is a site of struggle with preservice teachers caught in the crosshairs. The field of RC has struggled to establish a disciplinary identity within English studies as a past history of "anti-theory" composition teachers (Sommers 1979, 46) competes against the present pressure of increased professionalism as a field (Brown et al. 2000, 2005; North 1987). As a result of these opposing forces, Hardin (2005, 36) suggests, "Ironically, the theory/praxis split may be particularly embedded in rhetoric and composition precisely because both theory and practice are so much a part of how the field identifies itself." No place is this paradox more evident than in the undergraduate WMC, because it is here that writing faculty define the parameters of rhetoric and composition as a field to the next generation of writing teachers.

Though the disciplines of English education and rhetoric and composition are generally in agreement that pedagogy is valuable (Alsup 2001), this internal tension uniting theoretical and practical instruction has historically remained an elusive ideal within the writing methods course, What has resulted from this organic presence of the writing methods course within, and occasionally outside of, English programs is a host of variations in emphases and topics covered. Some, like the Project English course at Michigan State University (1967) described earlier, advocated instruction in grammar, history of the English language, and composition. Others such as Richard Gebhardt (1977) articulated the possibilities of an integrated theoretical and practical approach in "Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers." He proposed writing teachers should write about the teaching of writing in addition to learning about the structure of the English language, rhetoric, writing theory, and practical teaching methods to help students learn to write (134-135, 137). Later studies, including those made in the *Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, support this argument that theory and practice are ultimately inseparable in the field of writing (see North 1987, Parker 1982, Ruth 1986, and Saidy 2015) even if writing teacher educators disagree as to whether the WMC should prepare theorists or practitioners of writing.

In contrast to the theorist-practitioner tension embedded in rhetoric and composition, most English educators more uniformly agree that an emphasis on practice-based material is necessary with the WMC because it better prepares future teachers for

[1] For a full description of the survey methodology, see Tulley (2013).

the realities of teaching. In fact, English education faculty member Tremmel (2002, 8) claims in his introduction to *Teaching Writing Teachers*,

> We are, after all, methodologists who address practice directly in our classes and enact practice with our students during in-class activities, workshops, case-study exercises, and the composition of lesson and unit plans, journals, and portfolios.

In other words, emphasizing practice makes explicit how the writing teacher actually does her work. Furthermore, though many rhetoric and composition faculty have previous secondary school experience, English education faculty are generally more attuned the realities of secondary teaching such as standardized testing, classroom management issues, and tougher licensure standards because they regularly confront these challenges as part of the larger teacher preparation program.

Moreover, methods for best teaching practices are a proud hallmark of this field, unlike in RC where pedagogy often is simultaneously embraced and denied in the field at large. While the practitioner roots with RC remain strong, there has been a growing trend among rhetoric and composition faculty to favor theory-driven courses in general (Stenberg 2005) leaving any agreement as to what the WMC should do at a relative impasse. At the undergraduate level, the shape of the WMC is ultimately unclear as Tremmel (2002, 9) argues, noting that RC as a field experiences "unevenness, ambivalence, and lack of commitment connected to writing teacher education."

The WMC differs from other courses within English studies as it must meet a variety of needs from both English and Education departments. Though other English majors may take it the course is usually required for secondary English teachers who take courses, and are often considered majors, in both disciplines. Because of the wide range of existing topics, and growing bodies of research conducted in both fields, the writing methods course suffers from the problem of an overstuffed, and often contradictory, agenda. Contemporary WMCs may focus on study of classical and contemporary writing theories, instruction and practice in the writing process, development of writing assessments and assignments, and/or reflection about the writing teacher's own writing process (Hogan 1980, Tremmel 2002). Course material also reflects the variety of interdisciplinary overlap from fields such as psychology, departmental alliances, and pedagogical challenges writing teacher educators have faced for decades when determining course content. The problem of breadth of material and lack of time to cover it has been noted in nearly every essay written about the WMC. Christensen (1973, 168) noted that an advanced composition course for teachers would "tax the ingenuity of any teacher who undertakes it" due to having a wide range of topics to cover and not enough time to do so.

E. Shelley Reid (2004, 17) distills the paradox for the writing teacher educator:

> Writing-teacher instruction cannot be quick, although we often have very little time in which to provide it; it needs to be multifaceted and to encourage higher-order thinking even though we are usually working with novice students of both pedagogy and composition. It needs to allow for trial and error, resistance and internalization by the teachers….

While Reid is specifically referring to graduate teaching assistant writing methods training courses in composition, undergraduate writing teacher education faces similar challenges

as Christensen (1973) points out. Christensen confirms, "the main problem is how to integrate the many components of the composing process in such a way as to wing two or three birds with every shot" (1973, 168). If instructors give in to a natural inclination to try to cover both theoretical and practical materials, given the tendency to value both in rhetoric and composition, the time constraints of a single course are exacerbated.

What We Can Learn from the Past

More teacher education programs are offering WMCs to prepare middle and secondary English teachers to teach writing in an age of increasing attention to writing standards from the Common Core Standards to No Child Left Behind. At the same time, practicing teachers are clearly feeling the pressure to know how to teach writing when what skills needed to teach writing are in flux. Brimi (2015), for example, notes that new practicing teachers feel unprepared to teach writing and continue to rely on formulaic writing instruction to assure that students could better meet standardized testing goals. In addition, though teachers were aware of the need to teach the full writing process, few actually did it. Instead, "the teachers showed no inclination towards helping students with the 'invention' stage. Furthermore, they reported that most revision was done only after papers had been graded, almost as an afterthought, or more appropriately, as one teacher called them, as 'corrections.'" (Brimi 2012, 69). Other studies (Coker and Lewis 2018; Read and Landon-Hays 2013) confirm similar troubles with teaching writing due to poor preparation in the teaching of writing. There are clearly issues where the undergraduate WMC is not yet connecting to what practicing writing teachers need in the classroom, particularly when teachers work in environments that ensure they "can teach writing only minimally and with very little actual feedback and assessment on student writing" (Read and Landon-Hays 2013). As writing teacher educators, we need to understand our past history and its impact on writing teacher education at the present moment to develop effective preparation courses. Looking back at the two embedded problems inherent in the historical design of the undergraduate WMC course, it's clear that both problems affect the quality of the course today and require further study. I briefly unpack both problems in today's context in the section below.

Who is teaching and who is taking the undergraduate writing methods course?

Unlike historical studies that argued the undergraduate WMC was assigned to "second rate" faculty, today's undergraduate WMC is most often taught by someone with a PhD in rhetoric and composition, often with previous secondary teaching experience. For example, my survey of all of the undergraduate WMCs in Ohio indicates that 64.7% of all WMCs taught in Ohio were taught by someone with doctoral training in the teaching of writing (Tulley 2013). However, this same research indicates that the remainder of WMCs are taught by someone without these credentials, most typically someone with a PhD in literature or linguistics. A study by Baker et al (2007) found that many writing teacher educators have previous experience as secondary educators. Therefore, while we might assume most faculty teaching the WMC want to teach it due to their training as writing specialists or due to a past interest in high school teaching, we can't be sure about the motivations or qualifications of the other faculty assigned to the course.

Returning to the reputation as a course for "second rate clientele," my 2010 survey research also found that 82.3% of students taking the WMC were English education majors seeking to teach English in grades 7-12. Another 8.2% were middle childhood majors seeking licensure to teach English in grades 4-9 in Ohio. The remainder of students taking the course were taking it as a training course to tutor in the writing center. Though these are the students who most likely need a WMC, the student population reveals that no "regular" English majors (i.e. those majoring in literature or creative writing) were required to take the course, and, at least in this survey, did not choose to take the course as an elective. Therefore if English department faculty view English education majors as less scholarly than English majors focusing on literature, the perception of the undergraduate WMC as a "second rate course" for faculty to teach may persist. This is clearly an area for further study in the field of undergraduate writing teacher education – who is teaching the WMC and why and who is taking the WMC and why? What is the current reputation of the undergraduate WMC in English Departments? These answers are essential to understanding where the course fits into the teacher education curriculum but also what potential impact teaching the course has on a faculty member's reputation. It's very likely that the course has gained some stature in the field as it may be one of the only content courses in rhetoric and composition within English departments, and therefore the course has moved beyond an initial negative reputation, but without more study it is difficult to say for sure.

Is theory or practice taught in undergraduate writing methods courses?

My research (Tulley 2013) of Ohio WMCs suggests previous and divisive historical tendencies have persisted from the origins of the undergraduate course. Today's WMCs tend to take one of three primary designs: the WMC either covers purely practical material needed to teach one or two composition courses specific to a university or to "survive" teaching writing at the secondary level: the WMC "covers" composition theory without pedagogical application, or the course tries to blend the two. Though it may happen incidentally, very few WMCs stress explicit integration between theory and practice. This would suggest that historical tensions between theoretical and practical camps within rhetoric and composition, between the fields of rhetoric and composition and literature, and between rhetoric and composition and English education continue to play out in designs of the undergraduate WMCs and shape ways that preservice writing teachers learn (and don't learn) to teach writing. A useful first step to addressing these persistent tensions is to find out where specifically new writing teachers feel unprepared and work backwards to determine if theoretical or practical strategies, or a blend, would work best to address the issues. Returning to the issue of the 2015 study of the new teachers who did not teach the writing process, it would be useful to ask if the teachers did not teach the writing process because they themselves did not understand it, had not practiced it themselves, or because they failed to see how the writing process could apply to a situation such as writing for a standardized testing writing prompt? Finding the answers to these questions could help shape the design of the undergraduate WMC.

As the field of writing teacher education evolves, we have much to find out about this emerging field of study. As Reid points out,

> no longitudinal studies about the effectiveness of writing pedagogy education have been published; scholars in composition have seemed reluctant even to articulate general principles for this common task. We propose tentative solutions to specific problems such as student resistance to composition theory; we sometimes recommend extracurricular structures such as mentoring or co-teaching. Generally, though, we offer local success stories without arguing directly for field-wide adoption. (2009, W198)

Mapping the history of the undergraduate WMC is one method of capturing what one segment of writing teacher education has historically looked like in the field. Understanding this history and using it to study current course designs and resulting effects on writing teacher preparation is the next step to offering general principles, or best practices, Reid calls for.

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