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'The World is Too Messy': The Challenge of Historical Literacy in a General-Education Course

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Abstract
The problem with implementing writing-intensive (or writing-emphasis) liberal arts general education (GE) courses is as evident as it is underacknowledged; that is, this seemingly well-bounded, modest reform involves significant change-on multiple levels and for multiple players in complex institutional and disciplinary activity systems. We know a little about such issues: Writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs are often said to present new challenges for teachers, such as a felt tension between the demands of teaching writing and covering content, and the need for substantial background in writing pedagogy (Russell, "Writing in the Academic Disciplines"). Although such tensions are both urgent and real, they do not reflect the depth and range of changes a movement to discipline-based writing can entail-in terms of institutional traditions, departmental modes of operation, classroom practice, and students' understandings. And it is crucial to remember that liberal arts courses are almost always in some discipline. Michael Fullan's work on educational change suggests that although these processes may appear "technically simple," they are in fact "socially complex" (The New Meaning 5), invoking individual and collective feelings of "loss, anxiety, and struggle" (The New Meaning 31; Fullan Change Forces). When attempting change, cautions Fullan, a good rule of thumb is to "assume that changing the culture of institutions is the real agenda, not implementing single innovations" (The New Meaning 107).

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Comments
"THE WORLD IS TOO MESSY"

The Challenge of Writing in a General Education Liberal Arts Course

Arturo Yañez and David R. Russell
with Corey Smith

The problem with implementing writing-intensive (or writing-emphasis) liberal arts general education (GE) courses is as evident as it is underacknowledged; that is, this seemingly well-bounded, modest reform involves significant change—on multiple levels and for multiple players in complex institutional and disciplinary activity systems. We know a little about such issues: Writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs are often said to present new challenges for teachers, such as a felt tension between the demands of teaching writing and covering content, and the need for substantial background in writing pedagogy (Russell, "Writing in the Academic Disciplines"). Although such tensions are both urgent and real, they do not reflect the depth and range of changes a movement to discipline-based writing can entail—in terms of institutional traditions, departmental modes of operation, classroom practice, and students' understandings. And it is crucial to remember that liberal arts courses are almost always in some discipline. Michael Fullan's work on educational change suggests that although
these processes may appear "technically simple," they are in fact "socially complex" (*The New Meaning* 5), invoking individual and collective feelings of "loss, anxiety, and struggle" (*The New Meaning* 31; Fullan *Change Forces*). When attempting change, cautions Fullan, a good rule of thumb is to "assume that changing the culture of institutions is the real agenda, not implementing single innovations" (*The New Meaning* 107).

Just as disciplinary fields of study have complicated histories, ongoing contradictions—ghost from the past—so too do people and institutions. We tell the story here of one instructor's struggles to engage GE university students in the demands of writing in a liberal arts course in history, and of how his efforts reflected departmental and campus-wide initiatives to foster what was often referred to as "effective student writing." By all accounts, this promised to be a best-case scenario. The instructor, Corey Smith, was widely regarded as one of the most effective graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) on this large, state-university campus, which we call Midwestern University (MWU). His faculty supervisors had recently taken a special interest in encouraging the teaching of writing throughout the department, with particular attention to GE courses, and had selected Corey to play a central role in these efforts.

But the tale we have crafted is a cautionary one, and neither seamless nor smooth. Beneath the surface of hopeful rhetoric about supporting student writing were deep contradictions—among the official motives of the GE program and the department, the historically rooted institutional and disciplinary structures that lay behind those, and the students' and instructors' motives and objects. These contradictions were manifested in competing visions of what "effective writing" is and how it is best taught and learned. As befits our subject, we explore these contradictions not only as they played out across a semester of data collection, but also historically, in the evolution of policies guiding the campus's writing programs and GE writing emphasis.

Academic disciplines, or fields of study—and the institutions in which they operate—are neither static nor unified, and teachers and students negotiate often contradictory and unstable disciplinary and institutional landscapes. The theoretical lens we use in this analysis, cultural-historical activity theory, suggests we view disciplines and institutions not in a monolithic way, as stable and discrete entities, but rather as complex and shifting networks of people and their tools, including tools of communication such as writing (Engström; Russell, "Rethinking genre"). Accordingly, writing is not viewed as a container, a conduit for transmitting ideas (Reddy), but rather writing is a tool that mediates the human interactions in disciplinary and institutional networks. However, this mediation is rarely unproblematic-
ic because people belong to multiple activity systems that have different objects, motives, values, divisions of labor—and different ways of using their tools, different discourses. Thus, there are deep contradictions within and between human activity systems. These deep contradictions are sometimes manifested in psychological double binds, where an individual receives two messages or commands that deny each other and produce that uncomfortable feeling of “I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t!” In this analysis, we suggest that the institutional history of GE is fraught with several deep contradictions that help explain the double-bind struggles of students and teacher in one liberal arts GE classroom—and suggest the difficulties and possibilities of using writing as a tool for learning in GE courses.

METHODS

Data were collected throughout the spring 1998 semester, encompassing the duration of Corey Smith’s “historical perspectives” GE course (in accordance with his own scholarly interests, Corey elected to focus the course on modern Irish history). Yañez compiled detailed fieldnotes on every class session throughout the semester (28 sessions), audiotaping when major writing assignments were discussed. He interviewed the course instructor and focal students extensively: at the beginning, middle, and end of term, and also before, after, and during three major writing assignments (an annotated bibliography, a book review, and a critical analysis of archival newspaper articles). He collected multiple drafts of student work, audiotaped writing conferences, and conducted text-based interviews with focal students and the course instructor as work on the assignments progressed.

In order to assess the broader context in which the course was situated, Yañez also interviewed seven history department faculty members, a campus administrator who facilitated oversight of GE courses, and a retired professor who had been a long-time leader in efforts to strengthen the teaching of writing campuswide. Yañez collected extensive written artifacts documenting the evolution of the campus’s writing programs (focusing particularly on the evolution of the writing emphasis in GE courses, the roles of the English and Rhetoric Departments over time, and ongoing debates concerning the involvement of faculty from other departments).

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the process of data collection, intensifying as the study progressed and, particularly, once all data were in. For the purposes of this chapter, Yañez repeatedly re-read all gathered data, formulating tentative coding categories that highlighted the issues surround-
ing this attempt to teach writing in the context of a discipline-based course. Yañez combed repeatedly through the total data set to search for any disconfirming evidence or counterexamples, enlarging or revising his coding scheme as needed. This method allows us to pull from multiple data sources to discuss each issue or theme, supporting all conclusions with reference to the perspectives of various informants and to particular interactions (Merriam).

The data was collected under the auspices of the Human Subjects Review Board at the institution where the study took place. The names of all participants are confidential, except for Corey Smith, who requested the use of his real name and cooperated in the writing of this chapter.

**ANALYSIS: CONTRADICTIONS AND WRITING IN GENERAL EDUCATION**

Let us first preview our analysis. Corey and his students experienced double binds in using writing for teaching and learning in their GE Irish history course, one of many historical perspectives courses that satisfy a GE requirement for all students. The double binds made it difficult for them to accomplish the ambitious but ambiguous goals of the GE program at MWU for writing and learning. These double binds, we found, had their roots in deep, historically rooted contradictions in GE, which we analyze at the level of the university and the department before analyzing how they manifested themselves in this classroom. The central contradiction is between two contradictory motives of the institution and the discipline: specialized disciplinary education leading to some profession (in this case professional academic history) and “general” or “liberal” education leading to well-rounded citizens. This contradiction is masked by what organizational communication theory calls “strategic ambiguity” about writing (Myers). Specifically, there is a contradiction in the ways writing is conceived of and used as a tool of learning. When convenient, writing is conceived in terms of unproblematic transmission: a container or conduit for thought. “Content” is placed into “form” and sent. When convenient, writing is alternatively conceived as a tool for enculturation in some specific social practice, such as the activity of doing professional academic history. This strategic ambiguity allowed MWU to pursue the contradictory motives in GE without confronting their consequences at the human level of teaching and learning. The strategic ambiguity made it possible for faculty and administrators to invoke one and
ignore the other of these two official (and admirable) motives when necessary or convenient in working out the division of labor (who would teach what to whom and when). Not having to examine the relation between GE courses and students in terms of the writing (and share clear goals and expectations for the GE mission of the department) allowed administrators and faculty much more flexibility in apportioning faculty and TAs time for teaching and research, as we will see. Graduate students, for example, generally taught the historical perspectives courses, freeing tenure-line faculty for teaching majors and doing research.

However, this strategic ambiguity over conceptions of general education and writing left Corey, and his students from many disciplines (none in history) to wrestle with the consequences. Corey, who had successfully taught both rhetoric First Year Composition (FYC) and history, struggled creatively and often successfully with the contradiction, as did many of his students. He attempted to move students from their view of writing as a conduit (form, container) for content and history as static facts collected unproblematically into texts to a view of writing as a tool for encountering and engaging history as a debate (argument) about the past relevant to their futures as citizens. But as we see here, the institutional and disciplinary contradictions operated so powerfully that it was difficult at best to use writing as a tool of learning, and thus the double binds.

"EFFECTIVE WRITING" AT MWU

MWU had long been recognized for its high visibility role in the teaching of writing, instituting in the 1930s what remains today a premier creative writing program, and participating actively in the development of GE writing curricula in the years following World War II. Although both programs appeared well-bounded, they were originally conceived as strands of interwoven wholes—creative writing as an integral part of literary study, and expository writing as a necessary element in the education of a newly burgeoning and diverse wave of undergraduates. One long-time campus leader acknowledged the difficulty of separating elements in an institution’s history, let alone distinct influences on the development of writing curricula; “The world is too messy to fit into neat packets,” he observed. We might paraphrase, in terms of activity theory: the networks of activity are too complex and fraught with contradictions to be easily analyzed. Accordingly, the history we write here is admittedly selective, crafted from our review of archival materials and interviews with campus leaders.
MWU and the Advent of General Education Writing

Writing at the close of World War II, a campus administrator observed that American citizens were "faced with problems that were totally unknown to their grandfathers" (McGrath, "The general education" 5). But there was great optimism, too, as college became a reachable goal for unprecedented numbers, and MWU set about preparing the new student "for a full and satisfying life as a member of a family, as a worker, as a citizen, and as an integrated and purposeful human being" (McGrath, "The general education" 3). In a world growing more complex by the day, the role of the academy was to impart the necessary "knowledge, insight, and wisdom . . . demanded of the citizens if they are to perform adequately the manifold duties that fall upon them" (Hancher 13). The GE movement further promoted a shift in emphasis from preparing scholars and elite professionals to teaching undergraduates for "the common responsibilities of life shared by all men" (McGrath, "What education" 167). "The great end of education," was said to be "the good life and the good man" (Hancher 16), a pervasive use of the male pronoun suggesting a world that may in some respects seem simpler than our own.

MWU’s post-war programs demanded a degree of inter- and intradepartmental cooperation that may appear audacious to those of us familiar with more compartmentalized curricular schemes. With the adoption of "core courses" in 1944, MWU’s faculty opted for a program of that sought to "integrate the subject matter of related disciplines" (McGrath 5), providing knowledge which, although "not less thorough and earnest than that of the professional or vocational specialist," would be more appropriate to the needs of the student "as man and citizen" (McGalliard 204). In the words of MWU’s post-war president, "there are fundamental principles or subject matter of physical science, or of biological science, of social science or of the humanities, cutting across departmental lines, that may be combined to give the student a course with valid intellectual content which will at the same time give him a better understanding of the world in which he lives than he has any reasonable chance of obtaining from a single course in a single department" (qtd in McGalliard 204).

Although MWU was a leader in post-war discussions concerning GE, its curricula were in turn shaped by what came to be known as the Harvard "Redbook," General Education in a Free Society (see also Pace). Commissioned by Harvard president James Bryant Conant, the Redbook argued the need for specialized writing courses sponsored by English
departments, but also emphasized the importance of writing across the curriculum, particularly in GE courses. While noting that writing is “a never-ending discipline which can only be begun in schools and must be continued in college,” the report also conceived of college writing instruction as a “remedial” enterprise (199; qtd in Russell, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines* 253).

Both observations informed MWU’s 1944 adoption of a required “Communication Skills” course, just as millions of war veterans prepared to enter U.S. colleges and universities. According to campus documents, growing numbers of students were “unable to meet the required standard of performance at entrance,” and the course was intended bring their reading, writing, and speaking skills up to par. Designed to provide training in “expository, argumentative, and critical techniques,” Communication Skills would also assist students in recognizing bias and flawed reasoning in the discourse of others, and in eliminating such defects from their own writing. Campus administrators applauded the addition of the new course, emphasizing the need to cultivate “habits of effective writing and speaking of the mother tongue” (McGrath, “The general education”). Several years later, a former MWU administrator bitterly derided the new Communication Skills course, arguing that “no course in the college curriculum has given less satisfaction,” and that it had failed “to teach students to write clearly or even correctly” (Foerster 199). Foerster located one of the course’s fundamental problems in the shortcomings of its founders—“educationists and administrators, men with abnormal interest in organization, paper patterns, and terminology” (202).

“Communication Skills” would go through multiple changes in the ensuing years, eventually renamed “Rhetoric” and housed in a separate department. But the fundamental contradiction in conceptions of writing remained: Was the course primarily a fix-it shop for deficient writers, or was its charge more complex and nuanced? What was the rightful place of such a course in the larger curricula? Was it the job of every faculty member to teach writing—or just those so designated? Could the form of students’ writing—indeed, of anyone’s writing—be considered apart from content? What did MWU mean by “effective writing,” anyway?

General Education at MWU: The Continuing Debate

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, higher education was under scrutiny from multiple corners, prompting reappraisals of virtually all aspects of the enterprise, including general education. As increasingly diverse students entered
higher education and unrest swept the nation, growing numbers of students and professors “rejected general education as irrelevant to the world in which they lived” (Crooks 110). As the country moved closer “to the ideal of universal education,” faculty sometimes found these new students alien, inscrutable, and decidedly deficient in the area of writing. Since the close of World War II, undergraduates had become an increasingly varied group of ordinary citizens preparing for private and public lives beyond the university. They “[did] not necessarily want to be like us even in our basic social values, much less in our academic devotion,” observed one long-time MWU leader; “In many ways, we talk mostly to strangers.”

In 1978, an MWU task force was charged with formally re-evaluating the GE curricula, guided by the question “is it meeting today’s students’ needs?” The group had much to say about the teaching of writing, calling for a high-stakes exit exam at the close of freshman rhetoric, and an intensive focus on writing in the disciplines, particularly in proposed capstone courses in students’ major departments (General Education Task Force Report). The committee argued that responsibility for the teaching of writing rested with every faculty member, and proposed a series of strategies for ensuring adequate preparation and structural commitment to the task.

The new plan of general education adopted by the College of Liberal Arts in 1980 reflected generally lukewarm enthusiasm in the college for the task force’s recommendations. On the one hand, the revised curricular guidelines acknowledged that “no sequence of courses can guarantee . . . effective use of the English language,” and that “the college’s total faculty must assume more responsibility for maintaining it through regular guided use” (Laster iii). But for one former committee member, the end result was “that there was a lot fuss and nothing much happened. So this report really didn’t go anywhere. I don’t think they really wanted to push very much.” A College of Liberal Arts administrator concurred, acknowledging that although “the committee members recommended a kind of writing-across-the-curriculum concept . . . that proposal was not put into practice. . . . The College has always felt they didn’t have quite the resources for that.”

At the time Yanéz collected the data for this study, however, campus guidelines did emphasize the importance of writing in all GE courses in its official documents:

One of the goals of the General Education Program is to develop students’ effective use of the English language. Because writing and speaking are both ways of learning and of demonstrating knowledge, all General Education courses should include such activities where feasible
and practical. Because the nature of the General Education offerings varies so widely, it is expected that the kind and amount of speaking and writing will also vary. Instructors should consider writing and speaking assignments that are compatible with, and contribute to, the educational objectives of the course and the General Education area. Such assignments and activities might include short position papers, oral and written reports, term papers, debates, student journals, or essay examinations, provided that they are evaluated for form as well as content. (College of Liberal Arts Classroom Manual 12)

MWU's Goals for General Education carefully construct a strategic ambiguity to mask the contradictions of general education: "Effective use of the English language" is a goal and courses should include writing and speaking, but only "where feasible and practical." And the "kind and amount" will "vary widely." The official goals list a wide variety of possible genres, and specify they are to be "evaluated for form as well as content" (College of Liberal Arts Classroom Manual 12).

Critical oversight of such policies was scant, with decisions concerning the inclusion of writing in particular courses left primarily to course instructors, often graduate student TAs with little faculty supervision. Meanwhile, writing was linked on the one hand to disciplinary learning, whereas on the other, "form" was seen as separable from "content"; that is, form and content were regarded as companion foci of evaluation rather than parts of an integrated whole encompassing process as well as product.

Masking the contradiction made integrating attention to "effective writing" in particular courses quite problematic, and led to an enduring lack of any clear or agreed upon definition of the phrase. According to one active participant in a number of efforts to reconceptualize general education writing curricula at MWU, those calling for such reforms "don't give you any clues as to what they mean [by effective writing]. Part of it is deliberate; I suspect most of it is that they've really not considered the problem very seriously. . . . They've picked up the slogans; that's much easier, to repeat the slogans, than it is to try to think about it." "Effective writing," he maintained, is little more than a "term of piety":

That is to say, everybody wants to be good, we just don't agree on what good is, and "effective writing" is a term that was used by McGrath and others of that generation in a broad sense, writing that we approve of. They also used "effective writing" as the kind of term you use when you have a committee with all sorts of basic differences and yet you have to produce a report.
According to one campus administrator, through several waves of GE reform, “effective writing” remained a phrase often-repeated but “never operationalized.” It endured as a “vague axiom” (North 438), a bit of “strategic vagueness” (Myers 3) that kept fundamental contradictions hidden, making apparent consensus possible. But it pushed the conflicts and tensions caused by the contradictions into the classrooms of the least powerful teachers and, of course, the students.

When campus administrators called for yet another re-evaluation of MWU’s GE curricula in the mid-1990s, the impetus stemmed from several concerns, all best described as logistical rather than conceptual. The campus had recently adopted a promise that students could complete baccalaureate requirements in 4 years, a pledge that was particularly difficult to keep in the hard sciences, where required coursework for the major had expanded over time. There was also talk of diminishing lines for graduate TAs, who since the early 1960s had come to comprise the dominant GE teaching staff. As various issues had swept through the campus in recent years, a common response was the addition of new GE requirements (the inevitable approach to every challenge from intercultural understanding to computer literacy, according to one professor, had been “add a course and stir”). The list of GE courses required of all students had grown unwieldy, and faculty in the hard sciences were particularly restive.

The perennial contradiction was conceptually and politically difficult—how to negotiate the familiar dilemma between preparing well-rounded citizens versus producing professionals? As a campus committee set about trimming down GE requirements, its focus remained fixed on practical urgencies and the need for workable compromises. A few universal requirements remained—rhetoric, foreign language, and single courses in literature, Historical Perspectives, humanities, natural sciences, formal reasoning, and the social sciences. Other formerly required courses were clustered into lists of options, significantly reducing GE coursework in a number of core disciplines. The means had become less certain, but MWU’s hopes for GE remained lofty: “to enable the students to understand the physical world in which they live, the social organizations in which they act, and the values of the past and present civilizations that form their own culture and the culture of others,” while also “providing the basis for and supplementing the insights of specialized study” (Bulletin, MWU College of Liberal Arts, 1997-1998). As MWU prepared to enter a new century, the strategic ambiguity about writing in GE set the stage for pedagogic ambiguity and painful double binds in the classroom.
A HISTORY DEPARTMENT TEACHES WRITING

Data collection for this study commenced soon after the latest revisions to MWU’s GE curricula, which markedly reduced enrollments in the History Department’s historical perspectives courses. MWU undergraduates were still required to take one course in the area, but a formerly required second course had been relegated to a list of options. Course goals remained ambitious but contradictory: “to develop an understanding of historical processes [the discourse of disciplinary specialization] and a sharpening of students’ analytical skills through training in the evaluation of evidence and in the development of generalizations and interpretations [the discourse of general preparation for critical citizenship]” and to comprehend the past “in the context of processes involved in both change and continuity” (Bulletin, MWU College of Liberal Arts, 1997-1998).

The recent decline in student numbers had been accompanied by a decrease in jobs for graduate student TAs, provoking internal concern. The department had meanwhile commenced new programs to support undergraduate writing—through senior-level colloquia for majors, and in new outreach efforts to undergraduates. The GE “historical perspectives courses were often described as sites where the college’s commitment to fostering ‘students’ effective use of the English language” was vibrantly alive and well. The beginning of data collection for this study coincided with the establishment of a new departmental writing center (WC) staffed by graduate student TAs. The WC had been funded on a trial basis by the College of Liberal Arts, regarded as a promising effort to facilitate students’ movement from rhetoric coursework (and assistance in the Rhetoric Department’s own WC) into disciplinary studies. By most accounts, this new interest in writing included only a sector of the department, but those involved spoke proudly of these efforts. Meanwhile, what MWU history professors meant by “writing” and its teaching quietly fell into a range of varied possibilities.

Some described writing as an ongoing process—taking lifetimes to master, and demanding multiple drafts of particular essays. Writing, proclaimed one, is “art and sweat”; “To write is very difficult,” admitted another; “Those who say it’s not are liars.” Several spoke of their own problems with writing—what one called “a life-long struggle.” Because writing is so difficult, these professors observed, a freshman course would never be enough, and the teaching of writing would always be an exceedingly difficult and time-consuming enterprise. While emphasizing the importance of multiple
drafts, they acknowledged that time constraints made it impossible for them to coach students through successive iterations. Although “the final, handed-in product should be the product of numerous rewritings, each moving closer and closer to nirvana,” this group generally looked only at final products. Classes were too large, another added, for students to revise their papers “even once” in response to professor feedback. Even so, observed another, the tendency to “weigh the final grade heavily on writing” in history courses stood in contrast to practices in most other departments. “Many students often times don’t do a great deal of writing” for their other courses, noted one professor, since the press of numbers typically presented “a very difficult problem.”

Others defined effective writing in more product-oriented ways, naming “clarity of expression,” “grammar and style,” “good knowledge of the basics,” and “strong theme or argument” as the key characteristics. The importance of organization was often noted as well—defined as “an introduction, body, and a conclusion,” by one, and “grammatically clear paragraphs and sentences” by another, this even as references to critical thinking found their way into the mix ("ability to express ideas in a critical way"). This group often seemed to regard effective writing as a readily unwrapped package containing well-reasoned ideas, descriptions reminiscent of Reddy’s famous conduit metaphor. Students’ enduring problems were blamed on deficient public school preparation, inadequate freshman rhetoric courses, or even a lack of “innate capabilities.”

When asked to define effective student writing, one professor responded frankly that “that’s going to vary depending on what professor you speak with.” This perception was clearly born out in interviews with members of the history department, who spanned the spectrum from ancient to postmodern rhetorics. Only one explicitly argued that writing is inescapable from the companion processes of reading and thinking critically about history, whereas others focused on the difficulties of the writing process without exploring the nature of these difficulties or how they might be negotiated over time. For yet another sector, the idea of writing-as-containment/conduit remained the dominant paradigm, consistent with current-traditional rhetorical assumptions (Young).

Although seldom named explicitly or explored critically, such assumptions are not uncommon in American higher education. Years ago, Richard Young observed that “the main difficulty in discussing the current-traditional paradigm, or even in recognizing its existence, is that so much of our theoretical knowledge about it is tacit” (30), an observation that holds in many quarters yet today. Referencing similar assumptions, Slevin et al.
maintains that “in the eyes of many teachers, the ultimate goal for student writing is to make the writing, to some extent, ‘unimportant.’” What teachers often want is “transparent prose that does not get in the way of the perception of the truths being written about. Fundamental to this view is the separability of writing from content and the assumption that there is neutral prose” (11). Kaufer and Young argue that “writing with no content in particular” has dominated the thinking of most American universities (77), noting the common assumption “that pretty much the same skills will develop no matter what content is chosen. The content is specific . . . but the language skills taught and learned are generic” (78). (For an activity theory analysis of the problem of the invisibility of writing, see Russell, “Activity theory”; and especially Russell and Yañez, which is also based on this data.)

This strategic ambiguity masked crucial questions: In what ways might content matter as nonspecialists write for a GE history course? Are there particular challenges and benefits to writing about history for students (the great majority) who are not motivated to become professional academic historians? What struggles and developmental trajectories might instructors expect to see? How best to sequence writing activities? What support do students need—and their teachers as well—to successfully negotiate difficulties? How might instructors know that students have achieved writing competence? Amid the department’s new commitment to teaching writing to undergraduates, these fundamental questions remained both tacit and unexplored. Although agreement was widespread that students needed help with writing, conversation concerning student writing was infrequent. “Very rarely do we talk about these kind of things,” noted one professor; “sometimes we get around to talking about the problems the students have with writing,” observed another. For another, talking about student writing meant reaching consensus on grading practices: “On certain occasions when two or three of us do talk, I get the same impression that somehow we’ve all formed a very similar view of what we expect.”

Graduate student TAs assigned to teach the department’s historical perspectives courses occupied a liminal space, struggling to apply what they knew about history and the teaching of writing to their work with undergraduates, most of whom would not elect to major in the area. The graduate students were poised between the activity system of professional history and the activity system of general education, with no power to negotiate their position institutionally. According to one long-time campus leader, since the early 1960s, this reliance on transient graduate student instructors has deprived the general education program of “a solid group of people who can
provide continuity and an intellectual base.” “I don’t think that we actually monitor the TAs’ performance closely, you know,” observed one history professor, hastily adding that “we do look over the students’ syllabi to see what kinds of assignments that they’re asking the students to do,” ensuring that assignments are assessed and that “something supportive about learning how to write” is included in each course. According to the History Department’s chair, although there was no “formal program that is standardized across all of the general education history courses . . . we have the general expectation that in general education history courses students will write”:

part of what we have to teach them in a history GER is what the norms of the discipline are. And that there are norms in each discipline in terms of how evidence is cited, what makes an effective argument, what varieties of history writing there are, from sort of straight narrative to a more analytical type of writing . . . we leave a lot up to the discretion of the individual teaching assistant or faculty member to decide the particular range of writing exercises that will be deployed. But I think we all have an understanding that writing is crucial, and that part of what we hope students are learning in general education courses is what’s distinctive about writing, about doing history writing.

In this formulation, the goal is to introduce nonspecialists to the writing of the discipline of academic history. It is clear how this would prepare students for further specialization in history, but how does this prepare students for citizenship? What kinds and processes of writing might further kinds of thinking and reading students might appropriately do in a GE history course with critical citizenship as the goal? Many of the department’s graduate student instructors had previous experience as freshman rhetoric instructors, and many, like Corey had been recognized as strong teachers. But when it came to using writing for teaching, these instructors were caught in the fundamental contradictions and uncertainties of institution and department. If instructors viewed writing in terms of the conduit/container model and did not pay conscious attention to writing, then the contradictions might remain submerged, as they did for many TAs and tenure-line faculty. But when a conscientious and committed instructor, like Corey, attempted to consciously use writing to support the learning goals of the course and the GE program, he was entangled in the contradictions, as we will see.
WRITING FOR HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Instructor

At the time of data collection, Corey Smith was a 28-year-old graduate student, ABD in history. Corey credited his “very demanding” high school writing teacher for his continuing academic success. “I understood how to organize information,” he recalled, “how to present it in a clear, concise manner. I got better at it, obviously, as I wrote more. Everyone does. And my ideas matured.” The organizational patterns he recalled being most useful from high school—“argument on one side, argument on the other, come down on one side or the other, use evidence”—would provide the foundation for Corey’s graduate school socialization in the rhetoric of professional academic history, where the discourse is based on these principles. “It’s how to put evidence in place so that you support an argument,” he explained. “All of those techniques that I learned and developed increased in size and maturity, but they’re the same skills.”

Corey asked much of his “Communities and Society” students, describing himself as “demanding” as well, because, as a former rhetoric instructor, he believed that writing was crucial to a deeper kind of learning, one in keeping with the official goals of the GE program and the department. He expected them to participate actively in class—to respond to his questions, to provide evidence for their opinions, and to react to classmates’ ideas. He also expected students to craft historical arguments in their writing, developing thesis statements and marshaling supporting evidence. In Corey’s view, knowing history rested less in students’ capacity to store particular information about the past than in their ability to make reasoned arguments about a theme and to evaluate the plausibility of historical accounts and explanations. Corey described this dual focus on historical thinking and writing in his course syllabus:

An important objective of this class is for all of us to mature as historical thinkers. We will improve our ability to think critically about the past in a number of specific ways, including the evaluation of textual material and the evaluation and use of evidence to form or counter an historical argument. Finally, we’ll improve our ability to communicate those arguments by developing better writing and speaking skills—emphasizing the link between clear thought and clear communication. By the end of the class, you should be better at both the production and consumption of history and historical argument.
For Corey, knowing facts about the past was necessary but not sufficient; if they were to develop historical reasoning, he explained in an interview, students must take an extra step:

[Students will] interpret evidence, learn to ask questions that help to explain change over time, how things got to where they are now. That's what we mean by historical thought. You're not going to be regurgitating information. That's not what I'm looking for. What I'm looking for is independent thought. Why is it important? Why do we need to know it? How does it connect to other information? What did the Civil Rights Movements have to do with the Civil War? How does the Border Campaign connect to the Civil Rights Movement? How did the Civil Rights Movement lead into the 1990s actions of [Margaret] Thatcher? Why is the cease-fire that we just talked about today connected to the Civil War? Connected to the Border Campaign? What are those connections?

But why should GE students reflect on such matters? Should a GE history course differ from those designed for majors? Given that this was the last history course most of his students would take, what was vitally important for them to know, understand, and do? These were the problems he faced, growing out of the contradiction between GE and specialized education, between teaching GE students and history majors. And he faced them without the support of a departmental or institutional dialogue about such matters.

Writing From Corey's Perspective

Corey certainly saw writing as a crucial part of his course, but he worked in an activity system (the History Department) which described the nature of writing either as a general skill (usually in terms of complaints about students' declining skill) or writing about history as a preparation for the major (i.e., in terms of the familiar world he had long known as a student) rather than as a GE experience that might provide these nonhistorians tools for reflecting on the past, in their own fields or in their lives as citizens. "In the discussions I've had with faculty members who teach the upper-level classes," Corey explained, "most are dismayed with the steady decline they see in the ability of students to write... if they aren't going to learn how to write for a history class in this general education, first-level, entry-level class, where are they going to learn it?" The purpose of the course (GE expe-
perience or introduction to academic history?) remained suspended in unnamed contradictions—as did the role of writing in it.

Corey’s belief in the inseparability of historical thinking, reading, and writing bumped hard against the current-traditional strategies (writing as container/conduit) that students had previously experienced in previous high school or higher education GE courses. Early in the semester, Corey began by activating their previous knowledge about writing as a prelude to moving them on toward an understanding of writing as a tool for learning and doing history and critical citizenship—his goals for the course. He probed and valued students’ prior knowledge, which amounted to the five-paragraph theme (introduction, thesis statements, paragraphs, etc.), a mainstay of current-traditional rhetoric (Young) and their previous experience in history and other GE courses. Gazing for a moment at the class, Corey asked “is this new to anyone?”, but no one responded. It was indeed familiar—as it was a formulaic genre (container) that had successfully mediated their learning when that learning was discrete facts. Corey explained that it was fine for the writing they would do on the midterm and final (short-answer questions) and he gave them practice exercises to prepare for it, warning them, however, that the longer writing assignments would require more: critical assessment of historical accounts.

But when, early in the semester, Corey began giving assignments that demanded synthesis, argument, and critique, the students’ previous experience of GE writing proved inadequate, and the contradictions of GE and conceptions of writing made it very difficult for Corey to move them toward his goals (and the official goals behind them). The first of these sent students to the library to find at least five books on a topic of interest; they were asked to examine each book carefully, taking notes, evaluating the author’s organizational scheme, and tracing a “main argument or thesis.” Students were then to provide critical assessments of the books in what Corey called an “annotated bibliography.” “It’s proving to be very difficult for many of them,” he acknowledged early on. Students seemed to be missing a central challenge that Corey had intended here—to trace and critique the author’s interpretation of events. Corey was well aware of the problem—in order to critique and evaluate an argument in history, they had to have some “map” of the field, knowledge of the motives and methods of historians in order to assume the authority to critique an authority. And this comes gradually with increasing familiarity with the activity of the field. “I was a junior before I realized that I could disagree with what an author wrote,” Corey recalled. But he wanted more from his own students than “recall and summary”: 


What day did Bloody Sunday occur on? I can open a book and look, and it says right here, Easter Monday, 1916. And, I say, Oh, that's when it happened. Well, if you go only that far, that's getting back to recall and summary. That's what happened. This would be kind of the essence. But that material is dry. It's not really history. It doesn't explain, it doesn't interpret ideas. It doesn't talk about how things changed over time.

Sensing their difficulty, Corey had students read and critique a passage of his own writing, to help students see that he too struggled with writing, that it was a process of engaging with and interpreting texts.

For the next assignment, students were to select one of the five books as the focus of a two- to four-page book review, to perform what Corey described as “a very intense, in-depth analysis.” Finding students’ responses to the annotated bibliography assignment unsatisfactory, Corey emphatically underscored the need for critical appraisal of the selected books:

THIS IS NOT A SUMMARY!! I do not want to know the thesis, arguments, or conclusions of the author, except as they illustrate other points. A review is essentially your judgment of the book—it is about the book, not what the book is about. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is it convincing in its argument? Revealing? Lousy? Boring? These and hundreds of other adjectives might find their way into your paper. You may use summaries or direct quotes from the reviewed book, but always as evidence to support your arguments, not as arguments in themselves.

Corey would reiterate this explanation a number of times, providing examples and issuing warnings about the seductions of rote summarization. “If you can’t find an argument,” Corey emphasized, “it’s a poorly written book, not a book I’d want to read. I mean that there’s no organization to it.”

Corey was also frustrated with students’ responses to the assignment, and felt what we have analyzed as a double bind, arising out of the deep institutional contradiction between the goals of GE (critical citizenship and “effective writing”) and specialized education (academic historical interpretation). If he gave up his challenge to do real historical argument, he would be compromising his (and his department’s) deeply held views of what history is and does, as well as his (and his institution’s) beliefs about what general education does. If he pushed them to write like academic historians, he risked continuing frustration (his and theirs, as is seen here). He estimated that only three or four seemed to understand the difference between “sum-
mary and recall” versus “argument.” These students had come to his class already understanding this difference, Corey surmised. As for those who were not yet at this level, Corey resolved that “I have to push. I have to give them that challenge to see if they can.” Next time, he added, he would spend even more time on the assignment, walking students through the task of reading with an eye to his central question—“okay, what’s the thesis here?”

Corey tried a different strategy on the next assignment, one that would involve students more directly in the central activity of his discipline—finding and interpreting primary sources—but which would be applicable in many fields and civic involvements and require critical analysis without having to have a “map” of the field. On the next assignment, then, analysis of primary sources was the focus: a three- to five-page paper in which students were to critique a U.S. newspaper account written the day after an Irish historical event occurred, considering how the event might be seen differently now. In explaining the assignment, Corey again asked for critical analysis:

- Note the context of the event(s).
- Consider the immediate perspective of the paper and its American authorship.
- Consider the long-range importance of the event(s).
- Write a 3- to 5-page paper comparing those two perspectives, titled with the headline of the article.

Troubled by the poor showing of the class on the bibliography and book review assignments, Corey repeatedly reminded students to craft an argument comparing the perspective of the newspaper writer to the way the event was viewed later. In an interview, he explained that he wanted students to grasp the rhetorical significance of the writer’s time, place, and point of view, and to ask generative questions: “Why is this New York Times perspective different than it would be, say, in Dublin, or in Belfast, or in London? How do Americans look at things differently?” Students’ papers would be graded on the complexity of argument, adequate supporting evidence, and writing style—ideally “clear, concise, and free of errors.” But if the description of “effective writing” here seemed straightforward, the thinking that was to inform it was anything but. Even in the grading criteria we see contradiction in notions of writing: Students still struggled to understand what Corey meant by “argument” and, as is seen here, continued to feel frustration.

Corey was slightly less frustrated with the results of this assignment; a few more students seemed to “get it.” And he planned to use more primary
documents in future courses (a practice increasingly recommended by history educators. See Shay and Moore; Russell and Yañez). Yet even in this assignment, the object and motive of professional academic history (debating interpretations of historical documents) still contradicted the object of general education, preparation for civic life. Why should these non-majors learn to think and write like professional historians? On the one hand, Corey felt obligated to transmit what his discipline deemed key information, and asked students to demonstrate their mastery of that information in required midterm and final tests. On the other hand, he wanted students to understand that history is much more than discrete facts, and that knowing history means understanding how historical accounts are crafted and recrafted through a highly subjective process of sifting, reasoning, and narrating. These are not necessarily contradictory, but the relation between writing to develop academic historical interpretation and writing to develop citizenship was not worked out in the department, GE program, or institution—much less articulated to students in ways that would be understandable and motivating to them. Moreover, there was no discussion of these issues in the department or university that would allow a vocabulary to develop for discussing how GE writing relates to specialist disciplinary discourses in terms beyond the current-traditional conduit/container model, no generative conversation about teaching and learning—conversation that might have highlighted contradictions not only in his own classroom, but at the levels of department and institution as well.

Writing From the Students’ Perspectives

What were students to make of Corey’s goals and means? Was this course too much like high school English or freshman rhetoric, a matter of thesis statements, topic sentences, and supporting evidence? Or was it like a graduate history seminar, requiring these GE students to assume the rhetorical stance of professional historians? Students tended to think both things, repeatedly mentioning, in interviews, their struggles to understand what Corey was asking of them. Many students noted that the class was much more difficult than they had anticipated, the contours and dimensions of this difficulty eluding both their powers of description and, often, their attempts at mastery.

These uncertainties—in some cases expressed as frustrating double binds—began at a foundational level, in students’ past experiences with writing, perceptions of themselves as writers, and beliefs about what makes
writing effective. As their silence during Corey’s explanation of the five-paragraph essay suggested, all four focal students had received extensive training in developing thesis statements and filing supporting evidence into tidy paragraphs beginning with emphatic topic sentences. TJ, whose struggles with self-confidence and grades resulted in his withdrawal from MWU at the conclusion of the semester, wistfully recalled his high school days, when “teachers wanted me to organize my papers in three main parts: an introduction, the body, and a summary for the conclusion. And I tried my best to follow this pattern and almost always got straight A’s.” Not so at MWU, where teachers seemed to want something less formulaic, and TJ struggled to understand their expectations. Similarly, Mia called herself a “horrible writer” who didn’t know how to organize her thoughts despite the five-paragraph training of her high school English classes; concluding (like some of the faculty Yañez interviewed) that effective writers were born and not made, she was certain she simply lacked the requisite gift. (When Corey invited students to read and critique his own writing, an exercise he intended to help students see that he too struggled with writing, Mia readily concluded that her TA fell squarely into the “born writer” category.)

The high-achieving students both arrived at Corey’s class feeling well prepared for the challenges ahead. Beth recalled that back in high school “we had to organize our papers in terms of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion,” and that in her freshman rhetoric course at MWU, “this type of organization was still valid,” although she had also learned to watch for needed adjustments to the familiar formula. Michael, a self-described “excellent writer,” had benefited from high school training that included advanced placement English as well as opportunities to write creatively and about personal experiences. Although he had completed his share of summarizing and mechanical organization, Michael had found his English classes to be overall “very fun,” and also strong preparation for the demands of college writing. Both Beth and Michael, the two students who arrived at MWU believing they were already effective writers, had found freshman rhetoric helpful in further strengthening their preparation. Mia and TJ regarded the rhetoric course as bewildering and deeply discouraging, especially as it veered away from formulaic organizational patterns into critical argument and analysis. Although all four focal students would struggle in Corey’s class, Mia and TJ were particularly ill equipped to negotiate the frustration and uncertainty that attended these new demands.

All four students understood the study of history as memorizing facts and dates. “In high school,” Mia recalled, “it was just memorization,” making reading history texts a difficult and tedious chore that “you couldn’t
apply to other parts of your life.” Michael described his mastery of high school history courses in a more positive light, but held basically the same conception of the subject: “to learn history all you needed to do was remember the main facts,” he observed. Although TJ disliked memorizing historical facts in preparation for objective tests, he liked the unambiguous nature of such study; “you knew the answer was there in front of your eyes,” he explained. Beth was even more pointed in describing her high school history courses, which had been excessively focused on “readings that were later regurgitated in class.” A good performance involved repeating “as literally as we could, the same information contained in our history texts.” “It was a waste of time,” she added, “useless, just busy work, a painful chore.”

Evaluation in these courses had consisted primarily of objective tests; although there were occasional invitations to write, teachers virtually never provided specialized instruction in writing about history. “Our history teacher wanted us to apply what we knew about writing from our English classes,” explained Beth, who continued to believe that writing was an abstract skill readily transferable across fields of study—a container or conduit for content. Michael had completed a great deal of writing for his AP history course, but here too the emphasis was on factual recall. Although he called the class valuable preparation, he admitted that only when he reached Corey’s class did he begin to comprehend the importance of argumentation in historical writing. “I didn’t learn how to make an argument in high school,” he acknowledged.

Although these students’ backgrounds and self-concepts varied markedly, all four conceptualized academic writing in terms of the five-paragraph essay, and when Corey began with the five-paragraph theme, countless memories of high school English were activated. Their concept of history as the rote memorization of discrete facts mapped rather neatly onto their container/conduit notion of what it means to write: If historical information is fixed and discrete, then it makes sense to file it into prose that simply groups and displays, arranging tidbits like so many artifacts on a museum shelf. The problem with this was that as the weeks went by, Corey seemed to want something different—not “recall,” not “summary,” but analysis that he described as “very intense” and “in-depth.” They tended not to see the two as a continuum, a way of building their writing further, but as a contradiction. On the one hand he had activated and valued their knowledge of the tried-and-true five-paragraph essay; on the other he seemed to want, in their view, the kind of prose that he might write as a graduate student in history. In this, we argue, they experienced as double binds the effects of the contradiction between GE motives and the motives of disciplinary specialization embedded in the institution’s activity system and its discourses. In inter-
views, students said that the course was, in the words of one, "just rhetoric
all over again"; but they also expressed frustration that there was, in their
view, too much reading to get the facts (unlike their high school history text-
books where the information was neatly predigested and organized), and
too much writing. They did not know what Corey was asking of them, and
that understanding proved elusive because of their past experiences with his-
tory and writing.

Students particularly experienced a double bind in their continuing
bewilderment concerning the distinction between "argument" and "recall,"
this despite Corey's repeated explanations, written reminders, and comments
on their papers. In responding to students' bibliographic and book review
assignments, for instance, Corey pointed out again and again that students
were simply summarizing the content of books, failing to identify the
authors' key arguments or critically evaluate the narrative and evidence.
"Good descriptions of the books," Corey wrote on Michael's annotated bib-
liography, "but you don't do much w/ regards to the arguments/theses of the
books"; and on Michael's book review, "Well organized — clear, concise, but
incomplete. You never find his argument." In an interview, Michael re-read
these comments, thumbing through his paper in search of understanding. "I
don't get it," he said at last. "These are his writing tasks and he wants me to
write them his way." The double bind Michael experienced came from his
mistaken notion (not uncommon among students) that it was the instructor's
individual, personal preferences for writing that lay behind his comments.

But from Corey's point of view these were not personal preferences but
the collective ways of doing things in his profession, the genres and rules of
the activity system of academic history. He was re-presenting his profession.
These ways with words, these genres and genre rules, had become central to
his professional ethos and identity. He saw their value to the profession in
making the study of history a socially useful critical enterprise, where inter-
pretations of history are continually negotiated and, perhaps, refined. Corey
also saw their value in general education and their potential use value in stu-
dents' lives beyond the course, in terms of critical citizenship. He communi-
cated that often in his classroom presentation, in his assignments sheets, and
in his comments. Yet despite Corey's efforts, the genres of academic history
often seemed to these students to be dichotomous, contradictory, unrelated
to the genres in which the students had previously experienced history tex-
tually (in textbooks, popular history, etc.). Because of the historical contra-
diction in general education, there was no textual space (in Geisler's term) for
representations of history outside of expert versus popular. The way out of
the double bind was simply to get through the assignment using the old
rhetorical routines to check off a requirement and escape with a decent grade.
Beth, the other self-described “good writer,” was also at first stymied when Corey wrote similar comments on her annotated bibliography: “Your explanations of the contents of the books are outstanding. What you have not done, though, is to describe the arguments in the books. What are the authors trying to prove to you?” Complaining in an interview that the assignment had been “kind of dumb,” Beth moved on to her book review, where the double bind she experienced led her to push toward new insight. A journalism major, Beth criticized her chosen book as lacking in objectivity: “we must expect the author to not be biased or slanted when reporting the story,” she wrote. Next to this line of Beth’s review Corey noted this: “actually, I would suggest that objectivity is a myth; we must expect that the author is biased.” Although Beth admitted that she “felt really frustrated” and “kind of got mad,” she struggled to understand what Corey meant by this, and even went to his office for what proved to be a productive conversation about his expectations and her work for the course. Yañez and Russell analyze Beth’s experience in much greater detail. Here we summarize that analysis. Engeström argues that double binds can sometimes lead people to challenge the old ways and transform their activity (even the activity system), to expand their ways of knowing and acting with others—learning not by merely reacting but by expanding. And that seems to have begun to happen with Beth.

When Corey realized that Beth was a journalism major, he was at least in a position to dramatize the differences. For example, Corey commented on her next paper, “This intro seems journalist-like. It is broken up into several paragraphs perhaps unnecessarily. History intros are typically longer and flow towards the thesis w/out paragraph breaks.” After the paper had been returned, she said in an interview, “I use a lot of long introductions, because that’s the way I like to write. You know we have very different writing styles. The thing is that I’m a journalism major and he’s a historian.”

The differences in disciplinary activity systems (and their discourses) had become an issue that could be negotiated. He could understand her writing expectations because he was familiar (as most all of us are) with journalistic conventions. And she could see him as fundamentally different—not that he was a “picky” teacher but that he was an academic historian, going about a very different activity, yet one that might have value for her beyond the grade, in her civic and professional life.

For her final paper, Beth chose to write a critique of a New York Times account of a meeting between Gerry Adams and Tony Blair. Her critique shows that she had come to see the value of the academic historian’s critical perspective for her chosen field, journalism. She had used the double binds she experienced to transform her understanding of both activity systems
through the mediation of a genre that combined both journalism and academic history. She begins her critique with a typical “Five W’s” journalistic reporting of the meeting. But she quickly moves to “how differently this story might have been reported and relayed in Ireland, Great Britain, and beyond.” This concern for how the news was handled outside the United States suggests that Beth was well aware of the newspaper’s American “bias,” as she put it (still using the epistemological framework of her understanding of journalism).

It seemed that Beth had begun to question her earlier, dearly held belief in the objectivity of the news. In this respect, she pointed out that “even from various media in America we see unique perspectives to this story.” In the closing paragraph of her introduction, Beth highlighted the limited knowledge of some journalists about the history of Ireland. In contrast, she stated that her “historical background knowledge [of Ireland] will form the basis [to analyze] this paper[s] perspective on the event.” This comment suggests Beth had begun to view the news from the epistemological perspective of academic history rather than journalism alone.

As the paper continues, Beth begins to use the analytical language of academic history. Beth is still looking to root out “bias” (a value of the activity system of journalism, in her view), but she sees bias in more complex terms—and both in journalism and academic history. This use of analytic terms and meta-discourse suggests she is aware that arguments are not to be regarded as unalterable truths, but as dialectic interpretations. She is between activity systems, between discourses, but trying to use this expanded perspective in ways that will be useful to her. For Beth, the value for journalists of the “wider historical perspective” of critical—academic—history was apparent. But this learning was purchased at the price of struggle with the contradictions of general education.

When the semester was over Beth admitted that she had “improved a lot as a writer, [and] learned a lot from him.” In balance, for Beth “this class was very beneficial. I learned a lot about Irish history and about historical writing. Specifically, I learned about how historical and journalistic writing are different.” When asked in the final interview if she was a better historical writer, she replied:

I don’t know. But I can tell you that I’m more aware of historical writing these days. I’ll be more careful about analyzing arguments. Like if I’m in a position where I have to agree or disagree with an author, I’ll consider the evidence used by the author to support her argument. As a result of this class, I think that I’m also a more critical historical reader, too. I don’t know. Does that answer your question?
Her writing and comments suggest she had begun to perceive value in the experience of writing critical academic history. (And she also got her A.) In a sense, she had realized the general education goals Corey had for the course ("promote learning of modern Irish history and analytical thinking abilities") and the hopes she had for a course (getting an A and improving her writing skills). Yet this happened in a way that surprised her, that made both history and writing different for her, as she confronted the contradictions of GE.

Mia and TJ, the two struggling students, fared less well. Corey wrote on Mia's book review that she needed to understand "how the author tries to manipulate the reader," feedback that she found new and confusing. "I don't know what I should be questioning and what I shouldn't be questioning," Mia complained in an interview. "Is Britain a good guy or is Britain a bad guy? Is Northern Ireland good? Is Northern Ireland bad? Is Ireland good or bad?" High school history may have been boring, but at least it didn't leave her wondering. "I feel like I am just drowning in this class," she confessed in an interview; "I'm just in this perpetual dark. I'm like, there's no light switch, no exit sign. I can't! I'm lost! I know there's a floor, but I can't find the wall, and I know it's a big room." Like Mia, TJ felt he had invested long hours and hard labor into the assignments, and was confused and disappointed when he saw Corey's final comment: "I'm missing the arguments. What does the author want you to believe?" "I knew that I was supposed to find the arguments," he remarked sadly; "Apparently I didn't find them." In high school he had been a high achiever, but here at MWU, TJ lamented, "I learned how dumb I am."

Despite a strongly professed commitment to the teaching of writing at the levels of department and university, and an instructor committed to general education and the importance of writing for learning, these students struggled to understand just what was meant by "writing" here, what its larger use value might be, and by what route they might expand toward engagement and mastery.

**CONCLUSION: NAMING OBSTACLES AND NEGOTIATING CONTRADICTIONS**

Corey might have remained content to teach GE history as facts and writing as a container/conduit for them, rather than attempting to use writing as a tool for learning in GE and wrestling with the effects of the deep contradictions this surfaced. But his efforts raised issues that he learned from, indi-
vidually—particularly the value of giving students a sense of the activity of history (e.g., through writing from primary sources) as a means of making it relevant to their professional and civic lives. Many in the discipline of history education—and other disciplines—are wrestling with these same issues (see Shay and Moore; Russell and Yañez). But collectively, in a university and/or department, the contradiction between GE and specialized education is so deeply rooted, historically, that change is extremely difficult. Those in the history department and GE program at MWU were not deliberately or even consciously attempting to mask the contradictions. They were simply doing what was necessary to get on with their contradictory work. Yet writing gets caught in the contradiction. And the contradiction isn’t going away, although at small liberal arts colleges it may be felt less than in large research universities. It is rooted in the very structure of mass higher education.

Like so many of our educational good intentions, the move toward emphasizing writing in MWU’s history courses appeared at first glance full of straightforward promise. The moment seemed opportune—in terms of recent developments in historiography and history education, in terms of what we have learned from pioneering WAC programs, and in terms of enlarged concepts of literacy. Here was a campus with a long-standing commitment to the teaching of writing, fresh from yet another wave of revising its GE curriculum and renewing its commitment to developing “students’ effective use of the English language.”

The writing that particular teachers assign in these GE courses would depend on the “educational objectives of the course,” continued the statement in the College of Liberal Arts Classroom Manual—provided that all writing would be “evaluated for form as well as content” (12). Herein rested the central dilemma that permeated this campus, department, and classroom: a belief in the integration of writing and disciplinary learning on the one hand, and a belief in a clear distinction between form and content on the other. This was a tension that could be traced back historically, at least to MWU’s post-World War II insistence that writing be fostered in the disciplines, and to the accompanying refrain that such instruction was somehow remedial, devolving academic courses into prose fix-it shops. These competing visions of writing-as-learning-tool and writing-as-container/conduit continued to co-exist at the departmental level as well, finding their way into faculty definitions of “effective writing” that varied from “grammatically clear paragraphs and sentences” to “the ability to express ideas in a critical way.”

These contradictions permeated the academic air this graduate student instructor breathed, occupying his classroom practice like so many ghostly echoes. If effective writing were a symmetrical and clean container, he would
offer students refresher lessons on the five-paragraph essay and assist them in polishing surfaces; if effective writing were grounded in historiographical debates concerning the relativity of narrative accounts, he would engage his students in hard-headed critique. Corey attempted to move toward the latter, and struggled with the contradiction. Like their instructor, Corey’s students were caught between the old and the new—between ghosts of English classes past and the novel academic challenge of writing like historians. These contradictions were part of his classroom, despite his best attempts to deal with them, contradictions that were largely invisible on his department and campus but operated no less powerfully—or rather more powerfully—for their invisibility.

Because “writing” always means particular things in particular contexts, MWU needed to consider how general education courses might usefully provide liminal entry into the discourses of various disciplines. Informed by practical urgencies and the realization that consensus is elusive, the work of revising general education curricula tends to produce more tinkering than bold new conceptions (Gaff). This most recent wave of GE reform at MWU had left contradiction-ridden language about improving writing instruction intact, opening the door to instructional approaches that cast writing as an integral part of students’ critical reading, thinking, and talking about a discipline—but also to writing that simply demonstrated successful transmission of content. Because this contradiction was never clearly flagged or discussed, both motives could readily co-exist in departments and classrooms. The institutional history forced students to negotiate a complex nexus of contexts and rhetorical demands as the work of this class interacted with both disciplinary and institutional traditions. Because these traditions had become largely transparent, invisible, undiscussed, the developmental challenges students faced in negotiating these demands were easily underestimated.

To be sure, we need further research that charts students’ developmental trajectories as they move toward historical understandings, that explores how writing can both support and assess such understandings, and that identifies developmentally appropriate pedagogical interventions. Meanwhile, reflective instructors who are both attentive to their students and engaging in regular conversations with colleagues can begin to fill the voids in our current understandings and instructional strategies. Certainly Corey’s was an academically strong department with a growing commitment to the teaching of writing. What structures for faculty development and mentoring might surface the contradictions? How might contradictions be put to productive use for the great majority of students, as Corey’s course did for some students. This brings us full circle to Michael Fullan’s (The
New Meaning) argument that we should think of all educational change as pushing against the grain of institutional cultures—in this case, a culture that tended to privilege lecture-driven instruction, and that approached teaching with commitment and energy, but according to traditional norms of relative autonomy. Thus, the department did not talk much about such issues as how general education courses might acquaint students with current conceptions of historiography, what kinds of writing might be appropriate, or the particular contours of students’ instructional needs.

Departmental conversation about GE history courses was also needed to ensure more robust support for faculty development and TA development and mentoring, flowing naturally from ongoing discussion about what it means to teach, learn, and write about history in meaningful ways. Even as the department worried about declining enrollments in these courses, there was little department-level deliberation concerning what these courses should be and accomplish.

These are foundational concerns with and important implications for the inclusion of writing in such courses. Historic Perspectives was not intended to serve as an introduction to the major, but as the last history course most of these students would take, a kind of capstone liberal arts experience. All had known many history courses over the years, typically centered on memorization of quickly forgotten facts, and multiple-choice tests or five-paragraph essays that assessed their quite temporary recall. The issues here were resonant: What should ordinary citizens know about how historical accounts are constructed and reconstructed? Why demand that students take so many history courses over the years, anyway? And given that this was presumably the last one for the great majority of these students, how best to use this final chance? What sorts of experiences and understandings should students take away—and what was the special role of writing in promoting those experiences and understandings?

Such questions may be basic, but they are far from simple. When general education courses come up for campus review, departments must make compelling cases, especially where a course is universally required. And if writing and thinking are of a piece, departments must somehow account for the particular efficacy of asking students to engage in writing that both provokes and reflects particular kinds of thinking. It may be tempting to take advantage of the familiar anger of faculty who feel that writing is an abstract, generalizable skill that was not adequately taught in the freshman composition course or high school. Vague, tacitly conflict-ridden promises to foster student writing may be politically compelling, but they set the stage for the double binds Mia, Michael, TJ, and Beth experienced in their historical perspectives class. We owe it to our students to explore more thoroughly what
we are asking of them and why, and we owe it to ourselves to investigate the implications of these arguments in terms of the public utility of our respective disciplines. Writing for the liberal arts means many things; campuses can proclaim their commitments, but it is up to departments to trace the more particular implications, providing supportive collegial environments, clearly articulated purposes, and assignments that offer rigorous but developmentally appropriate opportunities to explore the work of their respective fields of study. Meanwhile, the need continues for research that charts the logic and challenges of particular writing assignments, and identifies strategies that can help students negotiate the concomitant demands of learning and writing about a discipline.

**CODA**

**By Corey Smith**

The 6 years that have passed since the semester spent with (now) Dr. Yañez provide a perspective I could not have provided during our interviews that semester. In part, I am amazed at aspects of the class that demonstrate an untaught, almost instinctual pedagogical maturity; at other times, I am dismayed by my own naiveté. Negotiating between the boundaries of the double bind described by Russell and Yañez was never an intentional act, but what seemed the commonsense approach to the conditions as I perceived them at MWU. As a teacher, my inability to recognize the institutional bind that surrounded me created a great deal of my own frustration and inhibited my ability to navigate the contradictions for my students.

By no means do I believe the struggles I faced in that semester were unique to my class. The compartmentalization of writing to the English Department and English classes is the most pervasive prejudice I have to overcome. My graduate work is not in English, but history. The same thinking that results in such a compartmentalization pervades history classes from day 1, and I must defend my decision to include writing as a matter of course. At the same time, students continue to demand a direct application of the “material” (rather than the thought processes) to their future careers as accountants, physicians, managers, and so on.

My only objection to the material presented here is to the conclusion that “it is up to departments...” to make changes for the future. Depending on any institution (whether a department, division, college, or university) will only result in division of responsibility for the failure. The onus must be on individuals to take responsibility in their own classrooms and demand
accountability from their colleagues. They must make this subject important enough to create controversy at faculty meetings and even make enemies of other faculty members and/or administrators. They must also be willing to provide consistent and long-term pressure for the changes. Policy changes never happen quickly at an institution of higher learning.

The problems inherent in such a solution at MWU (and other equally large institutions) are obvious. The vast majority of those teaching the general education classrooms are graduate students who are powerless within the system, transient, and in no position to make enemies of those unwilling to change. They also influence only a handful of students directly (I taught to 67 students in one academic year there, out of roughly 4,000 per class. In contrast, as a full-time faculty member at a small liberal arts college, I had 125 out of the 400 in the class). In order to take place, changes will have to be mandated by tenured faculty members willing to personally oversee and direct graduate students in teaching as well as research activities.

Being the subject of such intense scrutiny over a prolonged period of time was an experience every teacher should be privileged to have. It forced me to consider the motives and execution options for everything I did in class, transforming the approach I had to pedagogy. Most importantly, it forced me to confront the issues presented here. I hope that each reader can gain something from my struggles that will improve the general educational experience for future students.

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