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[Review of the article ‘How well does writing across the curriculum work’, by Toby Fulwiler]

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REVIEWS & SUMMARIES

FULWILER, Toby. 1984. 'How well does writing across the curriculum work?' College English, vol. 46, no 2, February, 1984., pp 113-125.

After six years of directing the writing across the curriculum programme at Michigan Technical University, Toby Fulwiler has had to admit that in some respects the programme failed. Yet there have been unexpected and welcome spin-offs.

The problems which faced Fulwiler and his colleagues will be familiar to others who have tried to plan and conduct language across the curriculum projects, particularly in tertiary institutions. In this article he pinpoints eleven major problems and indicates how and how much he was able to overcome them in the course of six years.

A fairly common block to the smooth running of language across the curriculum projects is a misunderstanding of key terminology. At the outset, the organisers of the Michigan Tech programme had accepted and introduced to fellow staff members James Britton's categorisation of the functions of writing : 'Expressive' (personal, informal writing to yourself); 'Transactional' (writing used to inform, instruct, or persuade somebody else about something); and 'Poetic' (writing used as an art, where form and style may be more

important than content). The notion of expressive writing was widely misunderstood and therefore rejected by many members of the academic staff. Many felt that an encouragement of expressive writing would prevent students from mastering correct sentence structure, grammar and spelling. Even when the teerminological problem had been cleared (after three years of persistent misunderstanding), there were still those who questioned the value of expressive writing, no matter what name was given to it. It might, they granted, have a place in such subjects as English but hardly in the sciences. Although Fulwiler makes no comments on whether or not he solved this problem, the reader may guess that a number of his colleagues remained unconvinced of the value of expressive writing outside of what the Americans so aptly call the Humanities.

Resistance on the part of unmotivated, inflexible or highly suspicious staff members posed another major threat to the success of the Michigan Tech programme. Staff who had been obliged by their heads of department to attend workshops, and also those who had volunteered but with closed minds or competitive attitudes, put a strong damper on workshops and so discouraged others who had been more willing to try something new. An obvious solution, and one which has been resorted to in many educational institutions, is to make staff participation entirely voluntary even though this sets severe limits on how far across the curriculum the programme stretches.

Fulwiler makes some light-hearted comments on a problem which he labels 'Turf'. In his experience, some academic disciplines seem to produce more trouble-makers than others. Philosophers and English specialists proved most difficult. Both had a tendency to question every assumption and to argue fine points of theory and terminology. Fulwiler's solution? - Stick to ideas which are verifiable by personal experience and stay away from too much theory. My own view is that arguments about theory - so long as they are conducted in a spirit of open inquiry - make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the connections between language and the acquisition of knowledge.

Large classes and a lack of trust - both between students and their peers and students and their tutors - also blocked the progress of the writing across the curriculum project at Michigan Tech. Fulwiler concedes that where there are more than fifty students in a class, it is unreasonable to expect lecturers to set and mark more written work. Even in small classes, peer evaluation of drafts and group discussion of students' writing doesn't work unless the tutor makes enough time and opportunity for students to develop the trusting but critical attitudes necessary for good revision.

Other problems which are likely to bug language across the curriculum projects are the tendency of teachers and lecturers to dabble rather than commit themselves wholeheartedly to language work in their subjects; the size of the institution

together with an inflexible or over-loaded curriculum; a lack of follow-up workshops for academic staff members involved in the language programme; and - in universities - the pressures of the publish-or-perish ethos.

So much for problems. What about the welcome and unexpected spin-offs? I mention just three of the six which Fulwiler discusses. All three have, I believe, also been spin-offs for those of us who have been involved in the language across the curriculum project at the Johannesburg College of Education.

To be involved in a language across the curriculum programme is to be a member of an interdisplinary community of scholars. Fulwiler points out that prior to the establishment of the language programme at Michigan Tech, there was no campus mechanism for promoting regular collegial interactions across disciplinary lines.

A second spin-off for Michigan Tech has been a change in campus atmosphere - people talk alot more about writing. Much of the talk is in the form of staffroom jokes, but Fulwiler sees these as an indication that writing ahs become serious business in the campus community.

Perhaps the most important effect of the language programme has been its impact on teaching methods at Michigan Tech. There has been a move away from formal lecturing towards inquiry-based learning and problem-solving through participant

interaction. Formal records of field-trips in subjects like Forestry have been replaced by more personal field-trip journals.

Fulwiler concludes that although language across the curriculum programmes do not work all the time or for everyone, they sometimes work better than anyone would have guessed.Now there's encouragement for those who have been trying to establish language across the curriculum projects at schools and colleges in South Africa.

NOTE: Readers who are interested in a detailed account of language across the curriculum projects in the United States should refer to FULWILER, Toby and Young, Arthur. Eds. 1982. Language connections: Writing and reading across the curriculum. Urbana, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English.

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