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A Credited Support Course: Corequisite Writing Course at Boise State University

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In 1981, when I began teaching at Boise State University, the institution still filled the community college function, the teaching load was heavy (five or even six courses per term), and preparing students for first year writing was the goal of basic writing. I felt immersion in a full, rich writing and reading experience, not primarily grammar review, was essential. I entered Boise State with experience teaching at a small college in western North Carolina where I first encountered Mina Shaughnessy; I admired how she took basic writing seriously. After four years in North Carolina, in 1980-81, I participated in a year-long National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminar titled “Literature and Literacy,” led by W. Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California. During the seminar we read 1970s writing and reading theory, both conceived of as process, and worked to connect writing with reading. We read thinkers like James Britton, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow on writing; and Louise Rosenblatt, Frank Smith, and Norman Holland on reading; and others who studied and wrote about full texts, response, revision, and writing and reading as mirror image acts. Thus, when I came to Boise State, I was excited to try these ideas.

In my class, I focused on invention, revision, active reading, and editing as a near-final process. I demonstrated these principles using a “fishbowl” strategy with my own writing for the first essay. Students pulled their chairs in a circle (forming the fishbowl), and classroom interns—upper division and graduate students—were respondents. Then students offered their feedback. I handed out my initial freewriting, first draft, and, later, revised drafts based on intern and student response. Later, interns served as “guinea pigs,” demonstrating their processes, from invention (lists, questioning techniques, mind maps, and more) through first drafts, response, revision, and editing. Students worked within the same structure, in writing groups assisted by the interns or me. My class also encompassed active, critical reading: we used textbooks that revealed reading-writing connections, students kept response journals, and we often read a whole book, chapter by chapter, in a careful, intentional manner, such as Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* or Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*. This class was clearly the equivalent of three credits and should have received academic credit; inability to gain credit would be a continuing issue.

After I had been at Boise State about twenty years (roughly 2000), new challenges to basic writing appeared. These were more political than pedagogical, and I sensed how the larger scene of instruction, especially outside societal

forces, affects students, faculty, and what happens in classrooms. Challenges first emerged at The Fourth National Basic Writing Conference, an event marked by vigorous debates about mainstreaming and marginalization. Initially these issues appeared remote from Boise State, but inevitably political issues arose. One was that the Idaho State Board of Education, in a well-meaning effort to simplify transfer between state institutions, appropriated placement. Previously placement had been a faculty decision, but in 2000, the board imposed standardized test scores for placement statewide, essentially doubling the number of instructors needed at Boise State to teach basic writing. In response, I mentored a small group of faculty when they first taught the course. As part of our work together, we developed a statement of guidelines and goals, using a collaborative process. I wrote an essay about this work, later published in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, as part of a thematic cluster of essays on mission statements for basic writing; other contributors were Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, then of Chabot College, a community college in Hayward, California; and Tom Reynolds and Patty Fillipi, of the University of Minnesota General College. I was proud of our joint efforts contributing to a disciplinary definition of basic writing.

Earlier, in 1996, Greg Glau, of Arizona State University, had developed the “Stretch” program where basic writing became the first of two semesters that stretched English 101 into a two-term credit-bearing sequence. This innovation was the impetus for the Council on Basic Writing (CBW) Innovation Award. Although I was impressed by Glau’s work on Stretch, I questioned whether basic writing was preparation for, or direct support of, first year writing. These two goals are similar but not precisely the same. Glau emphasized that Stretch employed the same set of teaching outcomes as first year writing but stretched them over two classes. It seemed to me that basic writing as a field needed its own definition and outcomes, not simply those of first year writing. However, over time our program was transformed into a thriving stretch program under the guidance of Professor Tom Peele; even so, we could not obtain credit for the first semester of that program.

Another significant political reality was increasing reliance on contingent faculty to teach first year writing, including basic writing; these faculty were paid by the course without benefits and often commuted between institutions. As Eliana Osborn said, “faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.” The cost of education rose, student loan debt increased, and students needed a career path with reasonable promise of earning power. At about the time of the recession, organizations like Complete College America (CCA)—which advises state college systems on placement, credit, uniform course structures, guided pathways and academic maps, and related policies—emerged. CCA bases their analysis on attrition rates, gateway course completion rates,

time to degree completion, and similar metrics; some have called this perspective “rhetorics of austerity” (Scott and Welch 4).

The Idaho State Board of Education embraced Complete College Idaho (CCI), part of CCA, in 2012 and the board appropriated another pedagogical feature: course delivery format for “remedial” courses. State institutions were to adopt one of three CCI options—the emporium, acceleration, or corequisite models. We felt that the most pedagogically sound approach to writing instruction was the corequisite model known as the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). Originated by Peter Adams, a past Chair of CBW, ALP was well-researched (Adams et al.), and had received the CBW Innovation Award. Although we were dubious of state board and CCI control over faculty decisions, still, the approach made sense. In April 2016, Adams stated in a WPA-L posting that it would be better if efforts to improve basic writing “... were faculty driven rather than top-down mandates. [...] However, the model known as ALP . . . was developed by . . . faculty at the Community College of Baltimore County” (Adams, “Re: Non-Credit”).

Boise State initially piloted the corequisite model in Spring 2013, and in 2013-2014, Boise State and our sister community college, the College of Western Idaho (CWI), engaged in a sustained, grant-funded project to develop the new model. I was a co-leader in this effort with Professor Meagan Newberry of CWI. Instructors from both colleges held monthly meetings, including cross-institutional meetings, visited each other’s classes, developed teaching materials, performed teacher research, and created a website. We presented this work at a summer workshop for representatives of Idaho state colleges.

Although the Community College of Baltimore County does not offer credit for their three-hour corequisite course, we were able to argue successfully for a one-hour, graded credit-bearing offering, and CWI also created their corequisite course as credit bearing, for two elective credits. A review of the 2019-2020 catalogues of Idaho’s eight state institutions (three universities, a four-year college, and four community colleges) reveals that all offer corequisites for first year writing of some kind that are credit bearing. Now, students at Boise State receive four graded credits for English 101 with the corequisite or three graded credits without the corequisite. The new format means continued focus on some original basic writing goals, such as conferencing with students and clarifying and slowing down to make room for questions. What has been lost, in my view, is time for demonstrations and enactments of writing emerging—and active reading based on slow, focused conversation with a text. In 2015, Boise State received our own CBW Innovation Award for our corequisite model and related efforts, particularly “The Write Class,” a multiple measures placement tool (Estrem et al.), now used by most state institutions in Idaho and by some colleges outside Idaho.

In 2019, Boise State Provost Tony Roark praised the institution for substantially improving four- and six-year graduation rates as compared to a decade earlier; he credited this change at least partially to the first year writing corequisite model. I am somewhat skeptical of that analysis because in 2009 Boise State still served the community college function. CWI opened its doors that year and has since grown rapidly. However, the corequisite model was not instituted at Boise State until 2013. And there is evidence that since 2012, success rates in English 101 and 102 have increased by 5% and 6% respectively (Estrem, “TWC” 5). I am glad that current students appear to be succeeding. As Shaughnessy observed, it is “probably wise to assume that a few years of steady reading, writing, talking, and listening in an academic setting are certain to increase ... intellectual tenacity and spanning power ... (273). We do not expect students to master the complexity of rich, engaged reading and writing in one semester; those abilities develop over years. All of the conversation, reading, writing and thinking required by a major field of study and possibly a minor, and by other courses as well, compel students to engage with texts and perhaps redefine themselves as thinkers and writers.

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