

# Teaching students to think:

## Writing remains central to liberal arts education

By Melissa Martin  
Of the Emerald

Many students just want to get through their writing course — never realizing that a writing department is the cornerstone of a liberal arts university.

Program officials say they want students to think and write argumentatively when they finish the program's first year and continue their education.

"We want to direct writing toward the process of inquiry and other disciplines, so we are giving students better academic preparation through writing," says John Gage, composition department head.

"I overestimated the mechanical aspects and underestimated the maturity of their thinking," adds Richard Schwartz, a composition professor. "They're really becoming good thinkers.

"My job is to keep the students 'up' and 'jelled' and to promote the desire to write. I want to make them understand their writing does matter," he says.

Learning to write at the college level is not a "mirror skill," Gage says, adding that composition should be taught in relation to liberal arts.

"The way we teach writing will be in relation to ideas and how to support them," he says.

To make writing a foundational tool, the entire University needs to cooperate, Gage says. "Other classes need to reinforce and ask for writing and make it count as part of expected performance.

"If students aren't writing as well as they should it is everybody's problem," he says.

Gage, who serves on the National Council of Teachers of English, teaches a composition class so he can keep in touch with the students. The 2,500 students taking first-year writing classes are reading, "College Thinking," a paperback designed to help them get the best out of college.

And along with meeting with students, University writing teachers meet once a week to share experiences and knowledge, an event Gage says is a factor in the program's quality teaching and positive outlook.

In addition, department Graduate Teaching Fellows must finish a training sequence which includes a fall composition workshop and an apprenticeship before they actually enter the classroom,



John Gage

Gage says.

"I'm enthusiastic about what he (Gage) has done with this program," says Jonathan Monroe, a composition GTF who will complete his doctorate winter term and become an instructor.

Monroe says he will work with students individually for grammar problems but hopes to encourage students to think critically and transfer that to writing critically.

Monroe attended the orientation program Gage organized and says the sessions built up morale and prepared the teachers for a new term.

Schwartz also is excited about the composition department's liberal arts focus.

As part of the composition department for the first time, the former Ashland high school teacher says the University program's goals and ideas are making him a "much more well rounded teacher.

It's too early in the term to make generalizations about the students' progress, Schwartz says, but he hopes to sit down with them and find out how they view him as a junior high, senior high and college age teacher.

Gage keeps high school teachers informed on skills the University expects from first-year entering students. He says the department-sponsored conference for high school teachers held on campus last summer was very successful.

This year, Schwartz says he has a tremendous cross section of students. He says he uses materials such as newspaper editorials to stimulate student thought. And he enjoys reading student essays.

"Whenever I get a batch of essays I come back a new person," he says.

Schwartz doesn't depend on student response after his lectures to measure his effectiveness. "A teacher can walk out of a writing class totally disillusioned without a response," he says.

For Schwartz, the weekly composition staff meetings provide a good time to socialize and discuss teaching methods.


Although GTF Maria DePriest admits to being busy and not always wanting to attend the Monday night weekly sessions for composition staff, she says after the class is over she always comes back with "a million ideas."

She emphasized the students' tendency is to be vague in their writing and fuzzy in their thinking. "The ideas are almost formulated while they write," she says.

"We are really supposed to be teaching people to think."



Richard Schwartz



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