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Smiling Through the Turbulence: The Flight Attendant Syndrome and Other Issues of Writing Instructor Status in the Adjunct Model

In examining any pedagogical theory, it is important to consider the settings in which the theory is implemented as well as the constraints inherent in those settings. For example, many practitioners advocate the use of adjunct-model writing courses as a means of helping students learn content at the same time that they learn to write academic papers for these content courses. In the adjunct model, the students who attend, for example, a writing course offered by the ESL department also attend a content course such as political science or second language acquisition offered by another academic department. The writing course focuses on the genres students need to use in the content course and, among other writing activities, uses the actual papers assigned in the content course as a means of helping students master these genres. On the whole, however, the literature on adjunct-based writing courses does not emphasize factors that impinge upon the success of such courses. In our collective experience in teaching adjunct writing courses in a variety of settings, we have found that certain factors can have serious consequences.

What follows are some observations of difficulties that teachers may encounter in implementing adjunct writing courses in higher education. We will not be describing a particular adjunct-model course but will generalize from our experiences teaching a number of such courses, particularly from those in which we encountered problems. We will refer to teacher and student journals and particular examples of courses to illustrate issues where appropriate. We will begin from the point of view of the university student, for clarity's sake, but we recognize that student and teacher issues are inherently intertwined.

Student Issues

The literature expounding content-based language courses tells us that content-based language courses are intrinsically motivating for students (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Leaver & Stryker, 1989). The adjunct model predicts that students will be writing about content that is meaningful to them, at the very least because it is content that they need to understand in order to be successful in their companion content course (Goldstein, 1993). Consider, however, situations like those we have encountered where the content course seems either irrelevant or uninteresting to students. Students might be required to attend a content course which they may find interesting, but which they may not perceive as relevant to their degree program, for example an exciting breadth course (e.g., a course not in their major). On the other hand, students might find themselves attending a content course which they do find relevant to their degree program but which does not interest them, for example a dull required course in their major. It is our experience that when students attend a writing course adjuncted to a content course which the students consider irrelevant or uninteresting, the resistance to the content course can lead to considerable resistance in the writing course. As one teacher noted in her journal, "Every time I've ever taught an adjunct or content-based course, there have been complaints about the content." A student remarked in a journal entry, "It's really frustrating. I am push into a class and the instructor teach to me something I do not want any help with. I need grammar, spelling, organization not more of political science course."

Students also bring expectations from their previous academic experience about what their writing courses should cover. (See, for example, Valentine & Repath-Martos, 1992). We have found in some instances that students expect a "standard" writing class which covers a range of genres applicable to a variety of disciplines rather than a subset of genres applicable to only one discipline or course. In addition, we have seen that, as Valentine and Repath-Martos (1992) have found, in some instances, students expect the course to focus heavily on grammar and vocabulary. They may balk at being limited to in-depth study of specific types of writing related to their content course and may also feel that they are, therefore, not receiving appropriate generalized instruction. One student in an adjunct writing class stated concern in an evaluation, "I do not know if you realize it or you are doing it specifically, but it seems we are being taught the principles of political science rather than conventional English writing." For example, in a writing class for native and nonnative speakers enrolled in a required political science research course, we met a lot of resistance to working on the particular writing assignments of the course. Students viewed these papers as unique to this policy course and wanted instead to work on genres that they perceived as being applicable to a wider range of courses. Some students came away feeling that the instruction they received was inappropriate or not helpful beyond the confines of this particular combination of writing and content courses.

Another issue of concern is students' trust in the adjunct writing course. Certainly we can see from the above discussion that this trust can be undermined when students believe that they are not receiving adequate writing instruction. Of equal concern is the students' sense of who has authority over the content that is being taught in the content course. Traditionally, the academy has vested that authority in the content teacher, and writing teachers have taken pains not to tread on this authority. The adjunct model, however, makes this issue of authority central since students are writing papers in the adjunct writing course which focus on the content of the companion course. And, following current pedagogical practices, we teach and respond in ways that demonstrate that the writing is not separable from the content. (See Shih, 1986, for example). Adjunct writing teachers, therefore, find themselves having to both know the content and respond to the content in students' papers. While the writing teacher may feel confident that she or he does know the content and can respond to the use of that content in the students' papers, students are not always so willing to vest this authority in their writing teachers.

> I do believe the class is helping an awful lot in sharpening my political science writing skills. There is no doubt about that. The doubt is how well, you, an English instructor, can disseminate and give feedback on my political science writing ... I realize that the main purpose of this course, is to hone my skills at political science writing. But let's make a distinction here – it is simply improving writing skills and definitely not imparting knowledge about the principles of political science, for that is the forte of political science faculty members.
>
> (excerpt from a student evaluation)

This lack of trust on the part of the students can be further exacerbated when the writing teacher is learning the content along with the students by attending the content course. Students may even wonder if their teacher knows the content as well as they do or feel that their writing teacher is just "one step ahead." A teacher wrote in her journal , "[A student] wondered if and why the institution was going to keep making its English teachers teach things they don't know anything about."

The issue of authority also leads to another concern expressed by students in adjunct writing courses: serving two masters. In some instances, we have seen students confused by what they perceive as differing expectations on the part of the writing teacher and the content teacher. Unless the writing teacher and the content teacher share knowledge and perceptions about writing processes, products, responses, evaluation and assessment, then students can be left feeling that they are receiving conflicting messages about what is important in their writing and how that will be evaluated. In a number of instances, students have been thoroughly dismayed by the disparity between the responses of the writing teacher, who focuses on process as well as product and responds to and evaluates rhetoric, content, and language, and the responses of the content teacher who focuses on product and evaluates solely on content and/or language.

> She [the student] told me after class that she was really angry at JA [content teacher] because she had given him a draft of her critique and he had said it was all right, he had even marked it "good" in places (I have a copy) and then when he gave it back to her he had given her an A- (a low grade for her) and told her the policy evaluation was all wrong. Step 10 she got all wrong. So what is she supposed to do/think? Why didn't he tell her it was all wrong when he read the draft? He wasn't reading carefully, that's why.
>
> (excerpt from an adjunct instructor's diary)

In sum, from the students' point of view, adjunct courses are not always as effective as we might believe or hope. Students perceive them as working well when these courses fit their expectations about what a writing course should be and do, when they are invested in the content of the content course, and when they trust the writing teacher's control of the content and feel that their writing teacher and content teacher are in sync. Too often, however, we find ourselves in situations where some combination of the above factors is not present, and students are left feeling that they are not receiving the kind of instruction that will help them become better writers.

Teacher Issues

> One of the things that really upsets me about adjunct writing courses in general and this one in particular is that it makes me feel like a flight attendant. I keep picturing us in our little uniforms going up and down the aisles, taking care of the student-passengers, while the big boys fly the plane. We rattle down the aisle of a 747 handing out plastic wrapped chicken sandwiches, smiling through the turbulence, while the big professors sit up in the cockpit. The question is: Aren't we giving up our authority over our own 'content' by doing this? Pretty soon we'll be bringing them coffee, too. Won't we?
>
> (excerpt from an adjunct writing instructor's journal)

As this diary excerpt illustrates, adjunct writing teachers may have difficulty with authority, with status and rank. But this is not only a problem for this particular kind of course. More often than not, writing courses are considered "skill" courses by most members of the academy and although learning to write is considered important, it is still only a skill. As Rose (1985) puts it, "It is absolutely necessary but remains second-class" (p.347). In addition, language learning in general and ESL in particular are often categorized as skill courses and not as important in the university hierarchy as content courses. Auerbach (1991) has argued that, "A fact of life for ESL educators is that we are marginalized. The official rationalization for our marginal status is that ESL is a skill, not a discipline ..." (p.1). A writing course for ESL students, then, is doubly marginalized in the eyes of the rest of the university faculty and administration.

In the case of adjunct-model courses, often the writing course is taught by a part-time instructor and the content course by an associate or full professor. In one case we know of, two deans were teaching the content course. This is a fact that has been variously dealt with. Johns (1989) suggests accepting the asymmetry between the content course and the adjuncted writing course and using activities in the writing class such as "summaries of lectures and/or readings" and "listing important vocabulary and its relevance to the course." Benesch (1992), on the other hand, states that

> Paired arrangements can easily turn the ESL class into a tutoring service which sustains large classes, one-way lectures, incomprehensible textbooks, and coverage of massive amounts of material. Rather than acting as support for this type of instruction, we should be fighting for smaller classes, a more interactive teaching approach, and better readings. We can model a more appropriate style of teaching in ESL classes, including small group discussion, journals, student-generated questions, and we can work with our colleagues in other disciplines to implement these methods. (p.8)

Johns and Benesch represent the two ends on the continuum of teacher attitudes toward the place of ESL writing courses in the model of paired or adjunct courses. A prospective ESL adjunct writing-course instructor needs to seriously consider how much status and authority in the context of the

university she needs to have to function adequately in the classroom before embarking on this kind of teaching.

We have found that the belief still persists among content instructors that writing instruction is a skill that can be learned through memorizing rules and applying them. That is, these professors expect

> that writing courses will address sentence-level concerns whereas [writing] instructors emphasize a process approach to writing wherein audience, purpose, organization, and development of ideas are primary concerns. Grammatical or sentence-level issues are addressed only after audience, purpose, organization and development are clearly addressed (Choi, Cramp, Goldsborough, Nashiro, & Tuman, 1993, p.5).

Comments we have heard from content instructors on what is important in writing instruction include:

1. Student writers use too many *ing* -words.
2. I tell students to look at every *the* and see if they can strike it.
3. Only quote quotes.
4. Not to spell check is rude.

A further complication is that some content instructors feel that writing instructors should limit their remarks to sentence-level grammatical and mechanical issues. That is, writing instructors have no business making suggestions on students' ideas, since they are not experts on the course content. On the other hand, most writing teachers, educated by Halliday and Hasan (1976), think of a text as a semantic unit, a unit of meaning, not form. It is therefore virtually impossible for them to disregard content in their writing instruction, since disregarding content would mean disregarding the text.

Finally, if and when writing instructors attempt to share their expertise, it is often not appreciated by content instructors. In fact, more often than not, content instructors behave as if there is no content in writing classes, as if writing were something any well-educated person could teach. Often they seem to hold the attitude that writing, like riding a bicycle or driving a car, is a means to an end we all use but a tedious skill to teach and one they have no interest in participating in. Often it does not even seem to occur to them that they could participate in their students' development as writers.

Even though content holds this importance for them, adjunct writing instructors will never understand the content to the same degree as the content instructors (with the exception of those writing instructors who are

degreed in another field besides applied linguistics, TESOL, language education, etc.). Nor should they. The task of content-based instruction is to make explicit "the assumptions, conventions, and procedures of [the particular] discourse communities" (Eskey, 1992, p.19). Indeed, adjunct writing instructors should take on the role of discourse analysts, working with the content instructors and course material to determine the written discourse parameters of that discipline. Some previous research in this area may be helpful, research carried out primarily by ESP specialists, for example, Bazerman, 1984; Dudley-Evans and Henderson, 1990; Johns, 1991; and Swales, 1990. But for the most part, adjunct writing instructors need to investigate the discourse of the disciplines of their content assignments themselves as part of their own course development.

This is no easy task. They face at least two difficult obstacles. First, regardless of their attempts to inform themselves, adjunct writing instructors face the problems discussed above regarding students' mistrust of their authority vis-à-vis content instructors. Such mistrust can become contagious, infecting the writing instructors' own self confidence. This is illustrated in the following diary excerpt by a writing instructor whose course was adjuncted to a political science research methods course:

> Today in class I was totally stumped by a student question: Do we just have to take concepts, operationalize them, and thereby turn them into variables? Before this question came, I thought I understood concepts and variables completely. The student jolted me into realizing I didn't know how operationalization related the two together. And that after preparing a writing lesson on operationalization! I've got to go back to the political science material after all—wonder what else I don't yet understand completely!?!
>
> [The next day:] Yikes! Have I got *concept*-phobia now that I found out from my student that I didn't realize how operationalization affects concepts & variables? Here on page 23 of the political science textbook there's a discussion of whether concepts have to be observable or not. I had to read and reread over and over. I guess concepts have to at least be indirectly observable – a concept's empirical referents allow us to observe it at least indirectly. I guess even if it's not directly observable, it should still be precise and theoretically important. Okay, that should be good enough understanding of that – calm down, and try not to panic like that.
>
> (excerpt from an adjunct writing instructor's teaching journal)

A second obstacle involves writing instructors eliciting content information from their content colleagues. The writing instructors may find that content instructors, not being discourse analysts themselves, are often not able to articulate the discourse expectations of their fields readily. Their language awareness of the discourse patterns of their fields is lacking, even though their general understanding of the content of their fields may be excellent. Their responses to questions about what the writing is like in their fields tend to reflect their views of academic writing per se, as discussed above, for example, expectations of organization, and grammatical and orthographical correctness. Thus, adjunct writing instructors need to acquire enough knowledge of the content to be able to discuss specific issues of discourse expectations with the content instructors.

We have found it futile to ask content instructors in the field of policy studies the extent to which they define terms in their writing and the extent to which they expect their students to do so. However, when we have asked about the need to define specific terms like *civil strife* or *agenda-setting* within the field of political science, we have found ourselves in the midst of a fruitful discussion on the discourse of defining terms. Likewise, content instructors need to be prepared to work with the adjunct writing instructors introspectively and analytically to help build an understanding of the discourse of their discipline. The discussion and analysis carried out between adjunct writing and content instructors may need to cover discourse parameters of professional writing in the field as well as university student writing, in order for the writing instructor to determine a pedagogical discourse grammar, if you will, appropriate for the particular adjunct course. Not that they should, but even if adjunct writing instructors immersed themselves in lectures, professional reading material, and sample student papers regarding the course content, they might still be unable to develop an insider's understanding of the discourse unless they discussed what they observed with the content instructors as members of that discourse community.

Just as adjunct writing instructors need to learn the discourse of the content area, so also do content instructors need to learn aspects of our field of writing pedagogy in order to provide complementary instruction to our common students. Our primary concern is that content instructors respond to student writing during the writing process in a manner that corresponds pedagogically to our manner of response to writing. Naturally, we also hope that content instructors will assess final drafts of papers in ways that correspond to our assessments. We need to develop with the content instructors a common understanding of the expectations of the discourse community that we are teaching, sharing views on guiding students during their writing processes, responding to student work in progress, and assessing final papers.

As anyone who has been involved in writing-across-the-curriculum knows, writing instructors can come up against content instructors who consider it their responsibility merely to present writing assignments, answer questions if students come for help in office hours, and put letter grades along with a few justifying remarks on final papers. What needs to occur in the adjunct model is serious communication between adjunct writing instructors and content instructors regarding many issues, for example, (a) the types of written discourse the students should be working on, (b) the most appropriate ways to clarify writing assignments, (c) the types of difficulties students are experiencing in writing various assignments, (d) characteristics of both excellent and inadequate papers from the content instructor's perspective and ways to clarify this for the students well before final drafts are due, (e) given specific assignments, the areas which adjunct writing instructors should help students with and the areas the content instructor should help students with, and (f) what the adjunct writing teacher should assess and what the content teacher should assess.

Clearly, what we are suggesting here – developing an understanding of the discourse community at hand as well as sharing a common view of writing pedagogy – requires work from both the content instructor and the writing instructor. We are calling for reciprocal communication regarding entire fields of academic thought. This type of communication cannot be accomplished during a couple of meetings before the term begins but requires consistent communication throughout the course. It has already been noted in the literature that a most important factor assuring the success of an adjunct language program is regularly scheduled meeting time with content and language instructors, meeting time which is paid and scheduled at a time of the working day when all instructors have plenty of energy (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Mundahl, 1993). Without paid, rested time, meaningful communication cannot occur among content and adjunct language instructors; neither can communication take place successfully if the status of the adjunct writing instructor remains marginal. Boundaries need to be crossed by both the adjunct writing instructors and the content instructors such that the pedagogical responsibility and authority for writing and content is shared.

Concluding Remarks

Teachers need to approach adjunct courses with caution. In the best of circumstances, adjunct courses are a powerful means by which we can integrate content and writing instruction. They can allow us to open doors to the academic world for our students, helping them to understand the content and discourse of the communities within which they are learning and

to become more effective writers within that community. The best of circumstances, however, are often difficult to find. Institutional parameters find many of us working under conditions that do not easily lend themselves to sound adjunct courses. We are suggesting that ESL writing teachers be wary of situations in which they have lower status, in which the content teachers do not value the writing teacher's content nor attempt to learn it, in which the institution does not support the adjunct model by providing paid time for collaboration, in which there is not common ground for teaching and responding to writing between the content and writing teacher, or in which the students themselves are not vested in the content or the adjunct model. We are not suggesting that teachers avoid these situations, but we do believe that for the adjunct model to work, these conditions must be overcome. In the end, working under such conditions is not only demoralizing to students and teachers alike, it ends up separating what is inherently inseparable – content and writing. ■

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