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Neutral Zone: The Writing Center and the Classroom

Fall 2007 / Training

by *Marjorie Chadwick, Kyung-Hee Bae, Michelle Miley Doss, and Mary Gray, University of Houston*

Writing centers play an important role in establishing an integrated, university-wide writing approach

At the forefront of current educational discourse is a call for a more relevant relationship between what is taught in the classroom and what is practiced in the workplace. In order to meaningfully prepare students to participate in today's rapidly changing global economy, academia must transform its outmoded theoretical approach to educating students by replacing it with a pragmatic model suited to the current socio-political reality of globalization. With the interconnectivity and interdependence characteristic of globalization, come the need for versatile, practical communication skills, making Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines movements critical in bridging the gap between the abstract and the concrete. In order to better assist our students in navigating today's marketplace, we at the **University of Houston (UH) Writing Center** have recognized the necessity of implementing an integrated, heterogeneous approach to teaching writing, one which provides students with a toolbox of strategies and techniques to handle the contingencies inherent in writing for today's wide-ranging audiences. Importantly, the UH Writing Center exists as an autonomous neutral zone, an in-between site with no political agenda belonging to everyone. It is the UH Writing Center's neutrality and integrated approach to writing that facilitates what Jonathan Monroe identifies as "the development of multiple literacies and a capacity for discursive mobility."

[W]riting centers can help establish a robust interdisciplinary network capable of equipping students with the variety of tools necessary to compete in a complex world.

One example of the UH Writing Center's role as a neutral zone lies in its brokering and implementation of linked writing courses, which usually occur at the beginning of students' university writing experience. Writing center staff design and often teach small sections of freshman composition courses that are paired with large-lecture freshman courses in subject areas such as History, Hotel Restaurant Management, Art History, and Business. If appropriate to the content, the writing section may be hybrid, but no matter what the delivery format, all writing assignments are related to the subject matter of the larger class. The linked course partnerships blur disciplinary boundaries in that students discover that writing is not a discreet skill practiced in a vacuum, but is connected in many ways to a larger academic universe.

The UH Writing Center has recently launched the development of discipline-specific freshman composition courses. Similar to linked courses, the content

and all assignments of these classes are contextual in that they concern issues related to the subject matter of a specific college or department. Consequently, early in their academic careers, students become aware of writing conventions particular to their majors and develop an understanding of how written communication acts within the culture of their intended profession. The Writing Center, accustomed to familiarizing itself with a broad range of academic discourse communities, makes every effort to be a disinterested, neutral site. Much like Keats's egoless poet, "it has no self—it is everything and nothing."

The UH Writing Center staff encourages increasing the amount of writing assigned throughout the university-wide curriculum by emphasizing the close relationship between writing and critical thinking. As an active advocate of the recently approved institutionally designated core option, *Intensive Writing Experience in the Disciplines (IWED)*, the writing center staff has been conducting a series of campus-wide meetings, surveys, and focus groups with faculty and deans, clarifying specific writing needs and desired outcomes in order to help develop *IWED* courses. Repeatedly, faculty cites the ability to think critically as being a highly desired outcome of an undergraduate education. Our "writing is thinking" motto gives the Writing Center a transparent *raison d'être* so that the university at large places its confidence and trust in the Writing Center, perceiving it as an independent entity dedicated to the improvement of all writing. In a recent article, Elizabeth Fletcher, Associate Dean of the UH Bauer College of Business, stated that the "mantra" of their writing assessment team has been, "outsource to the Writing Center," where "the focus is on writing as an organic thinking process rather than a mechanical abstract exercise."

Looking to the future, we believe it is possible and essential for university writing centers to take an entrepreneurial leadership role in contributing to a campus-wide belief that writing is not the province of one department, but the responsibility of the entire university community. Put another way, writing centers should market writing as something that should be everywhere, all the time. By providing an accessible neutral zone, free from ideology and preconceived notions, writing centers can help establish a robust interdisciplinary network capable of equipping students with the variety of tools necessary to compete in a complex world subject to the inevitability of the shifting winds of globalization.

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Marjorie Chadwick

Marjorie Chadwick received her Ph.D in English from the **University of Houston**. She has been Executive Director of the **University of Houston Writing Center** since 2001.



Kyung-Hee Bae

Kyung-Hee Bae holds an MA in applied English linguistics from the **University of Houston (UH)**. Before becoming the assistant director of the UH **Writing Center**, she worked as the ESL program manager at the Writing Center, developing curriculum for ESL students across campus. Courses she has taught include the non-native speakers' equivalent of freshman composition I and II, a technical communications course for engineering majors, and a graduate writing workshop for nonnative English speaking students at the Texas Center for Superconductivity at University of Houston (TcSUH). Her current research project includes second language writers' attitudes toward the use of technology and its effectiveness in composition courses.



Michelle Miley Doss

Michelle Miley Doss holds an M.A. in English literature from **Baylor University** as well as a B.A. in English and psychology. She has taught freshman and sophomore composition classes at **Lubbock Christian University** and **Wayland Baptist University**, and has coordinated and taught in the XL: Strategies for Learning program at **Texas Tech University**. She also

coordinated recruiting for the Petroleum Engineering Department at Tech. As the **Writing in the Disciplines** Assistant Director at the **University of Houston**, Michelle develops and delivers writing instruction for courses across campus. Her course partnerships range from one-time presentations to teaching semester-long writing classes specific to particular disciplines.



Mary Gray

Mary Gray received her Ph.D. in English from the **University of Houston** (UH) with a primary emphasis in rhetoric and composition. Her dissertation critically evaluates a UH-linked course-learning community which integrates first-year composition, American history, and technology. She also holds a Master of Liberal Arts, concentrating in English and art history, from **St. Thomas University**. With research and teaching interests in interdisciplinary learning, she designs first-year writing classes linked to courses in American history, art history, and theater. Her other projects at the UH **Writing Center** include workshops for graduate students in the Department of Art History and Bauer College of Business.

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