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GENERAL EDUCATION NEWS

From the CSUS Office of Academic Affairs

Introduction to GE Area A Basic Subjects

By Greg Wheeler, Director of General Education

The General Education Program at California State University, Sacramento designates Area A courses as, "Basic Subjects." The units we require in this area are mandated by Title V of the State Education Code. The courses must include, "9 semester units in English language, to include both oral communication and written communication, and in critical thinking, to include consideration of common fallacies in reasoning." We have divided these units into Area A1, Oral Communication; Area A2, Written Communication; and Area A3, Critical Thinking. Upper division transfer students must complete these 9 units and a general education math course with a C- or better grade in order to be admitted to a CSU campus.

This year the General Education/ Graduation Requirements Policies Committee is examining our Area A courses as part of the cycle of review of all GE courses. There are 13 courses and 151 class sections in this area. The Committee is working with Departments to insure that all courses have an effective assessment plan. These plans are first reviewed by our Assessment Consultant, Leah Vande Berg, and then by the Committee. In addition, all courses submit there syllabi for review by the GE Course Review Subcommittee. This Subcommittee examines the syllabi to be sure that the course objectives and course design are clear, and follow the original intent of the course.

Please enjoy the four excellent articles about the key courses we offer in Area A.

Writing IS General Education

By Amy Heckathorn, Writing Programs Coordinator

When people find out I am a writing teacher, I am often greeted with a concerned, "I had better watch my grammar around you." And while I appreciate precision in language use as much as the next person, I am struck by how much *more* writing is—how writing is the very cornerstone of any educative endeavor. It is this larger vision of written communication that has influenced our campus to incorporate writing throughout the general education program and to require two composition courses.

High school students often enter college with fairly prescriptive and limited views of academic writing. It is not uncommon for them to enter CSUS believing: 1) that writing is something they are not and never will be good at, 2) that there are formulaic, a-contextual rules and regulations which govern all writing, and 3) that writing does not and will not affect their future lives. It is the job of our required composition courses to begin to address and overturn these myths. It is our job to introduce the notion that writing is how we create and revise ourselves, our ideas, and our disciplinary understanding. Thus, writing is both a tool for generating and disseminating what we believe. Toward that end, our two required composition courses focus both on writing to learn and writing to convey information—process and product.

College Composition I fulfills the "written communication" requirement within the general education program (GE Area A-2). The focus of this course is to introduce students to the strategies and dispositions of college-level writing. First, students are exposed to the idea that writing is not only used to create final

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The Role of Writing in the University

By Dan Metzer, CSUS Reading & Writing Coordinator

The CSUS *University Policy Manual* states, "CSUS is committed to the development of sound reading and writing skills." To understand the role writing plays in the university, however, it is important to understand that writing is much more than just a skill: writing is thinking. Writing at the university is more than simply correct grammar and spelling: we ask students to write in order to discover what they have to say, to engage with the content of our disciplines in meaningful ways, to converse with the texts of our discipline and make meaning in conversation with those texts. In every discipline and at every level of instruction, from freshman composition to General Education to courses in the major, writing plays a central role.

In talking to faculty during workshops and consultations, I've found that instructors at CSUS use writing as thinking in a variety of ways: for example, an essay in a Freshman Seminar course that asks students to reflect on their purposes for attending college, a reading journal in a nursing course that requires students to explore the meaning of class texts, a senior project in an engineering course that involves students forming groups and creating a complex technical report for an audience of engineering professionals, an experimental research project in a child development course that initiates students to disciplinary ways of thinking and writing. These examples of writing assignments I've encountered in my first year at CSUS lead me to make some fundamental assumptions about writing at the university:

Assumption #1: Writing is meaning-making.

Writing is one of the most effective ways to engage students in critical thinking about a subject or discipline. Whether it's

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products, rather composing can aid their learning. Janet Emig asserts that "writing represents a unique mode of learning…because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (122).[1]

In this first semester of composition, students explore the writing process—beginning with various forms of idea generation, moving into drafting initial thoughts, delving into peer evaluation and critique, passing through revising important ideas, and finishing with editing final products. Students also begin to understand the academic writing product—the notion that written communication is judged within a specific context. We begin to assert the idea that "good writing" is rhetorically situated—"good" relative to audience and purpose.

In addition to this first-semester course, CSUS has an additional writing requirement—College Composition II. In the early 1990s, faculty from various disciplines were concerned with the writing of their students. Realizing that only so much could be accomplished in one course, the Faculty Senate adopted an additional semester writing requirement (which the majority of CSU campuses now also require). In an effort to continue students' writing instruction and facilitate their transition into upper-division writing courses, a sophomore-level course was created to utilize and build upon the skills taught in freshman composition. The focus is interdisciplinary in nature, with students reading materials from a variety of fields. This more advanced course then teaches how to weave together the ideas from multiple texts, conduct independent research, and use these sources to write longer, more complex academic arguments.

Although two semesters of writing will never prepare students for all of the challenges that lay before them (within school and beyond), these classes do give them critical tools for their future success. They know that writing can be used to think through, wrestle with, and come to understand complex ideas. They know how to work through the writing process to develop and refine their ideas. They know that composing is a contextual activity and that the forms and presentation of their texts will depend on the purpose of and audience for the writing. They know that research is a generative endeavor that promotes discovery and learning. And they know that there are many ways to develop and present ideas—summary, critique, analysis, synthesis, etc. Writing, however, is not a skill that once taught stays fixed. Composition research shows that when students are exposed to new and challenging materials, their writing skills in relation to this material will regress—the cognitive focus needed to process the new information interferes with students' ability to write clearly. However, when faculty knows this, they can be comforted by at least one thought—writing can also be the tool that eventually remedies this situation. Instructors can use and build on the skills that students have learned in their writing classes to facilitate disciplinary learning and meaning-making.

[1] Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 28.2 (May 1977): 122-28.

Class discussion led by Professor Amy Heckathorn.

The value of public speaking in a general education

By Kimo Ah Yun, COMS Department Coordinator for COMS 4: Public Speaking

The value of a general education is in developing "well-rounded individuals" and "critical thinkers;" characteristics that make students better citizens.[1] While a general education is clearly an important one, the worth of such an education is diminished if students are unable to express their ideas in oral and written form. Public speaking in a general education curriculum is one way to assist students in developing the requisite skills needed to express their ideas.

Although public speaking skills are needed to succeed in a variety of contexts,[2] many undergraduates fear public speaking. As the coordinator of the Public Speaking course in the department of Communication Studies, I have encountered numerous undergraduate students who wait until their senior year to take public speaking because of their fear of presenting their ideas to an audience. This fear of public speaking experienced by these students is not unique. In fact, several international and national surveys report that although people fear catastrophic life events such as falling off of a sky scraper, financial ruin, being bitten by a snake, and death, these all are feared less then giving a speech.[3]

While there are many benefits to a public speaking class in a general education, I will address four areas that illustrate the value of public speaking for all college and university students. Specifically, the public speaking class affords students the opportunity to address their anxiety toward public speaking in a supportive environment, enhance their critical thinking skills, improve their listening skills, and aids in their development of organizational skills. Clearly, these benefits transcend the academic experience and serve to build the character of all public speaking students.

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Critical Thinking and Public Relations in the General Education Curriculum

By Christine Miller, COMS Department
COMS 2: Critical Thinking Coordinator

The General Education program may have a public relations problem: much to our chagrin as shepherds of our students' intellectual development, undergraduates have been known mournfully to lament that they are required to take GE classes. This "public" sometimes struggles to see the relevance and utility of the GE curriculum, perceiving instead that such hurdles simply prolong the time it takes to get their degree and get out there into "the real world." It is incumbent upon us, then, to take some time to explain precisely *why* we think our courses are relevant to their lives now and into the future. We have to do some public relations work.

Such work is actually not that hard in the critical thinking area. Students seem to recognize that, fundamentally, they are in college to learn how to think better. But they may not recognize that a curriculum designed to promote their thinking has been developed, independent of their major discipline. In their haste to specialize their thinking in a particular major, they may lose sight of the value of cross-curricular courses in developing certain skills and habits of mind that will serve them both in and out of college. Happily, they seem receptive to this message when one takes the time to make such observations. They often tend to be pragmatists, after all, and when we can "sell" them on "what's in it for them" they tend to respond favorably. That is what public relations is all about.

Pointing out how the GE curriculum is relevant to their lives is actually the easy part, though. The challenge dwells in achieving the objectives of the courses. In the critical thinking area, instructors seek to develop each student's ability to reason and to make rational choices—to think better. In today's fast-paced, computer-driven world, however, thinking better often means thinking more efficiently rather than more thoughtfully. In other words, students sometimes confuse the act of efficiently processing information with the act of *thinking* about it in a critical manner. One guide to critical thinking notes, "As the complexity of the world seems to grow at an accelerating rate, there is a greater tendency to become passive absorbers of information, uncritically accepting what is seen and heard. . . .Too many of us are not actively making personal choices about what to accept and what to reject."[1] Our challenge, then, is to make our students more thoughtful. Indeed, CSUS Professor Emeritus Perry Weddle emphasized in his book that "The thinking that underlies life's important decisions is contemplative, or at least ought to be."[2] Our obligation is to model such contemplative thinking as we design and teach our general education courses. After all, teaching well is the best form of public relations we have.

Professor Christine Miller and students engaged in critical thinking in the classroom.

[1] Browne, M. Neil, and Stuart M. Keely. Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990, ix.
[2] Weddle, Perry. Argument: A Guide to Critical Thinking. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978, ix.

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a reading log, a lab report, an executive summary, or a poem, when students write, students make meaning. When students write, students are engaged. When students write, students learn.

Assumption #2: Writing and meaning-making is discipline specific.

Composition courses introduce students to the ways we use writing to make meaning at the university, but it is unfair to ask a composition course to initiate students to the varied ways of writing and ways of thinking across disciplines. When

Professor Dan Metzer, CSUS Reading & Writing Coordinator meets with students

biology instructors assign an experimental report, they teach students not just how to write but how to think like a biologist; when sociology instructors ask students to write an ethnography, they teach students not only an important disciplinary genre but a primary way of making meaning as a sociologist.

Assumption #3: Students learn to write and make meaning by writing often.

If students write only in a few courses, their writing skills—and therefore their thinking skills—will atrophy. Students should be asked to write, and to use writing as a meaning-making activity, in every class, and at every level of instruction. In composition courses, students are introduced to academic discourse and the importance of seeing writing as a meaning-making process; in General Education courses, students begin to get a sense of the varieties of academic discourse and ways writing is used to make meaning in different fields; in courses in their major, students are initiated into the ways of thinking of their chosen fields partly through their writing.

There are a variety of ways CSUS supports these assumptions about writing: a series of required composition courses, upper-division Writing Intensive courses, the GE area A-2 written communication learning outcomes, the Writing Center and Learning Skills Center, the Graduation Writing Assessment (GWAR), and the Writing Across the Curriculum program. The most important commitment, though, comes from the many CSUS instructors across disciplines who believe writing is a central part of a university education.

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Addressing public speaking apprehension in a supportive environment. Without question, public speaking apprehension can have debilitating consequences for even the most gifted of minds. Famous public figures such as Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy openly discussed their apprehension to public speaking.[4] Fortunately, these individuals had the opportunity to develop their public speaking skills in a supportive environment. Although our public speaking students are evaluated by their instructors, a visit to any of these classes reveals that students bond together to support one another. This communal support enables students to work through their apprehensions toward speaking in public with their peers. Ultimately, students who complete the public speaking class are armed with a variety of tools to manage their apprehension when they present their ideas to less friendly audiences.

Critical thinking. One goal of public speaking classes is to make students more critical consumers of information. Exercises that require students to evaluate the merit of a variety of sources of information such as information found in traditional print formats and the expanding world of cyberspace is mandatory. Students are expected to find primary resources, and develop the skills necessary to dissect, digest, and discover ways to make such information useable.

The idea that public speaking training assists students in their effort to be critical thinkers has support. For example, a meta-analysis of the relationship between public speaking training and critical thinking skills revealed a substantial heightened ability to engage in critical thinking.[5] Furthermore, individual studies show that these concepts are causally related. That is, public speaking training such as the training received in a basic public speaking class enhances the critical thinking skills of students.

Listening. Frequently, individuals listen for evaluation and not for understanding. Although listening for understanding enables individuals to understand in an evaluation free environment, colleges and universities provide virtually no formal training on how to listen. A goal of public speaking is to teach students the different types of listening and to focus specifically on improving their skills of listening for understanding. By requiring students to provide feedback to their peers in the form of peer evaluations, public speaking students are able to hone their listening and feedback skills.[6] In particular, these students are asked to listen to understand and provide feedback to their peers. The focus on the dual processing of listening makes public speaking students better consumers of all types of messages in their lives.

Organizational skills. The very foundation of public speaking is the ability to organize a presentation. Students are taught that effective presentations begin with an attention step, provide a basic preview of the content of their speech, have a developed body, and conclude with a summary of the main ideas presented in the speech. These organizational skills are necessary for all individuals.[7] In particular, the organizational skills learned and honed in the public speaking class have a spillover effect to aid the growth of students in a variety of contexts. For example, former public speaking students regularly report the value of public speaking in their ability to express themselves in the written form. By teaching the organizational skills required in public speaking, student writing can be positively affected by approaching their writing with a greater understanding of organizing their ideas.

Without question, a general education makes our students better individuals in many ways. Public speaking is an important class that helps students to express what they have gained in their educational experience. As such, the skills addressed in public speaking class are vital to the general education of all students.

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