Chapter 4, Learning to Communicate

(Note: all material below is directly quoted from the text of the chapter. The chapter has two sections, one on learning to write and the other on oral communication. All of this material is from the section on learning to write.)

P. 82. Almost everyone agrees on the need to communicate effectively. Curriculum committees regularly affirm the importance of expressing oneself with clarity, precision, and, if possible, style and grace. So do business executives, law partners, and other employers. Students, too, share this opinion. In Richard Light’s lengthy interviews with 1,600 undergraduates, respondents mentioned improving their writing three times as often as any other educational goal.

P. 82. Freshmen have never arrived at college with impressive writing skills.

P. 83. Coursework in English composition was obligatory a century ago even in colleges with the most elective curricula, and it remains so to this day in the vast majority of American colleges. No other single course claims as large a share of the time and attention of undergraduates. And yet, when it comes to implementing the writing requirement, few institutions have managed to do what is necessary to achieve success.

While willing to force students to take freshman composition, senior faculty have long been reluctant to teach such a course themselves. Professors in the sciences and social sciences quickly referred the task to their colleagues in the English department. Thereafter, in one college after another, the work was gradually handed down to lower and lower levels of the academic hierarchy….By the 1990s, more than 95 percent of all compulsory writing classes in Ph.D.-granting English departments were taught by adjuncts or by graduate students. Only in small liberal arts colleges was it common to find such courses taught by tenured professors.

P. 83-84. Teaching writing is hard, time-consuming work. As the Conference on College Composition and Communication has observed:

The improvement of an individual student's writing requires persistent and frequent contact between teacher and student both inside and outside the classroom. It requires assigning far more papers than are usually assigned in other college classrooms; it requires reading them and commenting on them not simply to justify a grade but to offer guidance and suggestions for improvement, and it requires spending a great deal of time with individual students, helping them not just to improve particular papers but to understand fundamental principles of effective writing that will enable them to continue learning throughout their lives.

Unlike professors in typical lecture courses, who know next to nothing about how individual students are progressing, writing instructors are supposed to take an interest in the difficulties encountered by each and every member of their classes.
P. 85. It is hardly surprising that professors in English departments have shunned this kind of teaching. They are not hired to wrestle with such problems; their professional success depends on publishing works of literary criticism, and their pedagogic interests lie not in teaching composition but in lecturing on literature. Presidents and deans see little reason to deny them their wish, since graduate students and adjunct instructors can be hired to do the job for much less money.

The problem with this solution, of course, is that the quality of instruction often suffers.

P. 87. No single course, however ably staffed and amply financed, can transform undergraduates into skillful writers….undergraduates will never learn to write with clarity, precision, and grace unless they have repeated opportunities to keep on writing and get prompt feedback from the faculty.

P. 91. …campus officials and even English departments think of teaching introductory composition as a relatively simple task to show students how to eliminate errors and careless habits so that they can acquire sufficient competence to perform college-level work….

It is hardly surprising that deans and faculties think of composition this way. Full-time composition specialists did much the same for many decades.…

P. 92. In recent decades, however, composition specialists have come to take a far different view of how writing should be taught. Researchers find that simply emphasizing the correction of errors has no effect on improving writing and may even inhibit creativity and keep students from developing an authentic style. Writing professionals no longer view composition as a mechanical process of turning previously formed ideas into suitable prose but as something inseparable from thinking itself. Undergraduates tend to agree, often looking upon their writing as a uniquely important stimulus to thought. As Marilyn Sternglass describes it: “Repeatedly, students [report] that reading alone or listening to lectures did not engage them deeply enough for them to remember facts and ideas nor to analyze them. Only through writing , perhaps through condensation and analysis of classroom notes or through the writing of drafts of papers that required them to integrate theory with evidence, did they achieve the insights that moved them to complex reasoning about the topic under consideration.”

Nancy Sommer’s study of undergraduates confirms and amplifies these observations. More than 70 percent of the seniors in her survey felt that writing had been either “important” or “very important” in helping them to synthesize ideas and information, to think critically, to gain in-depth knowledge of a field, and, of course, to express ideas effectively.

P. 96. …if most colleges do little to encourage good writing beyond the required, introductory course, large numbers of students will continue to graduate without being able to write much better than they did when they arrived as freshmen.

P. 96-97. How can colleges improve their writing programs? A logical way to begin is to define as clearly as possible what the college seeks to achieve. Although this point may seem too obvious to bear repeating, longtime composition professionals report that “most writing classes—even entire writing programs—rarely state clearly the outcomes
for the course and then match course structure, assignment, and texts for the achievement of those outcomes."

Defining goals is not as simple a matter as it might appear....the differences of opinion on the subject are surprisingly wide. Objectives range from eliminating grammatical errors to inoculating students against the propaganda of an oppressive state. Choosing among these competing aims is not a task to be left to individual instructors, nor to writing program administrators, nor even to the English department. The entire college is responsible for the writing of its graduates, and every department has a stake in the results. Discussing the subject in a faculty forum should curb the tendency of some instructors to adopt purposes of their own that almost certainly do not reflect the wishes of the faculty as a whole. It may also help professors and administrators to appreciate the difficulties involved in teaching undergraduates to write and thereby muster support for doing more to strengthen the quality of the composition program.

Once the goals are clearly defined, the next essential step is to assemble a competent staff of instructors for the basic course. Success does not necessarily require enlisting regular faculty members for the purpose. Professors of English are not trained to teach composition and would rarely throw themselves enthusiastically into the work even if they could be persuaded to take it on. Rather than trying to force reluctant scholars to accept responsibility, colleges can attempt to recruit first-rate, well-paid professional compositionists or experienced writers and intellectuals with a demonstrable ability to teach.

P. 48. Ideally all teachers of basic writing would be full-time professionals... Nevertheless, every college can try to assemble a central core of experienced, properly compensated, full-time teachers to provide continuity and accumulate insight and skill that they can convey to the graduate students and adjunct professors recruited to the program. Whomever the college employs, teaching loads must be reasonable enough to allow sufficient time for meeting individually with students. In addition, all new instructors will need prior training in the objectives of the program, the methods and materials used to achieve those goals, and the pedagogical challenges involved. Once classes are under way, those in charge of the course can evaluate every section and weed out ineffective teachers, at least until they receive further training and improve enough to warrant another trial.

As previously mentioned, good writing—like critical thinking—will never be a skill that students can achieve or retain through a single course. However, successful the basic program may become, sustained improvement will require repeated practice. Fortunately, for many students in the humanities—and often in the social sciences as well—practice is not a problem; they already have to write a number of essays and term papers. The same is not true for students in the sciences, however, who often find that good writing is not valued and that even expressing themselves in complete sentences wastes time that could be spent more profitably figuring out the answers to assigned problems. Insufficient practice is undoubtedly a major reason why undergraduates, especially in the sciences, often fail to improve their writing during their college years.

P. 99. Even students who have many papers to write may make limited progress unless their instructors give them ample, timely feedback, not only on the substance of the papers but also on the quality of writing. In an ideal world, professors would provide such comments as a matter of course. In reality, however, many professors do not pay
close attention to student writing, nor are they necessarily trained to attend to the subtler problems of composition.

P. 99. Adequate feedback will rarely come about through exhortation from on high; more substantial efforts are needed to engage faculty members from a variety of disciplines in reading and critiquing student papers. As a practical matter, few professors will accept this added responsibility for very long or perform it conscientiously and well unless they have adequate training and receive appropriate rewards in the form of extra salary or added teaching credit. Since competent writing is so important, the investment seems well worth the cost.

P. 99-100. Efforts to improve student writing are unlikely to make sustained progress unless campus officials can evaluate the results on a regular basis. At present, few colleges know whether the instruction they provide actually changes student writing for the better. Few even know how much students write, department by department, throughout their undergraduate careers. Rather than remain in this state, faculties could determine how much writing students in different departments actually do, what sort of feedback they receive, and how much they improve during their four years of college. Having agreed on the goals they are trying to achieve, faculties could also start to evaluate the effects of different teaching methods. Already researchers have discovered that many writing instructors still teach in ways that have long since been shown to be less effective than other well-known methods. Rather than let outdated practices continue, faculties could initiate a process of enlightened trial and error to test different methods on comparable groups of students in order to encourage those that work best and weed out those that are demonstrably ineffective.

P. 100-101. The fact that so few faculties have taken the basic steps just described underscores the troubled state of student writing in America’s colleges. While some programs are outstanding and some instructors work hard to help their students progress, the field as a whole suffers from widespread neglect. In the words of Edward White, “Responsible administration of a university writing program is a test of the institution’s integrity, a test few institutions can pass at a minimum competency level.” Most deans, English departments, and senior faculties continue to underestimate the difficulty of teaching composition. As a result, they have consigned the task to graduate students and part-time teachers and let them function without clear goals, without adequate funding or proper training, and without determining whether their efforts are producing tangible results. In doing so, they illustrate the all-too-frequent tendency to pronounce a goal important enough to justify a required course without devoting the effort or the resources needed to make the enterprise a success.