The Challenges of Writing in the Disciplines

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Abstract: The essay reviews some of the philosophical justifications that underlie methods of teaching writing, citing classical rhetoric (in the European tradition) as the source of these assumptions in the conflict between Plato and the Sophists over the ethical problem of teaching an art of persuasion. The three philosophical justifications for teaching writing that I discuss are (1) Teaching students formal strategies of argument that give them power over others by manipulating their beliefs, (The Sophists) (2) Teaching students pure reasoning so that they will not be deceived by the strategies of persuasive discourse, (Plato) (3) Teaching writing as a process of discovering sharable grounds for agreement on issues not subject to pure reason, (Aristotle). It is the third justification that best warrants the teaching of writing across the curriculum as a way to "write to learn" rather than "learn to write," because it is this justification that imagines a world of discourse in which people disagree about fundamental questions and yet strive to reason together toward mutual understandings, i.e., the basic condition of university inter-disciplinarity. This essay therefore addresses, "how to imagine alternatives to technical competency as a basis for using writing to learn the knowledge of disciplinary fields."

This essay is a version of a talk I gave at Sogang University in the Humanities Forum on April 15, 2009, at the invitation of Professor Yoan Lee and the English Department. The occasion was to assist the Humanities faculty in thinking about "writing across the curriculum," an idea that is

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beginning to be discussed in Korean university education, just as it has been discussed and widely implemented in American universities. In the three days following my Humanities Forum talk, I met with faculty from a range of disciplines in workshops designed to guide them through a decision-making process about the nature and scope of a writing center that would serve their needs and fit their situation, I have included as an appendix to this essay and outline of discussion points I intend to facilitate discussion of the design and administration of a writing across the disciplines program to fit a local university setting and to guide discussion of administrative commitments that must support such a design.

In preparing for my visit to Sogang University, Professor Yoan Lee suggested that the faculty should read an essay of mine published earlier in The Teaching of Writing: The Eighty-Fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education entitled "Why Write?" Since I delivered my talk with the expectation that my audience in Seoul had read this essay, I will begin with a brief summary of its argument. The essay offers a review of some of the philosophical justifications that underlie various methods of teaching writing, citing classical rhetoric (in the European tradition) as the source of these assumptions in the conflict between Plato and the Sophists.

1) For a history and overview of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement in American higher education, see Charles Bazerman, Joseph Little, Lisa Bethel, Teri Chavkin, Danielle Fouquette, and Janet Garufis, Reference Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum, Parlour Press and WAC Clearinghouse, 2005.

2) Successful Writing Across the Curriculum programs develop from intense discussion among faculty from all disciplines of all of these issues. One such program, at Oregon State University, was created by a faculty-wide vote after an interdisciplinary faculty committee deliberated for two years. Their recommendations were based on ideas solicited from the faculty at large. The shape of the resulting program may be seen on line by visiting: http://wic.oregonstate.edu/