Developing Communication Skills and Fostering Students as Writers

All Queen’s students should graduate with an ability to communicate their expertise effectively in speech and in writing.\(^1\) The COU’s Degree-Level Expectations, both Undergraduate and Graduate, mandate “communication skills” alongside expectations for knowledge.\(^2\) It is important that communication skills be treated as more than another item in a list of outcomes, however, for in practice their relation to knowledge and expertise is integral. Effective communication is essential for the demonstration of knowledge and the performance of expertise. Still more, it is essential in many ways to the acquisition of knowledge in the first place: the capacities to read or listen with critical understanding and to reformulate are skills intimately connected with both communication and learning. As the APTF has been told more than once in its consultations, learning to write is learning to think.\(^3\) It follows that the University should give communication skills priority, monitor them, foster their early enhancement, and be prepared to remediate them where necessary. At the Town Hall on Writing (7 Mar. 2011), Mary Louise Adams (Kinesiology) memorably proposed that Queen’s should strive to be known as “the University you go to, to be produced as a writer.” We endorse this suggestion in the belief that producing Queen’s graduates “as writers” would be the surest sign of producing them as effective thinkers.

As an open letter from the Queen’s Department of English has also emphasized, “Proper teaching of writing is well known to be central to safeguarding academic integrity”:

Dr. Jim Lee, Academic Integrity Advisor to the Vice-Principal (Academic), cites “poor English-language writing skills, poorly developed critical thinking skills, and a lack of knowledge and training about proper citation practices in academic work” among the contributing factors to departures from academic integrity.\(^5\) And “academic integrity,” he observes elsewhere, “is at the heart of the university’s mission, and the principles of AI form the basis of the academic standards and expectations to which all academic work is held, in both teaching and research.” \(^6\) [. . . .] AI is best achieved not reactively, by policing

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\(^1\) The consultative data considered for this section include online responses to Pillar I; minutes of the informal session of Senate, 17 Feb. 2011; minutes of the Town Hall on Writing, 7 Mar. 2011; minutes of the Writing Centre Forum of 25 Mar. 2011; “Enhancing Writing Instruction at Queen’s — A Writing Centre Response,” 1 April 2011; and the open letters on the teaching of writing posted on the RAPB in November 2010.

\(^2\) For instance, the “Communication skills” expectation for an undergraduate honours degree is “The ability to communicate information, arguments, and analyses accurately and reliably, orally and in writing, to a range of audiences.” UUDLEs and GDLEs were formulated by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV). OCAV mandated that all Ontario universities adopt UUDLEs as of June 2008 (Queen’s Senate Minutes, 21 May 2008, http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/senate/minutes/May21_08.pdf, p. 4). QUCAPs, approved by Queen’s Senate in Nov. 2011, invokes both UUDLEs and GDLEs as standards for evaluating Queen’s programs, curricula, and teaching (secs. 2.2.1, 4.2.1, 4.3.1, 4.3.4). For texts of both, see QUCAPs, Appendix 1.

\(^3\) Gabrielle McIntire, in the Writing Centre Forum, 1 April 2011; see also Reed Smith, Learning to Write (Toronto: Macmillan, 1948), p. x. Thanks to Doug Babington for bringing the latter to our attention.
infractions, but proactively, by teaching students proper research and composition methods.  

We endorse this view as well. We recommend that Queen’s foster Academic Integrity at its roots by enabling its students in the communication skills and discursive conventions appropriate to their chosen fields of study.

We say “appropriate to their chosen fields” because the intimate linkage between communication skills, learning, and academic integrity means that university students need to learn not just general communication skills but also the discursive / communicative practices appropriate to their specializations. Chris Ferrall (Economics) laments the “prevalent attitude that one must first solve a problem, then ‘write it up,’” and recommends “that students learn to integrate writing more fully into their thinking.” Such views are confirmed and elaborated in the pedagogical literature of “situated learning” and more specifically of “writing in the disciplines.” As S.P. Norris and L.M. Phillips put it:

Reading and writing do not stand in a functional relationship with respect to science, as simply tools for the storage and transmission of science. Rather, the relationship is a constitutive one, wherein reading and writing are constitutive parts of science. Constitutive relationships define necessities because the constituents are essential elements of the whole. . . . Reading and writing are inextricably linked to the very nature and fabric of Science. 

For this reason, the “Initiation into a discourse community—enculturation—is a crucial event in an academic’s career.”

Some of Queen’s professional and other programs do currently teach disciplinary writing. First-year law students receive “training in legal research, legal writing and oral advocacy.” The School of Business has a “Communications and Professional Development Requirement” for its Bachelors in Commerce and takes “an integrated approach that includes a communications laboratory in first year, [and] a designated communications course in every year.” All “students who entered the program before

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5 Writing Centre Forum, 25 March 2011.


7 Florence and Yore 638.

8 Faculty of Law, “First-Year Program” (http://law.queensu.ca/prospectiveStudents/idProgram/firstYear.html). Josh Karton notes that “because Law is an intensively verbal discipline, Queen’s Law students get three years of writing activities” (Writing Centre Forum, 25 March 2011).
Fall 2009 . . . are required to pass a writing proficiency test.”9 The Faculty of Engineering and Applied Sciences requires that students pass an English Proficiency Test in addition to taking “a minimum of 36 AU's in Communications,” and offers courses in “Engineering Communications” and “Technical Communication.”10 Finally, the Life Sciences program at Queen’s lists “communication skills” among its core competencies: “the ability to communicate information, arguments, and analyses accurately and reliably, orally and in writing to a range of audiences.”11 But training in communication skills, let alone discipline-specific training, is not at present a general requirement at Queen’s.

Beginning with its informal session in Senate in February 2011, the APTF has consulted widely on the propositions “that the performance or mastery of a discipline is largely coextensive with the ability to write in that discipline and that writing should therefore be taught in connection with disciplines.”12 Support for these propositions has been strong,13 though some have argued for general writing courses at the first-year level in lieu of or in addition to discipline-specific training,14 and still others worry that required first-year writing courses would infringe on time and resources needed for teaching disciplinary content.15 Support for improving the teaching of writing in general has been practically unanimous.

The Writing Centre, founded in 1986, is Queen’s most important general resource for teaching writing. Operating on a small budget with (at present) a director, an administrative secretary, and about 37 part-time staff members (4 senior program coordinator/tutors, 5 adjunct instructors, 17 tutor/consultants, and 11 peer tutors), the Writing Centre offers six regular courses in writing (both on-campus and by correspondence) plus a non-credit graduate thesis course. One of its distance courses, WRIT 195*, addresses disciplinary modes of writing, “from the business memorandum to the literary review,” while its on-campus “Analytical Writing” course (WRIT 275*) is interdisciplinary. Another of its courses, WRIT 235, “Writing in the Community,” is threatened with discontinuation for budgetary reasons. The Writing Centre also holds about 3,000 one-on-one consultations for about 1,300 students (both graduate and undergraduate) yearly, organizes undergraduate peer-tutoring, and hosts a “handouts” webpage with links to over 40 advice documents on grammar, composition, and citation.

10 2010-11 Calendar, http://queensu.ca/calendars/appsci/Communications_Courses.html. See also Brian Frank’s comments in the Writing Centre Forum of 25 March. The Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB) has identified communications amongst the 12 graduate outcomes to be assessed for all engineering programs.
11 See “Core competencies within Life Sciences.” Worth noting, however, is the School of Medicine’s warning that the teaching of “communication skills” will suffer from the cutting of TA budgets (School of Medicine Response to Where Next?, p. 16).
14 See submissions by Craig Walker, 3 Mar. 2011, Ronald Weisman, 7 Mar. 2011, and others in the responses to Pillar I.
15 See, e.g., the Town Hall on the Undergraduate Academic Experience, 10 Mar. 2011, and comments by Peter Taylor in the Writing Centre consultation (1 April 2011)
As senior program coordinator Lori Vos notes, the Writing Centre can also “train TAs and advise instructors on how to teach writing and how to integrate writing assignments in their curricula,” but “departments and professors need to be more aware of the Writing Centre so they can collaborate better.”

In sum, the Writing Centre functions both as an instructional “centre” and as promoter-facilitator of more distributed, discipline-specific training within departments. Both its strengths and its limitations in the latter role were illustrated by the two-hour Writing Centre Forum held in March 2011: it was an excellent and inspiring session featuring presentations from faculty in six disciplines, but it is not a regular event, and only about 35 students and faculty attended. Asked in early April if the Writing Centre would have the resources to handle an increase in demand associated with a ramping-up of writing-intensive courses at Queen’s, its senior personnel responded that they are already stretched. A good idea that arose in our consultation is that academic departments each designate a Writing Centre liaison to enhance communication with faculty and raise consciousness of writing issues and existing resources within departments.

We endorse this proposal and recommend, further, that Queen’s take the Writing Centre seriously as an essential academic resource and investigate options for its enhancement both as a centre for general writing instruction (through both courses and consultations) and as a facilitator for the distributed, discipline-specific, teaching of writing within departments.

The APTF has also discussed the idea of requiring students to take writing diagnostics at admission and/or graduation, for several possible purposes: (a) to identify which students need what level or kinds of instruction or, conversely, which students might be qualified to serve as peer tutors, (b) to alert the students themselves to specific needs for improvement, and (c) more generally to signify the institution’s seriousness about requiring proficiency in writing and communication. But the APTF also had reservations about recommending diagnostics, given the probable cost and difficulty of implementation and the question of efficacy. If diagnostics merely confirm what is already known—i.e., that the vast majority of incoming students need help developing their communication skills—scarce resources might be better spent directly on writing courses (which can include their own diagnostics). Nevertheless, we do recommend that the university investigate this option for the purposes cited above. A diagnostic designed to advise and motivate students about their writing needs could conceivably improve efficiency if wisely combined with resources for self-help or targeted consultative instruction. The University of Waterloo has an English Language Proficiency Requirement with a diagnostic essay exam administered three times a year that appears to function primarily as a mechanism to motivate students to seek help for any writing difficulties. It directs students who fail to consult with the Waterloo Writing Centre, and also has alternative provisions for ESL students. We recommend that Queen’s explore the costs and benefits of this and/or of similar programs.

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16 Town Hall on Writing, 7 Mar. 2011. Testimony from students at the same Town Hall suggests that the Writing Centre should be more widely known among students as well.

17 APTF Consultation with the Writing Centre, 1 April 2011.

18 Queen’s Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science has had a “Written English Proficiency” diagnostic for about a decade (see http://queensu.ca/calendars/appsci/Regulation_15_Written_English_Proficiency.html). No remedial action is specified in this Regulation, but see note [10] above.
students are generally assumed to have achieved proficiency in communications but in some cases have not, and since they are frequently employed as TAs, Queen’s should also explore the advisability of writing diagnostics specifically for incoming graduate/professional students.

While there is strong consensus that Queen’s students need considerable help in developing communication skills, the range of suggestions about how to provide it is broad rather than conclusive. Mindful of the variance both in the community’s suggestions and in the needs and operations of diverse units at Queen’s, we offer the following recommendations.

• That Queen’s make the teaching and learning of communication skills, and especially writing skills (both general and discipline-specific), a high priority.
• That Queen’s recognize that effective teaching of writing is personnel-intensive (it is generally taught most effectively in small sections), and make the requisite resources available to departments.
• That Queen’s recognize that teaching writing is a specialized function; that it identify faculty in each unit who are qualified and committed to teaching writing; that it consider these qualifications and commitments a priority in hiring where necessary; and that TAs who are to be assigned to mark or teach writing be trained and chosen for these functions.
• That communication skills be addressed early, in undergraduate year 1, and receive continuing attention with writing requirements in every year of study. Specific ways of achieving this may necessarily differ by school, faculty, and even department. One possibility for first-year is that cognate departments have common required first-year half-courses in writing in small sections (e.g., WRIT 101* for arts and humanities students, WRIT 102* for social sciences students, etc.), and that departments not participating in those supply their own equivalents. For upper years, a commonly discussed possibility is that of designated “writing-intensive” courses at each level, in which subjects are taught with an emphasis on communication. In such courses students would learn the course subject through the practice of writing to assignments with well specified aims and audiences, such as book, movie, theatre, or art reviews, grant proposals, proposals for research or creative projects, lab reports, diagnoses, business letters, prospectuses.
• That the Library’s expertise in research methods and resources be actively sought and integrated into writing instruction at the appropriate stages, with special attention to encouraging fair and appropriate use of sources and academic integrity.
• That the Writing Centre’s role and the possibilities for its enhancement be taken under serious consideration, as suggested above.

19 See especially Frank Burke’s “Open Letter” on Writing, 17 Nov. 2010. Don Drummond observes of current university graduates: “they have one glaring weakness. They struggle to write,” and he adds: “I really believe this difficulty in writing goes back to the learning environment. It starts with a weakness in K-12 and it is not being addressed in university. Of course, universities will argue this is an unfortunate by-product of inadequate funding. But it must be acknowledged to a degree it also reflects resource allocation decisions” (5-6).
• That departments designate liaisons to the Writing Centre as they do to the Library, as suggested above.
• That writing diagnostics at both undergraduate and graduate levels be taken under consideration, as suggested above.
• That faculty with a commitment to and experience in teaching academic writing be engaged to develop a university-wide plan for implementing the recommendations above.