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### The Ethics of Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

We propose a panel discussion regarding ethical issues associated with the teaching of writing across the curriculum, especially as regards the training and philosophical understandings of instructors.

Dr. Mary Reda will explore the different ways that "good writing" is often understood in the academy and the ways that it corresponds to different philosophical beliefs about "virtue". Instructors' understanding about virtue can underlie ways of teaching writing and thereby be deployed in the classroom in potentially problematic ways.

Virtue, for some, is located entirely in the individual—it is all about *character*. Some may believe one is a "good" person or not. This corresponds to the way lots of students (and frankly, many teachers) see "good writers" - either you have it, or you don't. The idea of a good writer is linked to some inborn talent.

"The art of virtue" connects to the concept that essentially people train themselves to be more virtuous by keeping track of a particular virtue in their daily lives. At best, this corresponds to exercises to develop writerly habits; at worst, it corresponds to error-hunting. Instructors who subscribe to this belief often blame struggling writers for lack of effort or laziness, a problematic issue for many but especially for those who may be linguistically or socially different from the dominant culture.

Randy Cohen, who writes "The Ethicist" column for *The New York Times*, argues that virtue is all situational. You can put any person in a compromising situation--and they're likely to act unethically. How many teachers, uncomfortable with their own writer identity (and our research tells us there are many), may use tactics that may be less than ethical? What are the ethical concerns in regard to teaching writing? It may be comforting to think of the dichotomized world of good writers & bad writers, but that is simplistic. The Ben Franklin view is also problematic as it can devolve into error-hunting and be harmful to students, particularly inexperienced writers. The situational view seems MOST useful. If we understand that all students' writing is mediated & determined by the **rhetorical situation**, then we have a more useful way to teach writing-- and to teach ethically.

Dr. Linda Fernsten: The politics of traditional academic discourses in the academy and the teaching of writing across the curriculum can have negative consequences for some writers and can be especially detrimental for those whose sociocultural backgrounds vary from the dominant culture of school. Hegemonic practices pervade the teaching of writing in universities and secondary schools and can be tied to a variety of ethical issues.

Many of our teachers and teacher-candidates have candidly discussed their writer identities in negative terms and expressed a lack of confidence in having to teach/use writing in their content-area classes. As a teacher educator, I see a variety of ethical dilemmas involved in helping to prepare candidates for the challenges of incorporating writing in their content classes. Without first grappling with their own writing concerns and writer identities, i.e. having no articulated philosophy of teaching/using writing in their content areas, many arrive unprepared to effectively teach content-area writing to their own students. For the growing number of students whose home dialects may not match those of the academy, (given the often narrow focus of traditional academic language), inadequate teacher preparation regarding the issue can result in student marginalization and the creation of "writing outsiders". In the United States, the National Council of Teachers of English (in 1974 and 2005 position statements) has long advocated teaching students how to re-shape mainstream discourses so that they are more accessible for all people instead of just the economically and sociopolitically dominant (reported by L.D. Burns in *English Education*, Janu-

ary 2007). Unfortunately, this does not seem to have become common practice. What ethical issues are involved and how might teachers and teacher educators address them?

Dr. Jeffrey Fernsten: As a content area teacher I can testify to the following: many instructors like myself have no formal training regarding how to teach the required writing in our content courses. Correction and error-hunting focused on mechanics and dominant language use persist. The "single draft, correct and return" policy, prevalent in universities, does not teach students how to effectively produce the required genres of their discipline. When teachers report not having enough time for multiple drafts or a workshop approach, are they saying it is easier to punish students than teach them? If one does not know strategies for teaching content writing, it may appear, fallaciously, that lower grades are their only option.

There are numerous ethical issues involved: Teachers uncomfortable with their own writing may stint on classroom writing assignments; error hunting assessments predominate; teachers become "pretenders," never acknowledging their own fears but, instead, becoming like the emperor without his clothes--an expert without understanding.