Sure, I Can Teach That ...

By Gene C. Fant Jr.

One of my freshman-composition students plopped noisily in a seat next to my desk. "I failed my art appreciation paper. I don’t understand this. How can I fail an art paper?" I scanned the essay and asked him what grade I might have assigned the paper.

He looked over it for a bit: "I guess you would have failed it too. I see several misspellings and some incomplete sentences. But it’s an art paper, not an English paper! It’s not the same thing."

I smiled at his naïve comment, even as I disabused him of its false premise. I see teaching writing as foundational for other subjects, as I employ my professional training to eradicate weaknesses in student work. I build this foundation carefully through well-thought-out assignments and one-on-one conferences. Even students who enter the university with strong skills have poor habits that I can address. When they move onto their other subjects, they need to carry with them the skills that I have imparted and they have refined. I mention this because of a burgeoning development in general education: the replacement of disciplinary courses with student-learning outcomes embedded in a wide variety of courses. In the latter view, professors in almost any course can document student achievements in areas as diverse as public speaking, computation, research, basic science, and, of course, writing.

Certainly we need to embed these skills throughout the curriculum, but the problem that arises is what has been called "Polymath Syndrome," the belief held by many professors that they can teach almost any subject or skill. In such a configuration, a biology professor, for example, requires an oral presentation in a freshman-level course and submits a formal evaluation of the skill to a central records-keeping office to document the learning outcome. That professor might very well be able to recognize good skills or poor skills, but that professor is not likely equipped to remediate deficiencies. As I have heard some professors in the department that specializes in the skill lament, "That professor in [another discipline] is telling me that he knows how to do what I do, including all of the trouble-shooting that I have learned in six years of graduate school and a dozen years of teaching. I’m sorry, but that’s more than a little insulting."

The turf issues attached to such models are massive: If English, communication arts, math, and other departments no longer hold exclusive courses in general education but are reduced to trouble-shooting roles, their positions will disappear, replaced by yeomen remediers who work in academic labs and not classrooms. It’s a significant challenge.

Are such laments regarding Polymath Syndrome legitimate or are they just blustering over shrinking influence related to general-education courses?

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