

EXTERNAL REVIEW OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND WRITING SUPPORT AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN BULGARIA

Executive summary

The consultancy visit was requested by members of the Writing Program so as to assess the provisions for teaching and tutoring writing at AUBG, to identify strengths and areas of concern, and to make recommendations for improvement. Due to the very brief nature of the visit, findings will inevitably be impressionistic; nevertheless, it is hoped that these will provide some food for thought.

The first part of this report reviews the existing provisions and highlights areas of concern. Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are made to improve students' writing skills within a framework of 'writing support':

- Require written assessment in an increasing number of courses in all disciplines, so that writing in courses becomes the norm rather than the exception;
- Improve and formalize communication and collaboration between writing faculty and faculty in other disciplines to link writing courses to the other courses of study;
- Move one writing course into the second year of study and relate it to the disciplines students may choose as their major;
- Integrate the Writing Center and the Writing Program.

The second half of the report presents these recommendations in detail.

1. Methodology

Data was gathered via interviews with writing faculty, other faculty members, and peer tutors, and through examination of syllabi provided by the department.

2. Goals of the institution

AUBG seeks to train talented students from the region in a US-style liberal arts education with a limited number of majors mainly focusing around social sciences and related fields. It is assumed that a liberal arts education is sufficiently broad to encompass a range of interests rather than a pure career focus on a single discipline that is common in most European undergraduate degrees. This report accepts this assumption.

3. The Writing Program

Composition courses have been the basis of generalist first-year writing in the USA for decades, and the courses taught at AUBG are broadly comparable to what one might find in the US. They have the aim of teaching rhetorical skills that traditionally are seen as unconnected to a given discipline, and to be learnt by all students prior to their selection of a major. Students are not grouped in composition courses according to major, nor is this seen as possible because in the first year students "do not know their future major". Composition courses involve a great deal of writing, and for many faculty, frequent individual consultation with students on drafts further increases workload. Several faculty commented that to be effective such courses required small groups, but in reality class sizes may be as high as 25, with a proportionate increase in the amount of time spent working on individual drafts.

The Program also incorporates a number of 'writing intensive courses,' which ensure a minimum of student writing and are awarded an extra credit in recognition of the extra workload both for faculty

and students. In their university career, students are required to take two such courses. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview faculty teaching writing intensive courses.

Profile of the faculty

Most faculty who teach composition have a background in English literature or related fields, and most hold a terminal degree. The level of qualification is thus very high. Most have a workload that is split between teaching first year composition and teaching literature or some other related subject within the recently established Literature minor. However, some also focus their composition courses in part around literary texts or genres.

Individual support

AUBG has a peer tutoring program comparable to many US universities, supervised by the head of the Writing Program. Interviews with the tutors suggest they are keen, dedicated, and well trained. The two units are not closely connected, however. Several faculty attributed this to the location of the Program and the Center on different campuses. In addition, tutors suggest that Program and Center serve students at different stages of their university career and work largely independently of each other. It also seemed that tutors are generally underused as a resource, possibly because of a perceived lack of expertise. Detailed statistics are being kept that will be informative about usage patterns, though surprisingly there was no appointment-making system in use.

4. Areas of concern

a. International student body

Most features of the AUBG Writing Program and center, then, are comparable with those of a typical undergraduate university in the US. One, however, is not. While few US universities have more than 25% international students, AUBG has over 99%, if Bulgarians are included. While students whose first language is not English and who have grown up outside the US will not differ from the typical US student in every regard, some differences are important, most notably the lack of experience with written assessment of subjects other than literature, with the rhetorical values prized in Anglo-Saxon culture, and usually with composition as a subject of study at all. All those I interviewed made constant reference to these differences as a core problem in teaching, learning or tutoring writing. In spite of this, the structure and guiding principles of writing provision appear identical to those of a typical university in the USA.

It is a traditional assumption in US composition programs that the English literature specialist is best qualified to teach rhetoric. This is in contrast with the common situation in the UK, for example, where specialists in applied linguistics teach university writing and academic skills to international students. While most of the writing faculty do have experience in EFL environments prior to AUBG, the profile of the team might be strengthened by one or two specialists with backgrounds in applied linguistics who could inform their colleagues about specific EFL problems.

b. Integration of composition with other subjects

The faculty who teach composition take great pains to provide high quality courses, as evidenced by the very detailed and professional syllabi I was given. However, it is not clear that faculty in other disciplines are fully aware of what they do. Similarly, most writing faculty did not see the particular need to anticipate what those in other disciplines might or might not later set in the way of writing, nor did they feel they had the time available to spend finding out, given their heavy teaching load. This was particularly true of the Writing Program director, who in spite of a range of administrative and coordinating duties has no course release and teaches a full load.

My interviews suggested that most faculty outside the Writing Program are concerned in their courses with teaching the principal debates and issues of their field, an enterprise to which reading and understanding core texts in context is the key. Composition courses, in contrast, are seen by most as

being about teaching forms and structures of argument into which meaning can be poured, the choice of topic being secondary. More than one instructor of composition mentioned the difficulty of finding suitable topics for students to discuss or write about, a search which might lead back either to literary themes or to the selection of 'hot' topics, such as prejudice against homosexuals or feminism, so as to force students to confront their own prejudices. Anecdotes suggested that such attempts, while laudable in terms of breaking down prejudice, were not always successful and might distract from the core goal of teaching argumentation. As mentioned by Dean Sullivan, it would be very easy for those in other disciplines to offer suitable topics and debates that would be interesting for students and lead them into later courses or possibly help them select a major, but the framework for this exchange does not currently exist.

Feedback from peer tutors also suggested that while students clearly understood that there was an 'Anglo-Saxon' way of arguing at AUBG that need to be learnt, there was no obvious relationship between the composition courses and the other courses students received later. This disconnect related both to the genres taught and in part to skills. An interview I conducted with historian Markus Wien suggested that although he gave great care and attention to the design and support of his own written assignments in a process that can only be described as exemplary, the skills he was looking for students to demonstrate focused particularly on the critical understanding and evaluation of texts. He commented that one of the most helpful features in a composition course to prepare students for his own assignments would be critical reading of texts related to his discipline. Few of the composition syllabi I was given explicitly address critical reading skills as a key focus, and those that do rarely choose texts in the disciplines the students will go on to major in.

Problems of the quantity and timing of writing in the disciplines

Of greater concern are the comments relayed by peer tutors that students apparently often feel that their writing (or even their English!) declines between the first and fourth years due to 'lack of practice'. Students commented that 'many' courses had no written assessment component, and claimed that some students select courses on the basis of their low writing requirement so that by the time they get to the fourth year they may have done little serious writing for two years. While this is clearly not the fault of the Writing Program, if the tutors' assessment is correct it is a serious institutional shortcoming that appears not to be resolved by the requirement that students take two writing intensive courses during their university career.

Where writing was set in other disciplines, tutors noted a correlation between effectively defined tasks which produced highly focused, clear student writing, and inexplicit instructions eg. 'submit a research paper' that resulted in vague, unfocused writing. Clearly it would be desirable if all faculty setting writing were to provide students with clear, detailed guidelines, for example using a university template like the one provided in Appendix 1. This is a further example of how the writing program can interact with faculty in other disciplines to help improve the quality of writing tasks across the curriculum.

Other concerns

While it is difficult for an outsider to judge fairly on a short visit, there was a general impression of dissatisfaction and injustice on the part of English faculty, whether this be connected to workload, to lack of engagement of the administration with their desire to address their concerns with improving quality in the Writing Program, or to other more personal issues. While faculty everywhere will gripe about working conditions, there was an impression at AUBG that many faculty were at the end of their tether. That the impetus to review the program, and hence my visit, came from the program faculty and not from the administration, suggests on the one hand the continued dedication of the English faculty, but on the other that the attention given by the administration to curriculum and program review may be less than it should be. However, it is beyond the remit of this review to address this kind of dissatisfaction.

5. Recommendations

What then can be done to improve a system that has been imported from the US into an international environment, without detriment to the liberal arts values that guide the university and are paramount?

The suggestions I offer here are based on the concept of *writing support*. Writing support is founded on the assumption that writing is both a learning tool and an academic skill. This skill will be trained through writing in courses where the content of what is written is paramount, but the form serves as the vehicle. In such courses papers will be graded on whether the students have mastered the goals of the course, but lack of effectiveness in presenting written arguments in the genres of the discipline will result in the reader's expectations not being met and consequent poor transfer of ideas, thus to a lower grade. This assumption it shares with writing intensive courses.

The second assumption of writing support, and where it differs from writing intensive courses, is that political scientists, historians, or business specialists cannot do it all themselves. It is an ineffective distribution of labor to insist that the historian be the writing specialist; though she can recognize good historical writing, she is not therefore *de facto* able to teach it. This view is shared with first year composition, which also assumes the need for separate writing specialists.

Where writing support differs from first year composition is in the *role* of the writing specialist, namely to *support* those who set writing in their courses by teaching the principles of good writing through forms, texts and genres that prepare the students for the writing they will do in their later university career. Support requires understanding, communication and coordination of efforts. It is not that writing support requires these where other conceptual models do not; rather, it *recognizes* their importance where others do not.

Writing support is also ongoing: it does not end in the first year when the students have supposedly mastered the basic principles of writing, but is there throughout their university career, often in the form of individual tutorials, which are closely connected to other aspects of writing support provision.

Below I provide several specific suggestions for improving writing at AUBG within this framework.

a. Increase writing in other courses

A key step that could improve the effectiveness of student writing is that more faculty in other disciplines should assign writing tasks during the second and third years of study.

There are good reasons why this does not happen. Reading and assessing written work is time consuming, and faculty have their own research obligations. Some may also fear that the writing of weaker students would be so poor as to obscure attempts to complete the task. Nevertheless, some faculty, like Markus Wien, do set thoughtful and constructive assignments, and appear to accept that the support and grading of these assignments is an inherent part of their course. If so, it is not clear why others should claim it is not appropriate (except in the case of specific courses – mathematics is the obvious exception).

- Most courses in the second and third year should in significant part (at least 30% of the grade) be assessed by open written assignments.
- The nature of the assignment, the percentage of the grade and the grading criteria should be part of the course description.
- Assignments need not be lengthy; indeed shorter assignments with strict word limits would be more appropriate.
- A structure should be established so that students writing these assignments get support from the Writing Center and if possible from English faculty.
- For new faculty joining the university, guidelines for effective written assignments and recommended grading criteria would be helpful. The Writing Program might help here.

Input from both sides and collaboration towards common goals should greatly improve the quality of the student experience and increase the chances of improved writing skills.

b. Increase coordination of writing support

If the Writing Program is at least in some part beholden to faculty in other disciplines to prepare students to write in their second, third and fourth year courses, then the two parties have to have a deeper knowledge, understanding and respect for what each other do. This means building coordination and communication into the job description of at least some members of the Writing Program. Duties would include:

- gathering of information on writing assignments and the use of writing in other courses
- promoting awareness of the Writing Program
- promoting awareness of the Writing Center
- raising faculty awareness of best practices in setting and using writing to foster learning
- using information gathered from faculty to optimize writing support to their needs

The bulk of this work would probably need to fall, at least initially, to the director of the Writing Program, which would mean a substantial reduction in teaching, certainly 50% of current teaching load.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the exchange of information should be done through *personal contact*, not by questionnaire or e-mail. The objective is to make personal contact with faculty and built relations. This cannot be done overnight and it cannot be done electronically. There is an argument for spreading the task of interviewing and building relationships with other faculty across the whole of the English faculty. In this way, faculty in other disciplines come to know the whole team, and all members of the team come to understand writers and scholars in other disciplines better. While spreading the work in this way will somewhat lighten the load of the director, the latter should still have significant relief from teaching duties so as to coordinate and spearhead this collaboration. Other faculty who are involved in the project should also have proportionate relief from teaching.

c. Reschedule/restructure writing classes into the second year

The ability to respond critically to ideas presented in the texts of others, essential to almost every discipline, is not automatically acquired through traditional composition courses. Moreover, many genres used in most other courses are not taught in composition. Research suggests learning to write one genre does not automatically render students able to write other genres.

One specific opportunity to adjust the teaching of writing courses towards preparation of later written assignments would be to shift one of the current writing courses (Eng 101 and 102) into the second year and to adjust the syllabus so that this course forms a bridge to writing in the disciplines.

Core features of such a course would be:

- Critical reading of and response to discipline-related texts, probably selected with the assistance of faculty in the relevant disciplines.
- Grouping of students according to a prospective major: students would choose from a range of related writing courses with a core syllabus but with a focus on one of the major disciplines.¹
- Focus on genres that feature writing as response, such as critiques, reviews, or position papers.²

¹ Those planning to major in Maths would need to choose another discipline where writing is common.

² A position paper here is understood as a paper that compares and relates two published texts within a debate so as to contextualise those texts within the debate, show their relation to each other, evaluate them and finish by indicating questions unanswered, ways forward, or other possibilities. The position paper thus practises many of the skills of literature review, and helps pave the way for research papers.

- Consultation between faculty in the disciplines and writing instructors in selecting the most relevant genres (for example in business studies, none of the above genres may be appropriate) to prepare students for writing in a prospective major.

That students ‘do not know their major’ in their second year (though conversations with students suggest that many do) is not an impediment because choice of a writing course preparing for Business Management, for example, will not put students at any greater disadvantage if they ultimately decide to major in History than having chosen ‘Introduction to Business 101’ in their first year. Indeed, to have been ‘prepared for Business Management’ can be seen to be slightly advantageous for a student choosing History as compared to the present system, which in effect prepares the student for nothing, or at best for literary criticism.

d. Integrate the Writing Center more closely into the Writing Program

At present, there is little coordination between the Writing Center and the Writing Program, other than a shared director. It is not clear that the English faculty know the writing tutors particularly well or work with them, nor that the information tutors have about individual students’ writing needs is passed on to the Writing Program or indeed to faculty in the disciplines.

Some suggestions:

- The Center and the Program should share common premises so that faculty and tutors see each other regularly. It should be explicit that faculty and tutors are working together as colleagues towards a common goal, an understanding that should carry through in their greeting each other, talking to each other, and discussing professional objectives together.
- Tutors who are able to and wish to could declare a speciality, normally in their major and/or the discipline they chose for their second year writing course(see above). This does not mean they will not see students with papers in other disciplines, simply that students using the Center are informed if they have a political science paper which tutors are majoring in political science and can choose accordingly.
- Logistics of students consulting with tutors on a first draft of papers for first year composition or second year writing courses should be considered. For example, students in Eng 101 might be required to take a first draft to a peer tutor instead of the composition teacher. This might go some way to lightening the workload of the composition teacher, but also create a common project for both halves of writing support provision. This might also offer the option for tutors to be ‘apprenticed’ to a member of English faculty; however, the details of such models are beyond the scope of this report.

Concerns may be raised that the recommendations and the framework described here are somehow at odds with a liberal arts approach that sees writing as unconnected to a given discipline. The response to this is that because the principles of good writing indeed transcend the specifics of the discipline, teaching writing in support of a discipline does not detract from those general principles but in fact adds a further dimension and a greater relevance. If, however, the disciplinary focus happens to be relevant to the student’s choice of major, this is only beneficial.

An afterthought

The – in some regards – ‘subordinate’ role of writing instructors within a writing support model may chafe with those who hold a PhD in a discipline of their own that is not currently a major option at AUBG. To have to acquaint oneself with the themes, concerns and genres of a social science discipline when one is really a specialist in, say, English literature can seem like playing to one’s weaknesses rather than one’s strengths, and for some may feel like ‘playing second fiddle’.

Needless to say, there are some prominent scholars who demonstrate that this is not the case.³ However, ideally, no-one in a university should, in the long term, be forced into teaching courses that they are not comfortable with. On the one hand, those whose prime career goal is to teach literature or Creative Writing may be given more chance to teach within the new Literature minor. On the other, in the long term the university may seek to hire faculty whose profile suits them to work more in writing support and who will relish such an opportunity. Such teachers might have a master's degree in applied linguistics with a background in university EAP, or a master's in a subject closely related the available majors at AUBG together with substantial EFL teaching experience at university level and a professional teaching qualification.

Appendix 1 – Sample guidelines for faculty in designing assignments

Assignment for Course _____

1. *Audience*: how informed a person (or persons) are students writing for? What type of knowledge does this person possess or lack?
2. *Purpose*: what is the aim of the text in relation to the audience? To inform, to persuade, to advise? What is the aim of the text in relation to the subject material? To summarize, to compare, to analyze, to apply, to evaluate?
3. *Structural features*: What does a sample of this type of text (genre) look like? If it entails both summary and evaluation, should there be more of one or the other? Should recommendations be made? Should a methodology be outlined? Are quantitative data required?
4. *Grading criteria*: What criteria will be assessed in awarding the grade? Which will weigh heavier? (eg. will appropriate use of sources and grammatical accuracy carry equal weight?) Ideally a rubric should be provided to students prior to assessment.

³ John Bean being the most prominent, a scholar of Milton's poetry who works closely with engineers and chemists to help them get the best writing from their students. At CEU, Tom Rooney, defending his PhD in Renaissance literature in May 2011 specializes in support for Political Science, Economics and Sociology, while Andrea Kirchknopf (PhD in Post-Victorian literature) works with philosophers, historians and lawyers. Neither teaches any course in or related to English literature.