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Articulate Bodies: Writing Instruction in a Performance-Based Curriculum

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The history of arts departments in US universities has produced some peculiar hybrids, embedding programs with conservatory goals and methods within colleges and degree structures with a firmly liberal arts ethos. Where some faculty prioritize artistry and embodied practice, others think in terms of critical thinking and research skills, problem-posing, analysis, and verbal-textual communication. In many cases, this history has left a familiar legacy of discord between faculty who identify primarily as scholars and those who identify as artists, while students struggle (or, more often, refuse) to conceptually bridge these two dimensions of their curriculum. This schism can create particular difficulties in the teaching of writing.

Many departments of theatre operate according to an implicit contract whereby writing—traditionally understood—is considered to be the property of scholars and of little concern to practitioners. Students are expected to come from high school with already well-honed writing skills, which they will polish in introductory composition classes and in classes in the history, literature, and criticism curriculum, leaving them free to pursue their artistic studies as a purely practical endeavor. This contract, however, has significant consequences for student learning outcomes: everything we know about writing pedagogy suggests that writing improves only with consistent practice, within disciplinary contexts in which students feel they have an ongoing stake.

At the bottom of this divide are trenchant philosophical concerns for both scholars and practitioners. Practitioners feel that they are fighting universities' undervaluation of ways of knowing grounded in nontextual forms of expression and communication, such as literacies of the body, or visual literacies. They suspect that the disciplinary protocols of form, argumentation, and especially of assessment associated with writing pedagogy at the college level inhibit rather than open up students' creative faculties. Scholars, meanwhile, fear that without thorough writing training, students will lack the critical rigor they need to bring to artistic practice, and the basic research, critical thinking, and communication skills they will need in their postgraduation lives, where few will ever make a living as artists.

No matter how entrenched such divisions between artists and scholars might seem, however, to see the two sides as at loggerheads over the role of writing in the curriculum grossly misrepresents the *actual* ways in which both practitioners and scholars teach and learn with writing. The use of writing is ubiquitous in theatre studio pedagogy, from character biographies, journaling, and performance-response papers, to free writing, source research documentation, and stage-management notes, to name just a few. In their professional work also, artists must move fluently between forms of performance and transcription (in directors' notes, performance documentation, grant-writing, design bids, and any number of other contexts). By the same token, performance scholars, like artists, also struggle against the formulaic, fear-bound habits of writing that students bring to the classroom. As such, they have been mulling for two decades about ways to bridge the corporeal and the textual, to honor the unique character of embodied epistemology and experience, as they translate it into writing (in theories of performative writing, choreographic writing, critical ethnography, and so on).

These were the concerns that impelled our Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota, when it embarked on research into writing pedagogy during the spring of 2009. The study took place as part of the Writing Enriched Curriculum (WEC) pilot project—a large-scale, university-wide, Bush-grant-supported enterprise proposed by the university's Center for Writing. The goal of the project is to enrich writing pedagogy by having individual faculties devise a consensus statement about what constitutes effective writing in their specific discipline, audit current writing instruction through gathering syllabi and assignments, and develop a strategy to infuse instruction in component writing abilities systematically into all levels and in all parts of the curriculum.¹ Key to the success of the project was the invitation for faculty—adjunct and permanent, designers and choreographers, puppeteers and voice coaches—to define writing itself in ways consonant with their professional and pedagogical practice.

In this essay, we describe the outcomes and implications of this process. How might understanding writing in an expansive sense, encompassing embodied, ephemeral, material, and visual forms of communication on the terms of practitioners, aid in redesigning curricula in theatre, performance studies, and dance? How can it motivate students to think of writing as integral to art-making, and artistic creativity to writing? How do faculty define writing, and describe its relationship to practice? How, and why, do faculty move in their pedagogy between physical expression, material modes of inscription (for example, sketches, photographic documentation), and textual modes? And how might these movements or translations between forms be useful to students as they strive to bridge their own performance- and scholarship-based experiences? The WEC process has crucially demanded that we theorize our own practice, (re)discovering a language to talk about our shared core values and processes that are so often obscured by polarizing institutional pressures and sub-disciplinary habitus.

Writing and Performance: The State of Scholarship

Literature in the fields of both theatre and composition studies has examined the productive intersections between writing and performance, in ways that challenge the scholarship–practice divide that our department struggled with. This work builds on developments in writing theory in the late 1970s that foregrounded the process-based dimensions of writing, and argued that the embodied act of writing and the cognitive work of critical thinking were mutually constitutive (see, for example, Emig). These insights formed the foundation of the later influential Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement. More recent scholarship has followed by examining the ways in which writing and performing are mutually supportive, not merely analogies for each other. Writing instructors such as Ryan Claycomb have turned to performance to integrate nonverbal aspects of communication into written meaning-making, to remember the historical roots of embodied rhetoric and composition practices, and to reanimate pedagogical strategies in the writing-instruction classroom. Others have based their conclusions on the ethnographic study of actual existing student-writing practices and learning experiences that integrate performance and writing. Fishman and colleagues, for example (writing about the landmark longitudinal Stanford Study of Writing), comment that

our students compelled us to pay attention to the live, scripted, and embodied activities they stage outside the classroom: everything from spoken-word events and slam-poetry competitions to live radio broadcasts, public speaking, and theatrical presentations. In addition, our students prompted us to consider how the act of embodying writing through voice, gesture, and movement can help early college students learn vital lessons about literacy. (226)

At the same time, theatre and performance instructors have reconsidered the integration of writing into their classrooms in ways that draw on and enhance performance skill sets, while simultaneously developing critical-thinking capabilities. In many previous contributions to this journal, instructors offer concrete examples of writing assignments they have implemented in their own class-

rooms. From Shelley Manis's use of Brecht's "not . . . but" concept to help students engage, analyze, and stage two contradictory textual sources, to Susan Haedicke's artist journals, to Julia Guichard's recipes for crafting stage dialects, these examples demonstrate how "writing is one of the best tools we have to develop student-centered, active learning courses that combine critical thinking, student passion, and specific content into well-structured, exciting courses" (Roost 231).

Anchoring much of this work is a theory of embodiment—namely, that both writing and performing are bodily practices and forms of corporeal intelligence—grounded in a deep tradition of thought in both theatre and performance studies. This tradition also informs the theoretical musings of scholars such as Della Pollock, D. Soyini Madison (2004, 2005), and others on the topic of performative writing, which develops claims about the transformative, productive character of both writing and performance. On the one hand, they argue, our written scholarship must foreground this performative reality, and on the other it must strive to honor and manifest those ontological dimensions of performance that are in tension with the medium of writing—namely, its ephemeral and bodily character.

Finally, in considering the productive intersections of writing and performance, scholars from both fields have begun asking questions about the broader pedagogical philosophies that underpin writing instruction. Claycomb, Fishman and colleagues, and Sonja Kufinec argue that both writing and performance provide rich opportunities for enacting critical and emancipatory pedagogies, and for training students to become critical thinkers and engaged cultural citizens—two of the cornerstones of liberal arts education.

None of this literature, however, has addressed the ways in which practitioners *and* scholars within actually existing departments of theatre studies collectively, and sometimes contradictorily, define writing and practice it in their classrooms and studios. Nor does it move beyond the individual classroom or scholar, using these insights about the relationship between performance and writing to craft curriculum-wide approaches to the teaching of writing in the liberal arts context. This synthesizing and strategic framework is precisely what the WEC process offers.

The WEC Principles and Process

The theatre program's leaders embraced the WEC pilot as an opportunity to engage in discussion about the conceptual foundations and unifying principles of our discipline's pedagogy, even though "writing," traditionally understood, was not a natural focus for such a discussion.² As such, the dialogue was grounded by a set of principles that have been mainstays of WAC or Writing in the Disciplines (WID) initiatives in colleges throughout Euro-America for two decades: that writing abilities are developed in constant practice throughout study and career, in specific disciplinary and professional contexts; that the act of writing is inseparable from the processes of reasoning, creativity, and communication within those disciplines; and that ongoing instruction in writing is thus the responsibility of the entire academic community (and not only of English departments or specialized writing programs). Where the WEC project differs from WAC/WID is in designing and implementing a thorough, systematic, and institutionally supported process to ensure that writing instruction saturates a discipline's entire curriculum; in making disciplinary expectations regarding "good writing" explicit to students; and in integrating authentic writing opportunities at all levels in scaffolded, unified curricula.³ Importantly, WEC understands that in order to achieve broad faculty buy-in, the definition of good writing must reflect the way in which all faculty understand the work of communication within their discipline; it cannot emanate from a few faculty leaders or be the responsibility of writing experts from elsewhere. Accordingly, the WEC process begins with a radically capacious base-line definition of writing—"mark-making in the service of communication"—that offers expansive possibilities for those in theatre studies.

The first stage of the WEC process began with an online survey that questioned faculty (adjunct, graduate, and tenured/tenure-track), students, and professional associates about their experience of teaching and learning (with) writing in the department. It was clear from the survey that the department lacked continuity of writing instruction across the curriculum, and it poorly communicated to students the relationship between the very different forms of writing practiced within the discipline and the expectations for each.

In the second stage of the WEC process, faculty representatives convened for a series of meetings focused on two key priorities: determining a list of characteristics of good writing in their discipline, and the component abilities that students need to master in order to write well; and mapping the current curriculum to determine where and when these abilities are taught on the student journey through the major. These activities would serve the project's primary objective of implementing curricular changes to ensure that students are systematically, and in a strategically scaffolded way, taught all the component writing abilities and given an opportunity to cumulatively practice them. The final two meetings focused on the strategies the department would pursue and the resources it would need to communicate expectations to students regarding writing in a clear and consistent way.

While this round of meetings was highly productive, it proved difficult to secure involvement from faculty in specializations to which writing, traditionally understood, was peripheral to the teaching mission. Consequently, when the first draft of the list of characteristics and abilities was discussed by the tenured and tenure-track faculty as a whole at the annual departmental retreat, many observed that it was dominated by thesis-driven, argumentative modes of writing and reflected little about the visual literacies, corporeal intelligences, or the diversity of modes of reasoning and communication within the discipline. Many felt that the list would have to better reflect the process-based, exploratory nature of much of the writing pursued in performance and playwriting classes (where writing is not assessed as an end in itself), as well as the complex integration of textual and visual elements in design contexts or the technical and explanatory precision required in stage management.

It became clear that a new strategy, and a great deal more time, would be needed to fully involve adjunct faculty and those in practice-based disciplinary sub-specialties. Thus the WEC pilot employed Stephanie Lein Walseth as a research assistant to gather information about existing pedagogical strategies (by collecting syllabi and assignments), interview faculty and observe classroom practice, and revise and refine the abilities and characteristics list to better reflect the diverse understandings of literacy and communication in these areas. Finally, after a two-year process and vetting meetings with each departmental program, the list of writing characteristics and abilities was accepted as a consensus statement by the entire department (see the appendix at the end of the text).

Writing Is/as/with Performance: Translation, Process, Metacognition, Expression, Imagination

As the list makes clear, writing was conceived by scholars and artists alike as a vital ligament in the social, intellectual, and aesthetic processes of theatre-making, while the distinctions between textual and embodied, oral, or visual forms of communication were remarkably fluid. Time and time again, from faculty members in every program across the department, we heard about the myriad ways that writing enables theatre students, scholars, and professional artists to *translate* between mediums and vocabularies. Acting instructors and vocal coaches reiterated the necessity of translating play texts into embodied and personal language. One voice instructor noted that “the biggest challenge that I have is to take writing that’s on a page and get it to come alive in their bodies. So, to reverse that, when they begin to write, [the challenge is to get them to understand] that it’s a live art form, coming from them. A good writer is really in touch with their physical life and their imagination.” The design faculty, in a similar vein, discussed assignments that ask students to translate between aural and visual mediums, using a piece of music as inspiration for a set design,

for instance, as well as the necessity of translating their visual designs into written and verbal formats for nonspecialists. A lighting-design professor explained the indispensability of these skills, commenting that

Our work is basically non-verbal communication. We sometimes describe it as English as a Second Language. Verbal communication for us always takes a backseat, because that's not what we get hired to do. So, what I'm trying to get these students to do with their personal statements is to start thinking about who they are, what they want to do, and what kind of theater is important to them. But just as importantly, I want them to be able to articulate these ideas in written and verbal forms so that people who have no understanding of design get some sense of why design is important.

And finally, whether it is stage managers serving as the communication hubs for artistic teams or any theatre artist articulating the meaning of their practice or a specific vision to those outside the discipline (in order to, say, secure grant funding), faculty members repeatedly commented on the need for students to become familiar with and utilize discipline-specific vocabularies, and to translate these vocabularies for nonspecialists.

Another related discovery and point of commonality across the department was the conviction that writing not only mirrors, but is integral to the artistic *process*. For many of those interviewed, theatrical creativity involved a continuing, circular, reflexive process of translation, in which writing helped artists move in a generative and self-editing continuum between research, observation, recording, description, analysis, creation, and reflection. Not only does writing facilitate the imagination (see below), it also evolves faculties of discrimination, helping students clarify, hone, refine, deepen, and distill their thinking. Throughout this process, students develop a critical awareness that not all ideas, once generated, are worth being pursued, and that discernment is necessary in determining what is useful to artists, audiences, and the larger community. The principles of revision, commitment, and self-reflexivity, then, were not just analogies shared by scholars and artists, but mutually informing practices.

Writing also performs a crucially *metacognitive* function, as students move between the intimate, often highly subjective experience of embodied work and the collaborative one of communication and creation. One performance and acting instructor put it this way:

I feel that writing is an essential tool for [students] to articulate their experience, because they are the primary texts for the work in our class: their bodies, their voices, their imaginations. What is happening in the space *is* the text. It's so experiential that they've got to have a way to capture it, and I believe that writing helps them do this. It enriches the dialogue. It can't replace the dialogue, but enriches it. It causes them to do that metacognition thing—they're thinking about how they're thinking, which is so important. I also believe that my curriculum enriches their writing—everything from the physical exercises to the improvisations to the discussions about those experiences—and it occurs as a continual dialogue.

Over time, combining writing practice with performance practice allowed students, faculty contended, to become aware of their own personal growth and processes as artists.

In order to fulfill this role, however, writing needed—according to our faculty—to have certain qualities; namely, a deep character of *expressivity*, combined with an equally deep commitment to objective rigor. In the initial surveys, one of the starkest differences between student perceptions of writing and those of faculty centered around this question of expression: students overwhelmingly valued the expressive dimensions of writing more than their teachers. “I feel the most useful writing assignments are ones where we reflect on in-class exercises and learn how to better express feelings,” wrote one student, while another offered: “In acting it is important to write what you feel

and be able to express yourself with words.” Faculty, on the other hand, complained that students had “to be goaded to back up [personal opinion] with facts and examples or to move beyond their likes and dislikes into deeper thinking and analysis.” As liaison, I (Werry) initially suspected that this conflict would be reflected by faculty adhering to the disciplinary division between artistry and scholarship—the one creative, expressive, and intrinsically motivated, the other product-oriented, extrinsically motivated, judgmental, and detached. I was wrong: faculty across the board unanimously spoke of wanting to push students toward a greater level of rigor. Coming to agreement on the list of writing characteristics and abilities enabled us to collectively parse more precisely what it meant to be *effectively* expressive in our discipline: to use richly evocative, vivid, and precise language; to have writing emerge from solid research (either embodied, observational, or textual); to balance subjective responses with objective reflection, either based in evidence or in acknowledgment of the specificity of one’s own subject position.

Finally, while it may not seem surprising to readers of this journal that imagination and risk-taking are key ingredients of good writing in theatre, our faculty—scholars and artists alike—felt that this was not obvious for students coming out of K-12 systems that have been dominated by test-based curricula. A directing professor expressed the contradiction this way:

The biggest problem they have is that they want to be *right*. They get tied up in knots about it. Well, I want them to explore beyond boundaries. They need to learn to fail and make a mess. If writing isn’t balanced with play and mistakes, they can get tied up. They have horrible associations from high school about five paragraph paper structures and red pen marks on their souls. We try to unleash their imaginations.

Through using spontaneous, no-stakes or low-stakes, playful writing exercises and acknowledging the sensual, dynamic, vocal, kinetic, and musical qualities of language, faculty felt that writing could be a key, not an obstacle, to unlocking the imagination.

The WEC Prognosis

Although this disciplinary definition of writing has received approval from the department as a whole, the WEC process faces a number of challenges as it moves forward into the implementation phase. The first of these is the ongoing challenge of retaining commitment to teaching modification from time-poor core faculty, and of communicating with the practicing artists and independent adjunct faculty who deliver much of our core curriculum, but who are neither trained in writing instruction nor compensated for instructional development. Much of our work as liaisons has consisted of lobbying individual faculty to get their buy-in, explaining that it is an enhancement of what they are already doing, rather than yet another top-down initiative imposed for reasons of economy or managerial whim, designed to extract more work from them and to “spoon-feed” students. (To be sure, any ongoing support of WEC by our university’s administration—and without such support, it will be unsustainable—is predicated on its compatibility with the changing economic logic of public higher education in the United States. To what degree are such initiatives hostage to the increasing reliance on adjunct and graduate teaching labor, with its concomitant problems of continuity?) A related challenge as we move into the implementation phase of the project is a tendency for faculty to revert to the disciplinary habitus regarding writing instruction that we named in the introduction to this essay. After two years of discussion of the WEC principles, we still regularly encounter comments like “I just don’t have time to teach writing” or “If I include more writing, then I have to cut more content.”

What the WEC process has achieved thus far is a vigorous and substantive dialogue among all faculty members. Examining pedagogical values and practices on a structural level has, at times, opened a Pandora’s box of unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, questions regarding the teaching

mission of the department with respect to the rest of the College of Liberal Arts. The focus on assessment and outcome that a college-wide initiative like WEC entails, for example, has often seemed to contradict the creative practice of theatre, in which objectives are emergent in the process of doing and not predetermined. The challenge to move core elements of the curriculum away from a pen-on-paper model of writing that privileges verbal communication, argument, and analysis has exposed a tension between the department's liberal arts mandate (to which this model is integral) and its equally dominant assumption of conservatory philosophies (to which this model is antipathetic). How daring dare we be in this rethinking of our curriculum? What is our responsibility toward students, the majority of whom will not, in fact, ever make a living in theatre? Is to think in this way to foreclose the radical, emancipatory possibilities of performance pedagogy, as they reach beyond the parameters of theatre itself?

Nevertheless, implementation has begun in numerous classes across the curriculum. As a Writing Intensive class and gateway to the major, "Introduction to Theatre" was an obvious focus for the initial implementation of WEC principles. In the last year and a half, these principles, language, and practices have been incorporated into syllabi, assignment descriptions, grading rubrics, and in-class writing instruction. Writing assignments supported by in-class exercises, for example, now clearly break down for students the component skills in research, vivid description, interpretation, argumentation, and revision that the assignments are designed to develop. Section instructors also conduct multiple writing workshops, including peer-review sessions; structure-mapping; thesis-crafting; and finding, evaluating, and using sources. On a similar note, in an upper-division text-analysis course for aspiring directors, WEC implementation has meant identifying the writing instruction that is already happening, and making its concomitant skills and expectations more explicit in the syllabus, assignment prompts, and instruction. For instance, WEC language now clarifies for students the importance of weekly micro-assignments (in which students write and then collaboratively refine three-sentence statements regarding each play's central conflict) in terms of the relationship between writing and artistic process and the importance of self-reflexivity—both metacognitive awareness and understanding of social location.

Elsewhere in the curriculum, WEC has inspired efforts to bridge programs. In one instance, the WEC research assistant and the WEC implementation coordinator at the Center for Writing co-facilitated a workshop in a collaborative course between the BA and BFA programs that developed the critical ability of translating between embodied, visual, and textual mediums. During the three-hour session, three groups of students each created sixty-second movement pieces, performed them for a second group who wrote up their observations, and then a third group recreated the movement based on only the written document. When the third group performed for the first two groups, students were able to witness firsthand (and experience in their bodies) the communicative successes, failures, and re-interpretations of their writing and embodied performances.

Also inspired by WEC, our senior seminar capstone course recently implemented a "documents of process" requirement, which honors the discipline's multiple literacies, as well as our department's complementary emphasis on process and discernment. Replacing a previous, token "process paper" requirement, students completing scholarship-based and/or performance-based projects must now find a means of documenting their thinking from project inception to completion in a format that makes sense given the nature of their project. Students in the 2010–11 class experimented with everything from video diaries to design renderings, dioramas to photomontages, presenting their findings in a gallery format at mid-semester. These displays were accompanied by a three-minute oral presentation designed to hone abilities of critical distillation and translation.

Taken together, these efforts are helping faculty and graduate instructors to more clearly articulate the principles of writing in our discipline, resulting in more sophisticated and on-target student work. Ultimately, the process is succeeding in providing the basis for reimagining our curriculum, developing new teaching techniques and instruments, and communicating disciplinary principles

that integrate practice and scholarship to students. The potential outcomes of this process, however, go beyond its value to writing pedagogy. The process has allowed us to better articulate to ourselves what it is we do, the underlying conceptual structures that shape performance practice—their logics and syntax, as it were—in ways that make us better ambassadors for our discipline within the university at large.

Appendix

Why Do We Write in Theatre?

Writing in theatre is a part of the artistic process:

- There is continuity among observation, description, analysis, creation, and reflection.
- In theatre, we move fluidly between “reading” and “writing”; that is, among seeing, recording, interpreting, and remaking what we have created.
- Writing is a way of finding out what you think, what your body thinks. In writing, we can develop and deepen those thoughts, and notice changes in them over time.
- Writing can help us reflect on our own artistic process. It is essential, then, to our personal growth as artists.
- Writing is a tool for practical problem-solving—it allows us to propose and evaluate solutions to technical challenges.
- Writing in theatre can serve as a guidepost or map during the rehearsal and production process, and it can document this process for future reference.

Like artistic practice, writing in theatre communicates a vision, experience, or idea:

- In writing, we communicate ideas, visions, experiences, and observations to others in the service of collaboration.
- When we write, we join a conversation in which we explain, defend, or justify those ideas.
- Writing is a step in the technical process of theatre-making, helping collaborators move from concept to execution. It shows us, for example, how a design element will get built and how it will work.
- We can use writing to express an artistic vision to those outside our artistic process (audiences, funding agencies, scholars, other students, and so on).

What Makes Good Writing in Theatre?

Writing in theatre is aware of its audience:

- In formal settings, writers need to be responsible for a level of technical accomplishment, precision, and professionalism.
- In informal or process-based writing, exploration and risk-taking may be more important.

Writing in theatre is multi-disciplinary:

- It takes place in verbal, textual, graphic, and embodied media, and moves fluidly among these modalities.

Writing in theatre is poetic:

- It uses language imaginatively to convey ideas, images, and emotional life (using metaphor and vivid imagery, for example).
- It makes ideas resonate more deeply and creates new ideas.
- It utilizes all of the senses and all of the dimensions of our imaginations.
- It has a sense of aliveness, action, and energy.
- It can operate on the level of music, sound, and rhythm.
- It connects the body, the voice, and the imagination.

Writing in theatre balances the subjective with the objective:

- It balances instinctual and analytical, close and distanced perspectives.
- It allows us to make connections and associations among life experiences, readings, research, and artistic creating.
- It originates in feelings, reactions, tastes, visions, responses, or preoccupations that might be highly subjective, but it complicates and/or supports that subjective response with: *evidence and interpretation* drawn from the close reading of a text or detailed observation of a bodily practice; and *self-reflexivity*, which reflects on the writer's social location (namely, where is the writer's experience, taste, or response coming from?).

*How Do We Go About Writing in Theatre?**Writing in theatre originates in research:*

The making and understanding of artistic work depends on good research. Although the methods of research may differ, common approaches include: *textual research* (finding, reading, and analyzing a variety of sources, such as play texts, production reviews, design concepts, artist biographies, historical documents, theoretical frameworks, secondary sources, and so on); *observational or practical research* (closely observing, participating in, documenting, and analyzing artistic practices and performances, as well as performances and phenomenon in everyday life); and *organizational research* (gathering data from multiple sources and organizing it into documents that will be easily accessible to collaborators).

Writing in theatre is similar to the process of rehearsal:

We begin with brainstorming and work through successive drafts, progressively shaping, clarifying, and reaching greater specificity. In the early phases, it is critical that we *explore multiple possibilities* by: being open to the learning process; unleashing our imaginations; moving beyond what first strikes us or resonates with us; moving beyond preset boundaries and ideas about what is "right"; and taking risks, trying experiments, and implementing innovations. As we move forward, it is important to *clarify and hone* what we have made by: distilling and refining our ideas; determining what is most important and effective; and editing for succinctness, specificity, and good mechanics.

Writing in theatre requires commitment:

It takes time, effort, thought, and investment in the process to achieve success.

What Abilities Do We Need to Write Effectively in Theatre?

Conduct research:

- Recognize the different definitions, values, and processes of research pertinent to different dimensions of our discipline, and develop appropriate research strategies to support your work. For *textual research*, it is important to: develop familiarity and comfort with library resources; learn to distinguish between primary and secondary sources; assess the reliability and value of web-based resources; and effectively document your sources. For *observational or practical research*, it is critical to: cultivate the habit of mark-making in verbal or graphic form; and develop a practice of recording thoughts, images, and ideas as a response to the environment and everyday experience, and as a record of the creative process. This habitual practice may take the form of free-writing, stream-of-consciousness writing, doodling, note-taking, sketching, collecting, and so on. For *organizational research*, we must: collect information and organize it in a user-friendly and efficient manner; and anticipate questions that may arise, and be prepared to answer them.
- Develop methods of integrating your research into your creative work.

Unlock and explore the imagination:

- Go beyond your first instinct, what you think is “right,” and/or what is literal.
- Take risks, be willing to make mistakes and “get messy.”
- Keep an open mind and develop multiple options.

Create descriptions of performance, design components, and/or dramatic texts:

- Craft detailed, evocative, and closely observed descriptions of others’ artistic work, as well as your own.
- Communicate visual and technical information with precision, clarity, and consistency.

Identify, interpret, and analyze:

- Identify parts of texts and productions (such as key moments, turning points, striking images, plot structure, climax, character traits and actions, and so on).
- Recognize how choices/parts come together to form a whole.
- Identify artistic choices and speculate about artists’ or characters’ intent.
- Recognize the meanings, subtexts, implications, and effects of artistic choices.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these artistic choices.
- Articulate the ways in which structure and content are mutually supportive.
- Recognize how structural elements like punctuation, phrasing, tone, rhetorical devices, and so on inform the meaning and the physical delivery of written texts.
- Translate/paraphrase difficult texts into your own words.
- Discern the relationship between a text or production and its artistic, historical, social, political, and philosophical contexts.
- As a stage manager, break down a script or production in order to determine its practical requirements (scene breakdown, space breakdown, props lists, cue sheets, and so on), and anticipate questions and challenges.
- As a designer or technician, generate design choices/visual analogs for the language or themes of the play and devise visual formats to convey information.
- As an actor or director, craft “character analysis” or “world of the play analysis” through a combination of textual evidence and imagination.

Create and support a thesis-driven argument:

- Clearly conceptualize and articulate a thesis statement.
- Utilize topic sentences and clearly outlined structure to direct reader.
- Support claims with evidence from the text, production, research.

Develop an awareness of differences between conventions and genres of writing:

- These may include program notes, scholarly articles, stage manager's notes, advertising copy, grants, various playwriting conventions, research papers, and so on.
- Recognize, practice, and polish writing within specific genres, keeping in mind the audience expectations that are associated with each genre.
- Become familiar with and utilize discipline-specific and program-specific vocabularies (for example, general theatre vocabularies, acting, directing, design, technology, stage-management vocabularies, and so on).
- Translate these vocabularies for nonspecialists.
- Translate among visual, verbal, and written formats.

Deepen ideas to reach new levels of complexity:

- Address counter-arguments and incorporate multiple perspectives.
- Differentiate between opinion and argument.
- Examine historical precedents and other artists' and critics' practices and opinions.
- Build density by connecting multiple observations to interpretation.
- Ask questions that move from the concrete and grounded to the increasingly complex and critical.

Develop self-reflexivity:

- Recognize your social location and the limits of your perspective.
- Develop the ability to hold open both subjective and objective perspectives, and to consider perspectives other than your own.
- Discern the purpose and stakes of your artistic and scholarly intervention, asking what is needed and what is original, unique, imaginative, and worthy of discussion.
- Develop an awareness of your own artistic process, of what kind of work is important to you.
- Develop confidence in and ownership of your own voice, and identify tools that can assist you in this process.

Practice revision:

- Practice the stages and processes of revision (that is, brainstorming, structure-mapping, outlining, drafting, talking through your ideas and writing with others, reviewing for structural, argumentative, and language clarity and for effective usage and grammar, and so on).
- Embrace writing as a process of communication and reflection, rather than as a product.
- Develop an awareness of your own writing process, of your strengths and weaknesses, and identify and utilize resources in order to make your writing more effective.
- Cultivate responsiveness to others' input.
- Hone clarity, succinctness, and discernment through the revision process.

Notes

1. The data on which this project is based consist of a series of transcripts of meetings (three with the entire departmental faculty; nine with a self-selected group of tenure/tenure-track faculty (predominantly scholars of theory, history, and criticism in dance and theatre), and of twenty-one focused, one-on-one interviews with a range of tenure/tenure-track, adjunct, and part-time faculty, selected to be representative of their specific areas (design, performance, acting, dance technique, dance composition).
2. Although an original goal had been to use the WEC process to draw the two disciplinary sides of the department (theatre and dance) into closer alignment, because of the disciplinary differences, distinct curricula, and lack of shared faculty between the two units, the department elected to pursue the WEC discussions separately, and to determine from the outcome of discussions where their approaches to curricular change would overlap and where they would diverge.
3. While most WAC/WID proponents subscribe to several of these approaches (see Ochsner and Fowler), in practice, WAC has largely focused on combining curriculum-wide requirements (writing-intensive courses, for example) with voluntary instructional support.

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