Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History (2nd edition)
Written by David R. Russell
Reviewed by Jim Addison

The Reading/Writing Connection: Strategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom
Written by Carol Booth Olson
Reviewed by Harry Noden

A Field Guide to Using Visual Tools
Written by David Hymel
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In his remarkably well-researched and rigorously scholarly Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History, David R. Russell explores, as Elaine P. Maimon notes in her foreword, “the meaning and purpose of liberal education in a democratic society” (x). Creating, as he does, a historical context for the understanding of educational efforts in the teaching of writing, Russell posits two fundamental myths: the myth of transparency (the acceptance by an academic discipline of the idea that writing is acquired naturally or innately and a related failure or reluctance to examine the discipline’s own rhetoric) and the myth of transience (the belief that bad writing is a localized or temporary problem—one that can be remedied by bringing in outside “experts” even by faculty adjuncts). The result of both these myths is to marginalize writing instruction. This instruction is sidelined when professors in these disciplines insist that “good students already know how to write well because they think well.” A corollary of this view is that writing can’t be taught. Further, those in the academic disciplines are likely to hold that it’s somebody else’s responsibility to teach writing and that “this decline in writing abilities will work itself out if we just give it time.” So, what we’re left with is an unenviable situation—but one we English teachers, for example, readily recognize: the reality that writing is all too often marginalized in academe, shifted to the graduate students and “visiting instructors,” where it is taught in contextless first-year composition courses.

By focusing his study through the lens of academic disciplines—not just that of English language and literature, Russell persuasively argues, as Maimon says, “against the myth that distinctions among contexts and academic disciplines do not exist” (x). Through careful scholarship, Russell is able to point out significant ways in which the various disciplines differ—the “case” writing of business school and the lab reports of science classes, for example. These differing expectations of writers by specialists in the various fields further undermine the all-too-common practice of teaching first-year composition in an isolated, contextless manner. As long as writing instruction is shunted off to the margin, taught by virtually enslaved teaching assistants and poorly paid English adjuncts, the academic disciplines themselves can avoid, as Russell notes, “the rhetorical nature of their work and thus the responsibility to articulate or systematically teach their discourse” (30). Thus, by not teaching what Joseph M. Williams and Gerald Graff, among others, have called “disciplinary secrets,” practitioners within disciplines have been able to retain a kind of tacit “gate keeping function,” oftentimes allowing into chemistry or psychology, or finite mathematics or English literature, only those judged, on the evidence of their writing ability, to be worthy. As long as there is no real effort to teach the
“disciplinary secrets”—those unspoken “credentials” required by the various disciplines, there is no challenge to the faculty in them, who see their function, largely, as maintaining the status quo. It is as Russell notes:

In the absence of conscious, discipline-specific writing instruction, students whose writing language backgrounds allowed them to learn the discourse of a discipline without such instruction were more likely to enter successfully the professions associated with it; those students whose backgrounds made conscious, discipline-specific language instruction necessary were much less likely to succeed. And because the function of language in this sorting was thought to be generalized, transparent—a matter of prior instruction aptitude, intelligence, or dedication rather than of conscious, discipline-specific teaching—faculty rarely felt responsible for addressing the issue of language and access to professional roles. (28)

Although narrow in the sense that most of his examples are taken from academically elite institutions—Harvard University, Columbia University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Chicago, St. John’s University—Russell’s historical overview is, nevertheless, quite valuable in helping us understand what he calls “the deep value conflicts between equity and excellence” (30) that have persisted throughout the history of American higher education. Just how political is our function as teachers, as practitioners of certain disciplines? What exactly is our “gate keeping function”? Is this a legitimate use of our expertise and abilities? What about democracy in education, educational equity? Should we teach “disciplinary secrets” to the marginalized by explicitly relaying the rhetoric of our disciplines to the poorly prepared? Or, conversely, is our function to uphold standards of excellence and to maintain the status quo, to preserve, as it were, an academic elite—an endangered species always on the brink of extinction? These are some of the important questions on which Writing in the Academic Disciplines requires us to focus, and, through his careful recounting of the history of the teaching of writing in the disciplines, Russell recreates the passionate ideological debates, the academic “turf” wars, and the negotiated and imposed changes in curricula that underlie the evolution of what has become the writing-across-the-curriculum movement.

Specific chapters, grouped under his three major headings of “The Triumph of Specialization,” “The Search for Community,” and “The Postwar Era,” move us from nineteenth-century approaches to the teaching of writing, through twentieth-century “progressive” and “expressivist” experiments, and, finally, through the postwar years and the development, by 1970, of a clearly articulated “writing across the curriculum” movement. For example, under the heading “The Triumph of Specialization,” Russell frames the history of the teaching of writing from the narrow liberal curriculum of the academic elite to the coming of utilitarian writing and the culture of professionalism. In “The Sense of Community,” he traces the history of cooperative movements, and of reformists within progressive education. Finally, in “The Postwar Era,” Russell details communication theory and practice and the rise of the “writing across the curriculum” movement. He closes his study at the year 2000, looking at recent developments and “curricular models”—writing-intensive courses, freshman seminars, learning communities, paired or linked courses, etc. In between, he examines such particular subjects as “the Great Books” movement, associated with Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and St. John’s University, and writing’s connection to business and technology especially as exemplified by the program at MIT. In a section titled “The Disciplines Enter the Information Age,” he discusses the academic disciplines’ love-hate affair with the essay examination and the disciplines’ problematic and uneasy relationship to those intellectual hurdles and rites of passage known as the thesis and the dissertation (243). Russell reminds us that “the myth of transience had spread to graduate education: others had failed to teach students to write; others must solve the problem” (246).

In his insightful chapter “The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Movement 1970-1990,” Russell traces the development of programs in higher education and in secondary schools, pointing out innovative programs in “writing to learn” and “writing as a way of knowing” content in the various disciplines. Among the programs that he singles out for attention is the Bay Area Writing Project (BAPW), out of Berkeley, the forerunner of the National Writing Project (NWP), which he cites as an example of real—and seemingly lasting—reform throughout the high school and college curriculum. If we can ever get beyond the myth that distinctions between and among disciplines don’t exist, Russell seems to say, and if we can commit ourselves as teachers within the varied disciplines to opening up our own academic fields to scrutiny and to the teaching of our “disciplinary secrets” to our undergraduates and graduate students, we will have gone a long way toward bridging the historical chasm that has persisted between equity and excellence in American education.

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