



THINKING

Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum

GLOBALLY



Andrew E. Robson

T H I N K I N G
G L O B A L L Y

Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum

Andrew E. Robson, Ph.D.

Utica College of Syracuse University

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Robson is currently Associate Professor of English at Utica College of Syracuse University, where he teaches composition, introductory literature, postcolonial literature in English, language and culture, and other courses. He received his B.A. from the University of Nottingham (1968), his P.G.C.E. from the Institute of Education at the University of London (1972), and his Ph.D. from the Australian National University (1984). He also attended Central Michigan University, taking courses for secondary school teaching certification. His career as a teacher and researcher has taken him from England to Western Samoa, Fiji, Solomon Islands, California, North Carolina, New York, Australia, New Zealand, and China. He has visited more than 70 countries.

Professor Robson has written articles on various aspects of composition, literature, TESL, education in developing countries, and history. His most recent work includes "The Use of English in Achebe's *Anhills of the Savannah*" and "The Trial of Consul Pritchard," published in the *Cla Journal* and *The Journal of Pacific History*, respectively. He is currently working on a biography of William Pritchard, who was born in Tahiti in 1829 and who became the first British Consul in Fiji. This project has involved archival research in England, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands. In addition, Robson is the author of an independent study/distance education course entitled *Fundamentals of Teaching ESL*, administered by the University of North Carolina.

PREFACE

The idea for this text emerged from my belief that freshman composition courses offer a unique opportunity to improve the academic preparedness of students while still providing effective instruction in writing. This opportunity arises because Composition, perhaps alone in the college curriculum, has little prescribed content, and even this has traditionally been secondary to the general goal of improving writing skills. “Content” has come to mean, most commonly, the writing process, and many texts combine discussion of this process with a series of readings on topics of general interest. Because writing is an essential part of most college courses, the readings in some texts have been selected to reflect the broad college curriculum, with the intention of giving the selections an added relevance to the students’ work. That this across-the-curriculum approach continues to be popular is manifest in the widespread use of Behrens and Rosen’s *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. There have also, in recent years been a number of texts with more specific thematic content, often emphasizing cultural issues. This increasing interest in the pedagogical potential of the readings seems healthy, and I share it.

Believing that a wide variety of approaches can work, and that the selection and arrangement of readings is significant, I have devised a course that responds to a dual reality faced by many composition teachers: many of our students are not very well prepared for college work and don’t read or write very proficiently, while those who *are* well-prepared usually do not see much point in having to take composition courses. I have taught at selective and non-selective colleges and have found this situation at both types of institution. Faced with this, I decided to construct a content-based composition course that would help the less-prepared students by introducing them to readings and concepts that provide useful background for other courses and that would also be of interest to the stronger students. The result is *Thinking Globally*, which, in its preliminary forms, has been well-received by students of very different academic ability and interests.

Although many composition texts have “across-the-curriculum” in their titles, *Thinking Globally* makes a conceptual leap that gives it a fundamentally different character. This consists in explicitly recognizing what is tacitly assumed in some of the more thematic texts, that composition classes can provide information as well as writing instruction, and that, if well-chosen, this information can greatly enhance the basic educational preparedness of students as well as their writing skills. Of course, this is blasphemy to some in the field, but the

connection is clear: inadequate general knowledge is a major factor in producing inadequate reading proficiency at the college level; this is the basis of what reading experts call *schema theory*. In turn, inadequate reading skills are a major factor in producing inadequate writing proficiency in college assignments; if students cannot read texts effectively, then they certainly can't write informed essays based on those texts. Some writing problems can be addressed by discussing the writing process, sentence structure, and other traditional elements of the composition class, and these find an important place in *Thinking Globally*. However, deficiencies in writing skills may also be exacerbated by general educational deficiencies, and these are also addressed in this course. The best writing is not only elegant and correct; it is also *informed*. There have been many laments in recent years about the lack of knowledge that students bring to college. Professors often find themselves having to teach background information that students should already know. Students are notoriously deficient, for example, in geographical and historical information. *Thinking Globally* responds to this problem by helping students inform themselves as well as practice writing. This gives the course a special relevance and purpose, and it is this that students tend to like about it.

The range of subject matter may initially surprise both students and professors, but the text makes no undue assumptions. The topics are discussed before the readings are presented, and the latter are annotated in a convenient manner, referring to both content and writing features. For professors, the teacher's manual provides further comments, answers, and suggestions, and suggests films that offer an expert view on the subject-at-hand. I reassure my students at the outset by telling them that the purpose of the course is not to make them instant experts in astronomy, anthropology, environmental studies, and so on, but to give them a little background that they may take into courses in these areas or that they can add to their store of general knowledge. It may be worth mentioning also that the enthusiasm of a teacher for topics beyond his or her specialty can be exemplary. It encourages students to explore new directions and take pleasure in so doing.

Thinking Globally consists of nine units, each of which requires the students to address the kind of ideas and information fundamental to success at college and to an understanding of the contemporary world. Of course, it is impossible to cover everything, but the selections do cover a lot of ground. The titles of each unit are mostly self-explanatory: **A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place, A Sense of Modern History, A Sense of the World, A Sense of Number, A Sense of Nature, A Sense of Values, A Sense of Beauty, and A Sense of Humor**. The precise content of each of these units is outlined in the attached table of contents. Each unit provides basic information and terminology that students can take into other classes, and each one is

deliberately global in reference, reflecting the increasingly interdependent world we share. At the same time, model essays (on overhead masters in the instructor's manual) and discussion of writing and language—as well as numerous informal and formal writing assignments—guarantee the distinctive character of a composition course.

In more theoretical terms, several principles are applied. First, as in more traditional composition texts, students are taught about organization, process, transitions, and other aspects of writing. They are also required to read essays that demonstrate many of the qualities discussed. These aspects of the course are presented in a way that is visually appealing and that uses a cyclical approach, pointing out details as they occur and re-occur in the essays rather than presenting a discrete chapter on each. Second, the students do a lot of writing, both informal and formal. *Thinking Globally* asks students to “think on paper” as well as to produce fully developed papers. Third, from reading theory and common sense comes the notion that students read more effectively (and are likely to write more effectively also) when they have at least a little prior knowledge to bring to the material. This *does not require that readers have expertise, only that they have a general familiarity with a topic*. This is something that is often missing when students read college-level materials, and it is something that *Thinking Globally* is designed to address. Finally, the course encourages students to enjoy learning. When the material is clearly relevant to other courses, when it is material that many students recognize they ought to know (but often don't), and when it is presented in an appealing but still challenging manner, students respond well.

I have taught draft versions of *Thinking Globally* to freshman composition and remedial classes, and it has been well-received. Many students have described *Thinking Globally* as stimulating, valuable, and different. I have found that students are often delighted to find that the subject matter provides at least some background for topics discussed in other classes; as schema theory predicts, this prior knowledge equips them to read and write more effectively. The response to this course has consistently been positive; most students—once they get over their surprise—recognize that the content is valuable, and most find almost all the material new and stimulating.

The purpose of this course, therefore, is threefold: to improve freshman students' writing, to strengthen their academic preparedness across-the-curriculum, and to enhance their awareness of the global realities that shape their world. The course attempts to strengthen student performance by linking prior knowledge, reading, and writing at a college level. The content is carefully selected, covering in an introductory way *many topics that students are likely to encounter in other subject areas and that, even if they don't, will add significantly to their knowledge of the world around them*. This focus on *knowing things*

helps students understand references and allusions as they read, gives them subjects to write about beyond their personal experience and opinion, and encourages them to begin enjoying a more intellectual life, including an appreciation of the overlapping nature of academic disciplines. Many of the selections in the text were suggested by faculty colleagues from whom I invited suggestions for essays that they would wish all college freshmen to have read before entering their classes; this approach helped ensure that the selections were truly significant in the judgment of experts in different disciplines.

The course design is flexible and practical. It offers the inexperienced teacher a structure that is detailed and easy to follow, but it also allows plenty of scope for the teacher who wishes to adapt, omit, or add to the materials. Each of the nine units has five parts—three “sections” and two “options.” Sections One, Two, and Three offer reading alternatives for the majority of students; Option One is intended to challenge stronger students; and Option Two provides discussion of a variety of language-related topics that are intended to stimulate interest in, and understanding of, how English works. Many students, even among the better-prepared, have little familiarity with grammar, etymology, and other linguistic topics, and much of the knowledge they do have comes from the study of other languages. For this reason, most students find this Option to be valuable.

Each of the sections has four parts:

1. **Prior knowledge:** An orientation to the topic, providing relevant vocabulary, discussion of issues, and thought-provoking remarks. Short **Think on paper** exercises are suggested. This section provides background that enables students to read the following selection more effectively. It also provides bits of information and general knowledge and **vocabulary webs**. Throughout the text, many opportunities are provided for students to use dictionaries and to notice the common roots of words, thereby helping themselves in both vocabulary and spelling.
2. **Annotated reading:** An article, essay, or extract, with annotations drawing attention to ideas and writing points. As noted earlier, many of these texts have been suggested by professors in different fields, and they all provide, in different ways, a valuable orientation to the kind of thinking characteristic of particular disciplines. The annotations point out noteworthy aspects of the writing, as well as the use of techniques in organization and transition that may readily be applied by the students. The readings vary in length and difficulty, and professors and/or students may choose which individual essays, or groups of essays, to read.

3. **Aspects of writing:** A discussion of a particular aspect of writing, concerning the writing process, organization, or other practical matters. Usually, such material forms a discrete section, or chapter, of composition texts, but here these discussions are part of every section. This approach gives the professor many opportunities to have frequent, but focused, discussions on writing and language. Such discussion of language is on-going throughout *Thinking Globally*, but takes on a more formal character here.
4. **Writing exercises:** A choice of writing exercises based on the reading, class discussion, and other sources, such as films, which may be used to provide additional information; relevant films for each unit are suggested in the instructor's manual. Recognizing that not all classes, or all individual students, are at the same level, this section offers the professor considerable flexibility. Some of the questions require more sophisticated responses than others. An informal written response could be required in some cases and a formal paper in others. Some questions are analytical in nature; others elicit a personal response. They are only suggestions; the professor may prefer others. The formulation of questions as a class exercise is also a good way of stimulating thinking and generating discussion; it is a way of teaching students how to make generalizations about what they have read and discussed—and of checking their ability to do so. Advice on an aspect of writing is also included. This section of Option One in each Unit is called **Writing and research** and offers suggestions on the writing of research papers as well as questions that may be used as research topics.

The final part of each unit is a **Quick Quiz**, which gives students a chance to show what they have learned in terms of general knowledge associated with the thematic and linguistic topics presented. This also gives the instructor an opportunity to review the material in an informal way and assess, orally perhaps, how effectively the students read and remember what is presented in each unit.

Thinking Globally brings a new spirit and purpose to composition teaching. It is serious but good-humored, and it makes the composition course central to the freshman experience by providing a coherent, focused, college-level content that really helps prepare students for what lies ahead.

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