Empowering Student Writing Tutors as WAC Liaisons in Secondary Schools

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Abstract: A pilot program in a public high school positions experienced student writing center tutors to become WAC liaisons who foster writing across the curriculum by raising questions, identifying needs, and providing support to their teachers with the goal of strengthening writing instruction school-wide. This article discusses the background and implementation of the program, offers recommendations for how to prepare and guide student liaisons in their work, and presents initial results based on interviews with participating students and teachers. Drawing upon theory, its practical and replicable suggestions demonstrate how to engage high school students as catalysts for change as they subvert traditional hierarchies and collaborate with their teachers as co-contributors to the teaching and learning process.

Background on WAC in Secondary Schools

While Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has been part of the academic discourse and instructional practice in secondary schools for decades, its growth and implementation faces sustained and new challenges as well as innovative possibilities. Early literature in the field, such as Anne Ruggles Gere's 1985 *Roots in the Sawdust: Writing to Learn Across the Disciplines* and Pamela Farrell-Childers, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Art Young's 1994 *Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary School Curriculum*, called for integrating writing across all content areas while concluding that the success and scope of WAC implementation varies largely depending on context. Today, the same principle still holds true as WAC advocates confront new challenges and constraints that emerge from top-down educational policies that place new demands on teachers and students in secondary schools.

Current demands include budget constraints, diverse student populations, and increased class sizes, but chief among the challenges are the consequences and pressures resulting from the standardized testing movement in K-12 education. Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer (2011), in the latest findings of their four-year National Study of Writing Instruction, reported that standardized tests on the whole have "creat[ed] a powerful momentum away from the teaching of writing" (p. 18). A focus on test preparation and content knowledge in the subject areas has proven to be a disincentive to the teaching and meaningful assessment of student writing across the curriculum. However, many compositionists are hopeful that the new K-12 Common Core State Standards (CSSS) will support a culture of teaching writing across the subjects due to the involvement of organizations such as the

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP). Still, top-down messages and a test-focused learning environment present challenges that deter many secondary school teachers outside of the English department from teaching and assessing writing in the classroom.

Despite these challenges, successful WAC programs exist in secondary schools in various forms and are often initiated by teachers, administrators, literacy specialists, or postsecondary, local, or state partners. A pilot student WAC liaison program at the public high school where I teach positions students themselves—in particular, experienced student tutors in our writing center—to assume the critical role of fostering writing across the curriculum by raising questions, identifying needs, and providing support to their teachers in developing and strengthening writing instruction. These high school students are advocating for writing instruction in profound and transformative ways. Programs that mobilize students to facilitate better writing instruction by collaborating with both their peers and their teachers powerfully contradict the top-down educational climate perpetuated by national standards and high-stakes tests. They subvert a traditional hierarchy and promote student-centered agency and learning.

Institutional Challenges and a Student-Led WAC Initiative

From three years of experience as an undergraduate Writing Fellow working with religion and humanities professors and their students on writing for their courses, I knew firsthand the transformative possibilities of empowering student liaisons to work alongside faculty in teaching and assessing writing across the curriculum. However, several years later, in my role as the founder-director of a writing center at a secondary school, I became aware of the institutional challenges that accompany the implementation and administration of such a program. I began to recognize the discrepancies of writing instruction and teacher expectations across (and within) content areas at my school. Inside our WAC-based writing center, the tutors and I viewed other teachers' assignment sheets and assessment rubrics, overheard peer discussions in tutorial sessions, and recognized the courses and disciplines that were noticeably missing from conversations about writing in the center. Outside the center, I encountered varied responses to the writing initiatives we promoted: some teachers seemed skeptical or threatened by the ways they perceived the writing center exposed their teaching practices; others were open to and grateful for the support our tutors offered their students.

In light of my experiences both in college and at the high school where I still teach and direct the writing center, it became my goal to promote a campus-wide writing environment, which, according to Burnett and Rosen (1999), requires (1) building faculty knowledge and establishing the value of writing, (2) providing a support system for faculty and students, and (3) supplying resources for faculty and students. Drawing from many examples of successful writing center/WAC partnerships at both the secondary and the postsecondary levels (Barnett and Blumner, 1999; Burnett and Rosen, 1999; Mullin, 2001; Mullin and Childers, 1995; Soven, 2001), our writing center became a natural resource for instituting a WAC culture at my school.

To pilot the student WAC liaison program, I established partnerships between student writing tutors and content area teachers to assess students' writing and learning needs and to develop more effective instructional strategies and materials. Reflecting upon the program's initial results, I consider these high school students, in their roles as WAC liaisons, to be significant change agents who promote and institutionalize writing across the curriculum as they address their teachers' fears, vulnerabilities, and misconceptions about teaching writing.[1]

Building the Case for the Student WAC Liaison Program

The student WAC liaison program at my school grew out of both a failure and a success. In 2010, as the founder of the writing center and its director of two years, I wrote proposals and met with administrators and teachers to build the case for WAC training and development for the faculty. My goal was to garner administrative support for content area teachers to work together in a WAC site team and act as liaisons to the other teachers in their departments. Our proposed objectives were (1) to assess and evaluate the amount and quality of writing instruction across the school, (2) to identify needs for further training, and (3) to increase institutional knowledge about similarities and differences around what we expect of student writing in the content areas. However, it soon became evident that, despite some initial interest, the institutional commitment to a formal WAC program was not sufficient. While I had successfully developed relationships with individual teachers in my dual roles as writing center director and English teacher, I confronted what Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified as challenges to building symmetric relational trust in an institution: there were few occasions for me to interact meaningfully with my colleagues, and there often existed deeply rooted differences in beliefs, values, and prior experiences with writing pedagogy that remained unexamined (p. 31). A passing conversation in the copy room or hallway would raise a question or identify a need, but without a more official context in which to discuss differences and collaborate, real change seemed unlikely.

Ultimately, the success that led to building the student WAC liaison program resided in the expertise that the student writing tutors themselves brought to bear. In its pilot phase (2011-2012), the four student WAC liaisons were all seniors who had tutored for two years in the writing center. This three-year training model is unique in that it builds students' understanding of writing instruction through their own research and practice in the writing center, and it also cultivates their credibility with faculty who know them over the years as both students and tutors, building the trust and competence necessary for the collaborative effort to succeed.

Navigating their own multiple roles as students, writers, and tutors, the WAC liaisons develop a positional authority: they combine knowledge of course content with knowledge of writing, and they build relational trust with their teachers. These relationships allow them to foster authentic discussions about writing in the content areas. Their dual expertise poises the *students* to become liaisons to the content area teachers, instead of other teachers who juggle competing instructional demands and time constraints. This paradigm shift emphatically deposes Bryk and Schneider's (2002) assertion that, "While students are significant school actors, changes in the operation and organization of schools are primarily an adult game" (p. 32). Particularly in a public high school where teachers are spread thin between responsibilities and course loads, where there is little institutional support or time for interdisciplinary conversations among colleagues, students can—and do—play the vital role as catalysts for change.

Of course the concept of students driving conversations with faculty about writing instruction and assessment in the content areas is not foreign to many postsecondary institutions, where Writing Fellows programs have existed for years. Margot Soven called these students "emissaries, intermediaries with the special strengths that only peer tutors can bring to the table." Karen Vaught-Anderson said her course-linked tutors at the University of Portland are "gentle subversives who have created more change in the departments than any faculty workshop on clear writing assignments." And Deirdre Paulsen of Brigham Young University labeled them "unintimidating catalysts for discussion about writing at all levels" (quoted in Soven, 2001, p. 202). There is no question that student liaisons have forged lasting transformations not only in their instructors' beliefs and values about writing, but also in their writing instruction across the curriculum. However,

the literature on such programs (Barnett and Blumner, 1999; Hughes and Hall, 2008; Devet, 2011; Soven, 2001) is mostly limited to postsecondary contexts; while programs like these exist in secondary schools (see Grant, Murphy, Stafford and Childers, 1997, for one such example), relatively little has been written so far about their development, implementation, results, and possibilities, particularly in public high school settings.

Developing a Student WAC Liaison Program from within the Writing Center

Many of the features of our student WAC liaison program draw upon what we already knew from similar programs at the postsecondary level, but some of its unique characteristics result from constraints and opportunities unique to a high school setting. Challenges such as locating a teacher supervisor and classroom, identifying student liaisons, and facilitating training made our existing writing center the logical foundation for the WAC program. To be selected as tutors in our writing center, students undergo an application process that includes teacher recommendations, writing samples, and a panel interview. Once selected, they enroll in a credit-bearing elective course called Advanced Composition, which, like many of its postsecondary counterparts, combines writing instruction with tutor training and student reflection on their writing and tutoring practices. After being selected as tutors during their sophomore, junior, or senior years, interested students can re-enroll in Advanced Composition for continued elective credit and participation in the writing center until they graduate.

Year One: Developing Knowledge

During their first year as tutors, students complete an extensive research assignment that requires them to interview content area teachers, collect sample writing assignment sheets and rubrics, and conduct research on writing in a discipline of their choice. This research project not only develops students' own awareness and understanding of writing across the curriculum, but it also creates an opportunity for them to discuss writing with their teachers, thus expanding the WAC conversation outside the walls of the writing center while building institutional trust. As a result of their participation in the students' research process, content area teachers often read drafts of the tutors' research papers, request copies of tutors' presentation materials for use with their own classes, and encourage their students to access the writing center as support for the writing they are already doing for their courses. Both directly and indirectly, student tutors in their first year begin to bridge the gap between teachers and students while generating meaningful WAC discussion school-wide.

Year Two: Building Leadership

In their second year, students continue their work as tutors in the writing center and capitalize on their own experience by mentoring first-year tutors. They propose and carry out leadership projects to further the mission of the writing center within the school community. Ranging from developing workshops for students on SAT essay writing to producing a documentary about the writing center for the school board to planning a writing workshop with teachers at a local middle school, their projects foster institutional good will and trust in the tutors as school leaders. In addition to the responsibility that comes along with taking more challenging academic courses as upperclassmen and serving as tutors in the writing center, the second year tutors build their capacity to plan and carry out a project with adult partners, both valuable skills as they move forward into their role as WAC liaisons in their final year.

Year Three: Collaborating as WAC Liaisons

With two years of training, research, and leadership in the writing center, tutors in their third year are well poised to collaborate with content area teachers as they assume the role of WAC liaisons. In our pilot year, each of the four student liaisons was matched with an academic department (English, math/science, social studies, and electives). The student liaisons knew many of the teachers already, either as students in their courses or through tutoring their students in the writing center, and they had expressed interest in working within their assigned department. Together, the liaisons and I conducted needs assessments on writing in the content areas. Drawing upon their own experience as students in the courses and through formal and informal interviews with other students, tutors, and teachers, the liaisons identified students' learning gaps with respect to writing tasks (e.g., lack of clearly written expectations, lack of student model essays, lack of structure and support through the writing process). After making initial contact with teachers to identify areas of concern and to propose possible projects, the student liaisons selected one teacher to begin with, and they collaboratively designed a WAC project proposal (refer to Appendix A for a collection of sample projects). They implemented the projects with goals to more clearly define teacher expectations in written assignments as well as improve the quality of student writing in the content areas.

The student-based WAC model allows the writing center director's role to shift from implementing WAC through professional development workshops to facilitating and monitoring multiple teacher-student liaison relationships, providing resources to support writing instruction, and collecting information and evaluating the success of the WAC program. In a similar program at the postsecondary level, Haviland, Green, Shields and Harper (1999) explained that empowering students to take on a collaborative role with their teachers "reduced the distance between the goals of WAC programs and the disciplinary practitioners by [students] establishing one-on-one relationships" with faculty members (p. 57). This model expands the scope and reach of WAC by engaging multiple ongoing conversations about writing between teachers and students, therein challenging the traditional roles and limiting definitions of student and teacher.

Building Relational Trust Between Student WAC Liaisons and Faculty

Building relational trust between student WAC liaisons and the faculty members with whom they work proves to be particularly important to creating a school-wide WAC culture. Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, in their 2002 book, *Trust in Schools*, asserted, "organizational change requires major risks for all participants" (p. 33). They identified four components required to build the kind of relational trust that allows for transformational change in schools: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. When student liaisons initially develop relationships with their teachers as students in the content courses, they earn trust by proving their academic competence in the content areas. Combined with the experience and authority they gain over two years as writing center tutors, the students earn their teachers' respect in their dual roles as inside experts on the demands of the course and its content as well as outside experts on writing and communication learned in the writing center.

Secondary school writing center director Cynthia Dean, in the 2011 book, *The Successful High School Writing Center*, noted, "Peer tutoring interrupts the status quo of teacher authority and suggests that high school writing tutors can be agents of change who introduce and advocate for a less conventional definition of what it means to teach" (p. 61). Trusting students to challenge, critique, and revise teaching practices is an unconventional and often unsettling proposition for a high school teacher to accept; therefore, the first step to engaging students as change agents is to earn the faculty's

confidence. Math teacher Mr. Adams explained how WAC liaison Melinda earned his trust when they collaborated on literacy activities for his math class:

> [Melinda] is a student of mine, and I know she's a writing center tutor, so I have a connection there that makes me feel that I can trust her. She [helped me] develop a series of questions that can be used in classroom discussions and writing reflections, and she did a super job there, and that really helped build trust between myself and the writing center and trust with Melinda. (personal communication, November 14, 2011)

As student WAC liaisons build relational trust with their teachers, they can be as or more successful than a faculty member appointed as a WAC coordinator or a writing center director, who is a peer and may be perceived as a threat or an outsider to the discipline discourse and its expectations. Because of the positional authority liaisons develop as students and tutors, teachers like Mr. Adams are receptive to their input and open to collaboration that transforms teaching.

The way student liaisons interact with their teachers does not differ much from how they work with their peers in the writing center. Accustomed to navigating dual roles of teacher and student in a writing center tutorial, liaisons invite faculty members into this same nebulous space between teacher and learner (Haviland, Green, Shields and Harper, 1999) as they work toward a common goal. The student tutors' writing center practice provides the necessary foundation for navigating and challenging these traditional roles. A formalized student WAC liaison program creates the space for "non-hierarchical collaboration" between teachers and students; without this structure, "tutors will not challenge the visible hierarchies and disciplinary faculty are likely to follow established norms: tutors working under faculty members' direction" (Haviland, Green, Shields and Harper, 1999, p. 53). When founded in relational trust, these nontraditional teacher-student interactions have the power to subvert established norms and hierarchical patterns of authority, resulting in transformative change.

Identifying Needs in Content Area Writing Instruction

We have long known that successful writing pedagogy requires clear communication of purpose and expectations between teacher and student. In a 1987 study of secondary school writing instruction, Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee identified successful instruction as that in which students and teachers "had a shared understanding of the specific goals [of the] activity" and interacted collaboratively in the writing process (p. 140-141). Student WAC liaisons take the notion of teacher-student interaction beyond the traditional model of teachers giving and students receiving feedback on written assignments; their work lies within authentic collaboration with teachers to foster clearer and more effective instruction, prompting better student writing. Their interactions thus fulfill both of Langer and Applebee's objectives: they facilitate meaningful teacher-student collaboration, and in doing so, they clarify the purposes for and expectations of writing assignments. In this way, student WAC liaisons not only identify needs or gaps in their teachers' writing instruction, but they also provide the support and resources necessary to develop lasting pedagogical changes.

Melinda, liaison to the math and science departments, recognized the importance of clarity and meaningful feedback in establishing a writing culture in the classroom. She worried that most "students don't regard non-English writing assignments as writing because they probably don't really do as much writing [for these classes] and there's not as much of a focus on actually *how* to write." She explained her perspective on the feedback students receive:

> [My history teacher] will write 'good, good' or 'put more info here' but she won't actually talk about the development of my ideas; she'll just write 'good.' And that goes for other classes too; the teachers will just write 'good' or '20/20' whereas my English teachers will criticize my writing, [which] makes me feel like I'm building upon my skills instead of just focusing on content. (personal communication, November 11, 2011).

As a firsthand observer and recipient of varying styles of writing instruction as a student, Melinda is well positioned to identify and evaluate the relative effectiveness of such methods.

Applebee and Langer's most recent report on a four-year National Study on Writing Instruction (2011), acknowledged that teachers across content areas "reflect a much more sophisticated understanding of writing instruction" than they did 30 years ago; that on the whole, they "attempt to clarify the task and to provide strategies and collaborative activities" for students to complete writing tasks successfully (p. 21). However, the report also acknowledged that understanding effective writing instruction does not always translate into effective practice due to competing priorities of test preparation and time constraints.

This is where student WAC liaisons can take the burden off of teachers while still supporting effective writing practice. Liaisons at my school have helped teachers in social studies, science, mathematics, and elective courses by developing and implementing some of the varied approaches Applebee and Langer (2011) identify as effective for writing instruction, approaches which the study shows content area teachers are much less likely than English teachers to implement. Some of these strategies include: providing models of effective responses, providing rubrics that highlight the characteristics of good responses, and organizing a "workshop" environment in which students receive individual attention as they engage in learning the content, allowing for cycles of investigation, writing, and revision (Applebee and Langer, 2011, p. 20). Student WAC liaisons, with guidance from their content area teachers, have enhanced writing instruction by collecting and evaluating student models of effective writing, creating mini-lessons or writing workshop materials for classroom use, and revising assignment sheets or grading rubrics to articulate the characteristics of a good response.

Paige, a liaison to the social studies department, drew upon her own experience as a student in a history class the prior year to help her former teachers understand the need to clearly communicate their expectations when assigning a writing task. She reflected:

> A lot of [our collaborative work] was looking back at what I did wrong [when I was in the class] and how I fixed it and how I'm applying it to what I'm writing in History this year. So I've been referencing my own [research paper] from last year with the errors they marked on it and I've been working with the teachers to identify what problems they see because they really only see, you know, the negatives – the errors that we're making – rather than figuring out how to present it, so talking to them about my past experience with it opens up what areas we see for improvement. (personal communication, November 14, 2011)

By assessing her own errors, Paige helped her teachers understand the expectations they had but did not clearly communicate as students were working on the assignment. Having identified the communication breakdown, Paige collaborated with the teachers to develop instructional activities that clarify these expectations before and during the writing process, rather than only in written comments on the students' papers once they have been submitted. Her response to improve writing instruction was to conduct workshops for students in the library as they worked through the initial stages of research and writing. In doing so, Paige provided support for her peers as they strived to

meet their teachers' expectations of selecting effective research questions and developing them through research. Through the discussion with her teachers, Paige began to understand and articulate the teachers' frustrations and, in doing so, reframe their conceptions of how, when, and by whom writing instruction should be done. While there is still a ways to go to implement effective writing pedagogy in these classes, Paige's work as a liaison revealed the need for some changes and shed light on the student's experience as a writer in social studies.

Because the student WAC liaisons often have firsthand experience writing for the teacher and the course, teachers are usually willing to listen and adapt to the changes the liaisons suggest. It is counter-intuitive to think that a teacher would be more responsive to a high school student than to a colleague, especially considering what Joan Mullin (2001) said about the resistance many WAC coordinators and writing center directors face even at the postsecondary level: "If a director of WAC or of a writing center learns one thing, it is this: faculty members do not want to be told how to teach their classes, how to write assignments, or how to evaluate assignments" (p. 186). Yet Burnett and Rosen (1999) reminded us, "The success of a campus-wide writing program depends to a large extent on the support system for faculty to draw on as they begin to use writing in their teaching or look for ways to improve what they have already been doing" (p. 6). While traditional support systems consist of teacher-led workshops, one-on-one consultation with other teachers, or distribution of materials, students prove to be useful resources to their teachers as they evaluate and improve their writing pedagogy.

Initial responses to our WAC liaison program indicate that, more often than not, teachers value the experiences of their students, adapting the curriculum to their informed suggestions, which is why liaisons play a key role in making the case for and supporting effective writing instruction school-wide. At our school, even the JROTC teacher worked with a student WAC liaison, Nate, to redesign an annual essay assignment that cadets submit to an essay competition. This teacher cited Nate's preparation and professionalism as two qualities that contributed to the "excellent job [he did] re-writing my assignment, making it more clear and easier to follow. He also created an excellent rubric for the paper that resulted in higher success rates for the cadets" (personal communication, March 9, 2012). Through WAC partnerships, teachers can elicit support for their teaching that ultimately yields better results in their students' writing.

Building Competence Among Student WAC Liaisons

Beyond fostering trusting relationships, it is imperative that student liaisons demonstrate their competence in both course content as well as writing theory and practice. Tutors build competence in a variety of ways including tutor training and research in the writing center, writing instruction by content area teachers, and tutorial experience in the writing center.

Tutor Training and Research

Tutors in our writing center are introduced to WAC theory and practice in their first year through the research paper on content area writing. This assignment introduces them to the various academic discourse communities that undergird their eventual work as WAC liaisons. Their research adds to the experiential knowledge they have gained as students in the content courses themselves. Guided to select topics that both inform their own understanding about writing and contribute to the institutional knowledge about writing at our school, students' research topics range from incorporating case studies in psychology research to writing reflections of musical performances to mastering a timed essay in social studies. In addition to presenting their research to the other writing tutors, students publish their work in an annual volume of student research about writing, *A Student*

Guide to Writing in the Disciplines, which we distribute to the school library and to each department as a resource.

Writing Instruction by Content Area Teachers

While writing center directors often conduct tutor training, one way to promote a school-wide writing environment and build upon existing institutional knowledge about writing is to invite teachers into the writing center to collaborate with tutors to jointly learn about writing in the content areas. This practice addresses teachers' misunderstandings or misgivings about the writing center, and it fosters collaborative relationships and eventual WAC partnerships in the school. One of the most effective trainings our writing center hosted for the tutoring staff grew out of a colleague's request for help in teaching her students to write a literature review in a physics course. In her words:

> A few years ago, I was feeling very frustrated with one product that my students write very poorly. And I think part of that is because I don't teach writing. I approached you to see if the writing center could help me. I went in and I talked to the writing center tutors about how to write a literature review. And they were very responsive and I think some of their questions helped me better define how to tell other students how to write a literature review. (personal communication, November 15, 2011)

This teacher and the writing center tutors collaboratively evaluated sample models of student literature reviews with the goal of articulating the features of good writing in the discipline. Both teacher and tutors emerged with a clearer understanding of and ability to articulate the expectations for the assignment. Melinda, a first-year tutor at the time and the eventual WAC liaison to the science department, recalls how this lesson clarified for her the writing demands of this science assignment:

> As a student in that physics class, I'd looked at the assignment sheet the day before and had been thoroughly confused. So when the teacher came into the writing center and started talking to us [tutors], I found myself having a light bulb moment, thinking, "Oh, is that what she wants? Oh, I understand my teacher now." It was really enlightening. I understood the assignment in a new way because she had to verbalize what she wanted; she had to think about it. Just talking through it, I was able to understand, as opposed to her written assignment sheet, which was convoluted. She explicitly stated what she wanted. (personal communication, November 11, 2011)

It has been two years since the physics teacher came into the writing center for this lesson, but the relationship forged a lasting foundation for a collaborative relationship with Melinda. Together, they met multiple times a week during a study hall period for an entire semester to work on the WAC projects they jointly proposed, which include revising and rewriting student unit study guides and developing short videos to help students "think like a scientist" while taking tests. Future physics projects include revising assignment sheets and assessment criteria for the aforementioned literature review. Inviting content area teachers themselves to train the student tutors develops trust, creates co-ownership, and forges effective relationships with future WAC liaisons.

Tutorial Practice

In their daily work as tutors in the writing center, students gain knowledge about writing processes and practices that are transferable and valuable to their teachers. Soven (2001) notes the ways in which writing center tutors gain expertise from their tutoring practice: they help students

understand not only general principles of good writing but also "the rhetorical and stylistic features of writing in different disciplines" (pg. 201). Tutors practice navigating discipline-specific rhetoric and writing demands. They understand different students' learning needs and their challenges interpreting their teachers' expectations for writing assignments in various courses. Keidaisch and Dinitz (2001) reported that in a similar program, "tutors were accepted as 'authorities' by their sponsoring instructors, especially on matters related to understanding the problems students faced while writing" (quoted in Soven, p. 208). Their unique exposure to so many of their own peers' writing processes and challenges becomes invaluable to their collaboration with teachers on how to best address and teach writing. They are both within and without as they represent both students and teachers in the collaborative process. Liaisons precariously straddle traditional conceptions of authority in the teaching and learning processes; in doing so, they build knowledge among teachers and students, promote effective writing instruction, and further the WAC discussion school-wide.

Evaluating the Impact of Student-Teacher WAC Partnerships

While the preliminary results of the first year of this initiative are promising, I acknowledge that it is still in its pilot phase, and therefore, we are only at the very beginning of evaluating its potential impact in such areas as: effective writing instruction across the content areas, student learning and writing performance, and teacher/student conceptions of identity and authority in their roles as liaisons. There are many possibilities for future evaluation of this program as it expands and as we measure its effectiveness in meeting its intended goals over time. However, I will report some initial anecdotal results with the intent to continue studying the program's short and long-term impact.

One physics teacher reported that her interactions with student liaison Melinda allowed her to explore and challenge her teaching in new ways, that these interactions have especially "changed the way [she sees] writing in a natural evolution" in the classroom. One change she identified is in her own writing. Revising and tailoring instructional materials (e.g., assignment sheets, assessment criteria, unit study guides) has become one of her aims: "I'm telling Melinda what I want to say to my students and she's putting it into her words and so they'll hear her saying it and I think they'll listen more. I think it's very important to hear the student perspective. As much as we [teachers] try to relate to our students, we're not students ourselves." Melinda's prompting pushed her to "get something done that [she] had a mind to get done for a long time, and never succeeded at. And it's that someone is showing up that's going to ask you questions about something, and are you ready for it?" (personal communication, November 14, 2011). Over four months of ongoing collaboration, the teacher and Melinda revised ten units of student guides. This year, the entire physics team is using these revised "student-friendly" guides as the basis of their curriculum. Thus, the work of this teacher-student partnership has the potential to have a lasting and far-reaching effect on student learning.

But while the teacher clearly sees the gains of working with Melinda to assess and improve WAC in her physics classroom, she also acknowledges resistance that other teachers might put up to investing the time it takes: "It is a demand on my time. It is pushing me. So it requires a certain amount of preparedness that, in our hectic jobs, I can understand completely why teachers would feel like they don't have the time to invest in this project. But I'm investing the time and I'm hoping that I'll get back a good reward in the end" (personal communication, November 14, 2011). This reward may come in the form of better student understanding of the content and/or more effective writing in the physics classroom on tests, exit slips, labs, and/or literature reviews. But apart from that, Melinda's impact on at least this teacher's conception about writing and writing instruction is promising and worthwhile.

Another liaison, Paige, demonstrated how student liaisons gain traction in confronting teacher resistance and laying the groundwork for further collaborative work with their teachers. Within the social studies department, she worked to chip away at communication barriers, which will hopefully result in more clearly defined expectations for students and better written products. Still, she acknowledged initial resistance from teachers when she first approached them to propose a WAC project to support student research writing. After two months of collaboration that resulted in a series of research workshops in the library, she saw modestly positive results:

> [Our WAC initiative with the history teachers is] improving. Their interest is growing, I think, but the history department is sort of tight knit and their curriculum is pretty standard so having a new alien person come in and bring up new ideas that they hadn't thought of before I think can be threatening to them. But we've worked on how to approach that, and we have collaborated with the library on their [research] workshops. I sort of present my ideas as us asking [the teachers] for help rather than making it look like they need our help; it really helps us to get some leverage and help the students with what's not covered in the class. (personal communication, November 14, 2011)

Paige's reflection on the process evidences many positive learning outcomes. As a liaison, she has learned valuable negotiation and communication skills, her teachers began to open to her suggestions inasmuch as she demonstrated competence and earned their trust, and future students in their courses may benefit from her workshops and from their teachers' adaptation of instructional practices by better understanding students' learning needs.

While it is too early to make conclusive claims about the effect of the student WAC liaison program on school culture, we are beginning to see and hope to continue to see parallel results to those of similar initiatives at the postsecondary level: Joan Mullin (2001) reported that conversations between teachers and student tutors "are rich teachable moments for both sides," where tutors "learn more about the discipline and that individual faculty member's style of teaching and assumptions about learning, while faculty members learn more about the writing center, disciplinary writing, and their own discipline's way of communicating (something many of them have not considered before)." These initiatives "help draw together student and faculty constructions of each other and of education" (pg. 188). Through these shared identity re-constructions that WAC collaboration facilitates, teachers and students begin to break down institutional barriers and engage in transformative work to develop, support, and promote effective writing instruction at all levels and across all content areas.

Looking Forward

Along with acknowledging challenges and celebrating early successes of this initiative, I also recognize that empowering students in their roles as WAC liaisons is only one component of a fully-integrated WAC program in the secondary schools. An observation by Farrell-Childers, Gere and Young (1994) still holds: while a WAC program can begin anywhere, the most successful ones "have attained support at all levels of the system, support that encourages and rewards innovative practices associated with WAC" (p. 5). Student WAC liaisons are well suited to initiate conversations with teachers, provide valued student perspectives, and even revise instructional materials. In doing so, they profoundly advocate for better writing instruction.

Ultimately, Melinda's reflection embodies the program's promise: "Most of the teachers have writing in their courses, so obviously they know it's important or they use it to get to some end. But being able to approach them and say, 'Hey, you know, I felt like I learned a lot out of this but I could have

learned more' is really empowering and I think it helps everyone understand each other better" (personal communication, November 11, 2011).

As students act as grassroots change agents for WAC, they become transformative leaders in a school context that traditionally relegates them to recipients of knowledge, not co-creators of it. These students identify the need for more writing opportunities and better writing instruction in all courses. They use their expertise as students and tutors to develop and revise materials for clearer communication and better student understanding of writing. They foster relationships with teachers where both contribute to the learning and teaching processes. And together, they celebrate their own successes, as well as those of their teachers and peers.

Appendix A - Sample WAC Projects Implemented by Student Liaisons and Teachers

1. Research Writing in the Disciplines.
   - Interview content area teachers to draw upon (and reinforce) their discipline expertise
   - Identify, read, and apply WAC theory and practice from useful web and print resources
   - Distribute research papers and presentation materials to teachers, tutors, and students
2. Map Writing Across the Curriculum.
   - Compile and sort a list of writing in the school
   - Share list with teachers and administrators to validate, support, and encourage writing
   - Evaluate overlaps for knowledge transfer between disciplines
3. Evaluate Sample Student Writing.
   - Collaborate with teacher to identify strong and weak student writing samples
   - Evaluate samples with teacher to clearly define and articulate teachers' expectations for quality writing
4. Develop/Modify Writing Assignment Sheets.
   - Address incongruities between teacher assumptions and expectations, assignment guidelines and rubrics
   - Revise assignment sheets for clarity and accessibility
5. Develop/Modify Writing Rubrics.
   - Compare rubrics across disciplines to identify and streamline language and promote knowledge transfer
   - Revise rubrics for clarity and accessibility
   - Where clear grading criteria do not exist, develop a rubric for instructional use
6. Create and Present In-Class Writing Mini Lessons.
   - Identify writing concepts or strategies to support student writing in the discipline or for a particular writing intensive assignment for the course
   - Consult with teacher to prepare and present a mini-lesson to the students
7. Conduct Enrichment/Remediation Writing Workshops.
   - Identify common concerns or weaknesses in student writing to prepare a workshop for students to work on these issues (hosted in the writing center or in the classroom)
8. Develop Supplemental Course Materials
   - Prepare materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, handouts, or worksheets on writing-related issues or concerns, "how to" videos) for teachers to use during instruction
9. "Tutor" a Teacher's Instructional Materials.

     o Read and discuss teacher's instructional materials to clarify purpose and clarity
  10. Find and Promote Authentic Writing Opportunities.
     o Encourage teachers and students to participate in scholarships, contests and publications

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Notes

[1] The names of the teachers and students have been changed.

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