Illuminating Possibilities: Secondary Writing Across the Curriculum as a Resource for Navigating Common Core State Standards

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Abstract: Widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the United States has resulted in an unprecedented set of national secondary school writing standards that shift responsibility for writing instruction across content areas. As secondary school teachers grapple with these new demands, this article proposes that WAC can serve as a key resource in helping content area teachers implement and adjust CCSS-driven writing instruction. If secondary WAC advocates are to be successful in responding, however, they must first address the roadblocks that present challenges for secondary school content area teachers. By drawing on WAC's long history as well as those existing but limited examples of secondary school-wide WAC initiatives that offer concrete illustrations of what is possible, secondary WAC advocates can seize the opportunity of this unique historic moment to help teachers and students by offering models for future secondary school WAC growth and understanding.

Faculty members at Chelsea High School in Michigan recently embarked on a professional journey to re-envision writing instruction in their content area classrooms. Led by teacher-leaders Heather Conklin and Dawn Putnam, Chelsea teachers are building on a six-year history of district-wide professional learning about secondary reading instruction. Chelsea's specific action plan for writing across the curriculum (WAC) is continuing to develop over time in response to teachers' growing knowledge of disciplinary reading through Reading Apprenticeship training, which prompts associated questions about how to support students' writing across disciplines. Efforts to contemplate answers to these questions are leading faculty to "expand their reading discussions to include" the "things [students] need to know in order to make choices as writers" (Conklin & Putnam, personal communication, October 7, 2011). As facilitators of this collaborative process and an extension of earlier reading efforts, Dawn and Heather describe their inquiry with colleagues as a process of bridging the gap between assigning writing and modeling for students *how* writers make decisions and use strategies in support of content area learning and communication.

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A Unique Moment to Act

Chelsea's WAC efforts are timely given the prominence of national conversations about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). States' widespread adoption of and ongoing national conversations about CCSS implementation and forthcoming CCSS assessments challenge a new wave of secondary teachers and leaders with the expectation that "instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school" (Common Core, 2010, p. 4).[1] This division of responsibility is described in Common Core literacy standards for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, which are embedded within the English language arts (ELA) standards. The decision to place the literacy standards within the ELA standards, according to Common Core authors, "reflects the time-honored place of ELA teachers in developing students' literacy skills while at the same time recognizing that teachers in other areas must have a role in this development as well" (p. 4). Common Core reading standards are consistent with secondary reading research recommendations that focus on the unique demands of disciplinary reading tasks and practices (Appleman, 2010; Moje, 2008; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012). But the CCSS also require that secondary students "write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single setting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences" (Common Core, 2010, p. 41).

Never before has secondary WAC been mandated with such wholesale scope and fervor across the United States. Whereas previous crises conversations had resulted in recommendations that allowed individual states and school districts to decide whether or not they chose to adopt these suggestions (e.g. Bazerman et al., 2005; Russell, 2009; Sheils, 1975), those states that have adopted the CCSS leave no option for school districts' voluntary adoption. Like no other historic moment, the CCSS has required a new level of buy-in and new possibility for secondary WAC.

Identifying Roadblocks

As teachers continue to navigate the new CCSS writing demands, WAC seems an obvious resource. Yet WAC remains an untapped resource in CCSS conversations, which raises questions about why. While the reasons for this oversight are plentiful, three interconnected roadblocks echo over and over again in my conversations about the CCSS with teachers across the country. First, secondary content area teachers perceive the CCSS writing standards and writing instruction as an addendum to their existing content standards and instructional goals. Despite the CCSS intention that writing be seen as an integral part of how students demonstrate content area understanding, for many teachers the CCSS demands feel like an extra set of requirements that take them away from the heart of their work as content area teachers. These perceptions might arise from a second associated dilemma. Secondary content area teachers do not view themselves as writing teachers and, therefore, do not feel qualified to meet CCSS demands to teach writing in their content area courses. Unless they choose to pursue discipline-specific Masters degrees, many traditionally trained and certified teachers experience few opportunities to work as members of their disciplines. This third roadblock complicates teachers' understanding of writing as integral to their content area instruction. Most secondary chemistry teachers, for example, are not afforded opportunities to work as or even with chemists who write and read in their field on a daily basis. As a result of these limited opportunities, many secondary teachers see themselves as content specialists whose job is largely about helping students acquire and demonstrate content knowledge rather than as disciplinary experts whose job is to invite students to try on disciplinary ways of gathering content knowledge by joining and contributing to ongoing conversations. It follows then, that if teachers do not perceive themselves as disciplinary experts who write to contribute and communicate with others, then these CCSS writing

mandates feel like top-down impositions that detract from content goals. Such perceptions promote the search for quick fixes that resolve CCSS writing demands and dilemmas. In contrast, WAC holds the potential to help teachers see an alternate possibility for the role of writing in their classroom instruction. The CCSS roadblocks teachers describe also highlight the spaces where secondary WAC advocates need to further direct their attention if they are to propose WAC as an essential resource for helping teachers navigate the CCSS writing expectations and assessments.

Seizing Opportunity

Without an alternative possibility and with limited time to apply the CCSS before assessments are fully implemented, the quest for "CCSS compatible" pre-packaged activities and curricula in response to teachers' uncertainties and questions about enacting CCSS demands in content area instruction continues. The challenge for WAC advocates at this unique moment is to illustrate how WAC can help secondary teachers respond to the CCSS writing dilemmas and roadblocks in ways that are more supportive of long-term sustainability than quick fixes and programs. WAC does not offer a pre-packaged program or solution with step-by-step instructions for how to implement writing within content area classrooms; but what WAC can offer is a rationale for why writing is a unique process that supports disciplinary thinking. This rationale and set of associated practices can help teachers address the dilemmas posed by Common Core writing standards. The fact that WAC is not a pre-packaged program is both a challenge for secondary WAC advocates who care about helping teachers respond with meaningful writing pedagogy *and* one of WAC's greatest assets as a resource in CCSS conversations. With this conceptual framework for understanding how to reframe CCSS dilemmas as rich potential sources for deepening disciplinary learning through writing, a handful of exemplary secondary schools and districts, like Chelsea, provide illustrations of how visionary WAC leaders continue to develop locally responsive and contextually specific classroom and whole-school literacy learning initiatives across content areas (e.g. Childers, 2007; Farrell-Childers, Gere, & Young, 1994; Gere, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Mullin & Childers, 1995; Pasquarelli, 2006). They offer CCSS responsive possibilities and a rationale for why writing matters as an integral part of content area instruction and learning. Considering these possibilities illuminates the benefits of connecting secondary WAC with CCSS conversations as a resource for teachers and students alike.

Writing in Support of Content Learning

The WAC movement has since its beginning been defined by its focus on writing pedagogy in direct relationship with content learning (McLeod & Miraglia, 2001). WAC builds on the premise that disciplines are constantly evolving, shifting, and emerging discourse communities, and writing can invite students to participate by contributing knowledge to each discipline (Miller, 1984; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). From this vantage point, rather than serving as a purveyor of content knowledge, WAC suggests the role of a secondary school content area teacher as one of master modeler. That is, if the goal is to help students both acquire knowledge and construct or build knowledge of a discipline, then the content area teacher's relationship to his or her students is one of master to apprentice; and the best way for the teacher to apprentice the student in that discipline is for the teacher to provide students with opportunities to participate in the discipline through writing (Carter, 2007; Russell, 2001). Thus, WAC suggests the possibility for reconceptualizing CCSS-driven writing instruction in secondary classrooms not as addendum but rather as central to content area learning—a necessary support in meaning making and understanding.

Beyond consideration of each individual content area course, WAC also offers secondary school teachers an invitation to help students consider the similarities and differences between writing

purposes, genres, and audiences within and across disciplines and courses. The CCSS expect that students will "write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes" (Common Core, 2010, p. 65). These varied contexts, genres, and purposes may not pose new challenges at first glance. But, as post-secondary WAC discussions reveal, students often struggle to clarify how writing looks similar across disciplines while negotiating disciplinary distinctions and expectations. The CCSS also require that as middle school students, for example, draft, revise, and publish these "informative/explanatory texts" in different content area classrooms, they utilize "appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts" (Common Core, 2010, p. 65). The specificity of CCSS writing expectations across disciplines, including the consideration of transitions, pose new challenges for non-ELA secondary teachers who question their role as writing teachers. Therefore, WAC's ability to support cross-disciplinary conversations about, for instance, how transitions may be defined and used differently for discipline specific writing purposes offers secondary teachers a valuable resource for supporting new CCSS-driven expectations. Such conversations can offer secondary teachers WAC-inspired pedagogies that illuminate *how* they can go about helping students enact CCSS expectations. Young (2006), for example, proposes an instructional middle ground where students draw on prior experience and learning about writing while learning the academic discourse of a particular discipline with the support of an experienced teacher in that discipline. He suggests this developmental approach to instruction and to curricula design benefits students' cognitive and social growth. Moreover, such an approach recognizes the fact that students are simultaneously exposed to and expected to negotiate multiple academic discourses in various classes and that instructors have a responsibility to help students both transfer learning and negotiate difference (Bergman & Zepernick, 2007).

Context-Content Dependent Writing Instruction

Contrary to popular misconception, the CCSS do not dictate the secondary curriculum or teachers' pedagogy. The CCSS spell out grade-level writing expectations identifying what students should be able to do by the time they progress to a new grade, but they say little about how teachers should work with students to help them achieve such proficiency. Instead, the CCSS leave the door open for multiple interpretations of the pedagogical approaches that help students enact the writing outlined in the document (Common Core, 2010, p. 4).

This open door leaves room for WAC advocates to offer further guidance and support. Many WAC scholars have long argued that writing and writing development are "context-dependent" (McCarthy, 1987). If context includes "a social condition as well as a physical space" where knowledge constructs and is constructed by both social interactions and the physical spaces where those interactions occur, then together social interactions and physical spaces comprise a context that shapes writing and learning (Rex & Schiller, 2009, p. 16). Some WAC proponents argue that writing and curricula are inextricably linked. In his considerations of why WAC is named writing across *the* curriculum, Thaiss explains: "If we see 'the curriculum' as embodied in its documents and its processes of communication. . ., then changes in 'writing' and 'curriculum' must go together" (2001, p. 314). WAC, therefore, can provide secondary teachers a language and understanding to advocate for writing curricula and instruction that is responsive to the unique context-specific challenges they negotiate as they implement the CCSS as well as the unique context-specific demands of their disciplines (Farrell-Childers, et al., 1994; Gere, Dickinson, Orzulak, & Moody, 2010).

Focus on Learners' Needs

Embedded in this argument for locally responsive writing pedagogy is the key connection between WAC's commitments and those of secondary school teachers: the belief that instruction and student needs are inextricably linked. This shared interest in building instruction that emerges in response to learners' needs provides common ground from which secondary WAC advocates can build. These connections may begin to help secondary teachers navigate CCSS expectations that students will be career and college ready when they are able to enact Core writing standards with independence across and within content areas.

WAC's focus on instruction provides a compelling argument for keeping learners at the heart of all pedagogical decision-making. Linked to its roots in Dewey's progressive education, WAC's efforts to foreground learners in curricular decisions open another space for WAC advocates to respond to CCSS demands. Russell (2009) argues that WAC's effort to balance the "claims of both equity and disciplinary standards, social unity and social specialization" will make "possible . . . the vision of Dewey: . . . that new institutional structures would be created, new pedagogical traditions evolved, continually to balance the experience of the learner with the demands of the disciplines through discourse—of students, teachers, disciplines, and the wider culture" (p. 166).

In a time of CCSS, it may be easy for secondary school teachers to stray from their commitment to student learning as the centerpiece of instruction through no fault of their own. The public discourse linking secondary teachers' instruction to students' performance on standardized assessments can easily leave teachers questioning their expertise and capabilities, especially around content area writing instruction, which they may not feel prepared to teach. WAC's ongoing focus on "student-centered engagement with disciplinary materials and thought" (Bazerman, et al., 2005, p. 37) suggests possibilities for supporting teachers' instruction and, therefore, students' learning and ability to demonstrate proficiency in meeting the CCSS.

Imagining Possibilities

The potential for connecting secondary school teachers who are negotiating CCSS writing demands with WAC's commitments is promising. By seizing the CCSS moment, secondary WAC advocates can capitalize on and contribute longstanding WAC knowledge in response to the CCSS paradoxical challenge by identifying possibilities for accessing CCSS demands, by responding immediately to teachers' CCSS concerns, and by continuing to help secondary teachers understand their roles as disciplinary leaders who use writing and literacy instruction to support students' disciplinary learning and growth.

Yet, acting on these promising possibilities will take renewed diligence. The unique needs of secondary school learners and teachers—and for that matter of the CCSS as a nationwide effort—requires a new commitment to supporting and illustrating what secondary WAC has to offer. In WAC conference talks, books, and other resources, teachers and leaders describe their experiences with writing in diverse content area classrooms, including the challenges and benefits of adopting a new position in relation to their content area instruction. Rather than considering writing as repetition of content area facts, these teachers have contemplated the value of writing-to-learn where writing supports not only students' ability to recount content area facts but also to reflect on content area learning, to track personal goals and progress, to construct new knowledge or understanding, and to enter the conversations that represent inquiry processes unique to each discipline. These teachers' efforts began long before CCSS adoption, but they nonetheless offer illustrative examples of how

teachers across disciplines can meet CCSS expectations through instruction that supports students' WAC learning.

Still, widespread examples of secondary WAC responsive to new CCSS calls are limited because less attention is given to secondary WAC than reading and elementary or post-secondary writing (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Juzwik et al., 2006) and there are fewer models of whole-school writing efforts to draw on as a result (Gere, et al., 2010). But if secondary WAC advocates are to help teachers navigate CCSS demands and understand the value of infusing writing into their content area instruction, then we will need more examples like Chelsea where secondary teacher leaders are charting a path toward what is possible. We can learn from teachers who are engaged in whole-school WAC initiatives whose key elements are making an early difference in successful implementation of CCSS-driven writing instruction.

Shared Inquiry

As teachers struggle with how to meet CCSS expectations, WAC advocates can invite them to the table by considering their pressing questions. At the post-secondary level WAC has "staked out another, higher ground for discussions of writing, one that linked writing not only to learning and student development but also to the intellectual interests of specialists" through collaborative pedagogical inquiry (Russell, 2009, p. 164). Interdisciplinary workshops where faculty work together to study WAC, including its orientations toward instruction and student learning, have from WAC's beginning engaged faculty in purposeful "intellectual interests" (Walvoord, 1996). These workshops, built on Britton et al's (1975) early stance that all faculty have responsibility to support students' writing-to-learn, enable faculty from different disciplines to interact with one another and recognize the myriad ways that writing promotes thinking across disciplines. The conversations that spring from these workshop discussions invite faculty to "rethink fundamental assumptions" about writing (Russell, 2006, p. 9).

Secondary school educators trained as content-area experts could benefit from WAC conversations as they support professional learning interests made significant through the CCSS. Using an inquiry approach grounded in WAC's tradition to answer CCSS-prompted questions, WAC advocates may determine potentially powerful and mutually beneficial goals and objectives. Pedagogical inquiry, much akin to the long tradition of teacher-research, begins with the premise that teachers are deeply connected to local, context-specific knowledge about the students they work with that can help them develop responsive curricula, and they are knowledgeable producers of meaning capable of learning with and because of others. Secondary teachers' uncertainty about CCSS expectations suggests their apprehension about the role of writing in relation to their content instruction. This very need highlights the import of connecting and adapting post-secondary WAC workshop frameworks in concert with secondary and post-secondary faculty to establish WAC models that support both students and teachers' on-going learning about writing.

At Chelsea High School, for example, teachers share concerns about whether they are qualified to teach writing, but together they have begun to explore how writing instruction can benefit their objectives and goals as content area teachers (Conklin & Putnam, personal communication, October 7, 2011). In a series of three day-long trainings with district colleagues and other teachers across their county and in monthly district support meetings, teacher leaders Dawn and Heather invite colleagues to build on the strength of their existing knowledge and interest in writing and reading as mutually supportive processes. In particular, they talk eagerly about how the writing emphasis has enabled teachers to set goals, brainstorm routines, and identify writing as an instructional opportunity to achieve and assess relevant content-driven goals. As classroom teachers themselves,

Dawn and Heather are committed to pedagogical inquiry that embraces the unknown, that begins with questions "building on what's already" there, and that enhances colleagues' "knowledge and interests" in service of their content instruction. Because they are facilitators, but also equally invested in the process as participants, Dawn and Heather understand WAC theory in their collaborations with colleagues, facilitating conversations and practices that open opportunities to engage in the process of writing. Dawn explains, "The power of all of this is that people are experiencing what [strong writing instruction] looks like and so they can take it back to their classrooms." Taking on the role of learner and writer is key to teachers' stance toward WAC inquiry.

During monthly voluntary district meetings, Heather and Dawn facilitate Lesson Share, a Critical Friends protocol for sharing cross-disciplinary instructional practice that they adapt to meet their local needs. So, for example, even when a science teacher brings a writing lesson idea specific to biology, all teachers at the table benefit because they focus on "the thought process" that led to particular instructional choices and outcomes. The resulting shared language for discussing practice and professional collaboration has become an unexpected but generative byproduct of on-going efforts (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006).

A shared language further enables teachers to go deeper in their exploration of CCSS-specific writing demands. In 11th and 12th grades, for instance, the CCSS expect that student writers will be able to "develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each" (Common Core, 2010, p. 64). Cross-disciplinary conversations hold the potential to help secondary teachers define what "counts" as relevant data and evidence in order to help students enact this specific standard. During one conversation at another high school not far from Chelsea, science and English teachers discover that their students' difficulty enacting this particular Common Core standard is directly connected to the fact that they themselves have to this point never discussed and therefore realized that they define evidence differently. One English teacher brings a T-Chart to share with one column labeled "evidence" and the other "conclusions." When the science teachers review this T-Chart and try to imagine its application in their biology classes, they initiate a lengthy conversation about how the definitions of evidence and conclusions as the English teachers describe might confuse students when they move to science classes where evidence has to do with observations. "No wonder our students are confused," they conclude. This realization enables them to brainstorm ways of raising these distinctions in future lessons. They decide, as one possibility, to include evidence as a key term on their word walls (a location where teachers list key terminology for each unit of study) in order to explicitly open the conversation about how evidence varies across disciplines. Then, they decide to invite students to adapt the T-Chart in both classes to clarify their understanding of evidence unique to discipline-specific writing purposes and audiences. Finally, they want to talk further with their students about similarities and differences in their understanding of what constitutes evidence and how they draw on evidence in support of claims between courses. All teachers agree to try these ideas with their classes before returning to discuss their instructional efforts and share students' writing artifacts with one another.

Ongoing Collaborative Learning

Conversations at schools like these suggest the essential collaborative learning foundation that makes possible WAC inquiry and instruction connected directly to CCSS. Chelsea teachers talk about the complexities and possibilities of taking on writing in their disciplinary instruction, but embedded within their reflections is an ever-present thread that connects their work to others in their building and district (Conklin & Putnam, personal communication, October 7, 2011). They find energy in conversations with other teachers across content areas where they collectively wrestle with the realities of their shared efforts to help students meet CCSS expectations.

Together, Chelsea teachers' secondary WAC efforts reiterate that whole-school systemic WAC efforts more than random acts of writing support students' ability to develop as writers and disciplinary thinkers; these systemic initiatives also support more sustainable ongoing professional learning about secondary WAC because such initiatives foster a culture of inquiry that invites pedagogical risk-taking and revision in support of students' learning and ultimately students' ability to enact the CCSS with independence. Without this kind of long-term collective support, Chelsea teachers question whether their students would benefit so significantly (Conklin & Putnam, personal communication, October 7, 2011).

These conclusions may seem self-evident to post-secondary WAC advocates who for decades have lived and made possible such professional opportunities and support structures in colleges and universities across this country. Contextual distinctions, differences in secondary teacher preparation and ongoing professional development, as well as the new CCSS demands that hold secondary content area teachers equally accountable all present unique challenges that distinguish secondary WAC from post-secondary WAC. At the same time, however, these differences also present unique opportunities to leverage the strength of post-secondary WAC and limited secondary WAC examples as critically important resources in helping teachers negotiate this unique CCSS moment in our nation's secondary schools.

As Chelsea High School suggests, through collaborative inquiry—both in the classroom and with colleagues—and whole-school focus, WAC offers secondary teachers a range of ways to meet the goals of and embrace the uncertainties of the CCSS. These teachers and the common threads their experiences reveal suggest what is possible if WAC advocates leverage their knowledge to help teachers successfully navigate the CCSS demands. If the CCSS present secondary teachers and schools with unprecedented mandated secondary WAC, then the CCSS also offer WAC advocates new possibilities for positively contributing possible solutions and professional knowledge to the challenges secondary teachers and schools face as a result. While WAC advocates are familiar with the history that informs the sustainability of their contributions in this CCSS moment, secondary teachers who are first encountering WAC through the CCSS mandate are less familiar with WAC history and knowledge that offers intervention in the CCSS paradox. The uniqueness of this moment calls for diverse illustrations of *how*secondary WAC can provide a meaningful long-term response to the CCSS that benefits student writers beyond merely fulfilling a mandate. Through their leadership, WAC advocates can identify and describe those secondary school efforts that illustrate how WAC can deepen and strengthen learning across disciplines. Failing to promote, solicit, distribute, and publicize the possibilities suggested by locally-developed and contextually responsive secondary WAC initiatives would be to miss an opportune moment to profoundly shape the future of secondary education and, therefore, secondary WAC in response to the CCSS.

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Notes

[1] At the time of this writing, CCSS adopting states and territories have also joined federally funded assessment consortia, which are currently working to develop CCSS assessment systems. The CCSS assessments are expected to be fully functional and implemented by 2014.

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