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Assessment in Writing Across the Curriculum

The development of WAC programs raised two kinds of assessment questions—concerning assessing students' work and assessing the success of programs.

First, student writing needed to be assessed in a new context. WAC in its very principles challenged the traditional assessment based on general skills displayed in undifferentiated testing situations. WAC highlighted that there were many different forms of writing that varied from discipline to discipline, and what counted as good writing for a literature class would not pass muster in a physics lab, and vice-versa. Moreover, WAC points out how closely forms of writing are tied to the knowledge and activities mobilized in any writing task. Finally, WAC points to the active construction of learning and knowledge by the student in the course of writing, so that it is not appropriate to measure writing simply against a fixed standard.

Second, assessments of WAC programs were even more problematic than the known difficulties of assessing writing programs. The heterogeneity of WAC programs, the range of faculty involved, and the multiple desired outcomes of student performance made the display and measure of a program's accomplishments and shortcomings a complex and uncertain matter.

Assessment of Student Writing.

This section attempts to answer the following questions: How is student writing assessed in disciplinary classrooms? What is expected of

student writing in writing across the curriculum classes, and how is this communicated to students? How is writing evaluated when writing is assigned as a learning tool (i.e., journals)?

Before looking at these questions, some definitions are needed. Among compositionists and writing researchers, there are several ways in which reaction to student writing is taken up. Some research and scholarship is focused on *response* to student writing; that is, how teachers, tutors, and peers respond, either verbally or in writing, to texts written by students. Another area of research considers the *evaluation* of student writing, including how writing performance influences decisions of student placement in educational settings. A third area looks at *assessment* of student writing; that is, the methods by which student writing is assessed, as well as the criterion, standards, or measures involved in the assessment. These areas are, of course, closely related, and by considering what scholars and researchers have to say about the response, assessment, and evaluation of student writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines, we can come to a better understanding of what it means to teach from a WAC/WID approach.

Writing is studied increasingly as a situated activity, and both the activity itself and the resulting texts produced by writers—whether students or professionals—are widely recognized as both embedded in and constructed by the social environment in which the writing operates (Bazerman & Paradis, 1994). But more than simply a way of saying that texts and writers are unique, a view of writing as a situated activity permits and requires a deeper and careful study of texts in context. One component of such study considers not the uniqueness of texts and writers but the ways in which they are conventional; that is, the ways in which texts and writers observe conventions operating within—perhaps even defining—the context of the text's production. Two "stories" emerge: in one story, the writer follows conventions in order to place his or her text within a network of other texts, activities, and participants. But the other story, equally important in understanding writing's situatedness, is that the writer contributes to the ongoing construction of conventions, not simply by enforcing the conventions through use, but by confirming and disconfirming the effectiveness, relevance, and appropriateness of the conventions in the face of changing needs, interests, goals, and circumstances.

In student writing, particularly student writing in disciplinary classrooms, the examination of writing and texts contains at least two

distinct contexts: the context of the classroom and the context of the discipline. In order to understand, then, assessment of student writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines, it is necessary to consider how student writing is seen as a product of the classroom environment and as a product of the discipline. It stands to reason that, when writing is viewed as a product of the classroom, there will be a more consistent pattern of expectations and evaluations between teachers and across disciplines. Teachers, regardless of discipline, will tend to share a similar set of expectations and evaluations of student writing when considering that writing as a product of the classroom environment. Some of these expectations include such factors as compliance with specific instructions (i.e., page length, due dates, format), relevance to course material (i.e., choosing topics appropriate to the course), and use of standard written English. In addition, when texts are considered as a product of the classroom, teachers are likely to evaluate texts from the basis of what they indicate about the student's level of knowledge, as an indication of what the student has learned. This last expectation illustrates how teachers reading student writing is itself a product of the environment: teachers are less likely to assume knowledge of facts or information not explicitly included in a text written by student writers than in a text written by a professional writer.

In other words, the enterprise of learning operating in the classroom is fairly consistent and stable across teachers and disciplines, which leads to a fairly consistent and stable view of writing as a product of the classroom. Obviously, this view of writing as an aspect of learning will be influenced by individual teachers' views of teaching and learning, but in general, the principles governing how student writing is perceived will be limited to those dealing with learning. In addition, the variations among teachers in regards to views of writing as a product of the classroom is likely to be independent of their disciplinary affiliation; that is, teachers from different disciplines are likely to share similar views of writing as an expression of learning (Bean, 1996; Fulwiler, 1987b).

However, when student writing is considered as the product of a particular disciplinary environment, expectations of student writing, and the subsequent response, assessment, and evaluation, are more varied across disciplines, and there is a higher degree of consistency among teachers within a given discipline (VanSledright & Frankes, 1998). Teachers within a discipline are likely to expect similar things

from student writing, and those expectations seem to be influenced more by the unique qualities or features of the discipline itself than by more personal elements such as taste or opinion. Even when dealing with freshmen writers, Schwegler and Shamoon (1991) found that sociology teachers expected students to use lines of reasoning and support unique to sociology. When reading student papers, the teachers studied rejected even those lines of reasoning and support drawn from related fields, such as anthropology and psychology. While there seemed to be more tolerance for "undisciplined" introductions, most participants in the study expected student papers to adhere to disciplinary constraints and conventions. The study suggests that teachers are particularly concerned with textual macrostructure, the gist and lines of reasoning employed in the paper.

In order to articulate disciplinary standards as well as to develop pedagogy and support of writing within the discipline, a group at North Carolina State University has been fostering discussions within each department participating in the WAC program. These discussions within each department, though facilitated by writing specialists, are driven by the disciplinary faculty. The discussions, however, center on student learning and student performance, and are carried forward in the context of concrete data about student accomplishment. The discussions address three questions:

(1) What are the outcomes—skills, knowledge, and other attributes—that graduates of the program should attain? (2) To what extent is the program enabling its graduates to attain the outcomes? And (3) How can the faculty use what they learn from program assessment to improve their programs so as to better enable graduates to attain the outcomes?

The set of questions moves issues of assessment of student performance directly to issues of program design and assessment and then to program improvement. (Carter, 2002; Carter, Anson, & Miller, forthcoming; Anson, Carter, Dannels, & Rust, forthcoming).

WAC Program Assessment and Evaluation

As WAC programs have moved from the first stage (development and first years of implementation) into the second stage (program maturity) (McLeod, 1989), the need and the desire to determine what these

programs are accomplishing has given life to an entire literature of WAC assessment and evaluation. Within education, assessment and evaluation of programs are a common and expected parts of administration. Michael Williamson defines assessment as "gathering information useful to describe the operations of a program or curriculum" and evaluation as "ascribing merit based on the information gathered in an assessment (1997, p. 239). The methods, motives, subjects, and audiences of the assessment and evaluation of WAC programs are as varied and difficult to define as the programs themselves. Because, as Toby Fulwiler points out, "the local conditions that gave rise to WAC programs were always quite specific," (Fulwiler & Young, 1997, p. 1), the assessing and evaluating of those programs is largely dependent upon the needs and desires of the participants in those local programs.

Fulwiler (1988) outlined seven specific challenges to WAC assessment (pp. 62–64):

- WAC means different things on different campuses.
- The exigencies of running successful programs leave little funds, provide little data, and create little administrative motivation for in-depth evaluation.
- WAC programs evolve and mutate rapidly.
- WAC is carried out under different institutional arrangements on different campuses.
- Quick and dirty measures tell little.
- WAC programs are amorphous and open-ended.
- Successful WAC programs run deep into the center of the curriculum.

Consequently, much of the earlier assessment literature came in the form of accounts of program assessments and evaluations conducted–earlier accounts were largely anecdotal (see Fulwiler, 1984). Later studies of programs, however, are more methodical, often empirical (see Walvoord, et al., 1997). Since the mid-1990s, the move to theorize and analyze WAC program assessment has created another wave of literature.

In 1997, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot edited a volume, *Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum: Diverse Approaches and Prac-*

tices, which brought together the expert voices in the field of WAC to discuss how program assessment had developed and how it might best be implemented by interested parties. Yancey and Huot lay out in the first chapter the purposes of assessment: 1) to see what the program is doing well; 2) to learn how the program can improve; and 3) to demonstrate to others why the program should continue or should be funded (p. 7). They then lay out the assumptions which guide the work in WAC assessment, which are that, first, WAC program assessment focuses on "the big picture"; second, it relies on guiding questions just as research does; third, it begins with "an explicit understanding about the nature of writing" (p. 7); fourth, it relies on diverse and often multiple methods; and fifth, it focuses on that point of interaction between teaching and learning with the goal of enhancing that interaction (pp. 8–11).

Looking at the big picture involves, by necessity, a narrowing of questions to be answered by any assessment. Kinkead (1997) approaches the design of an assessment process as "an opportunity to learn" (p. 39) and lays out a series of questions in a matrix divided by the categories of stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators):

- Who is assessed?
- What is assessed?
- Where is the locus of evaluation?
- Who is the audience of the assessment?
- Why is the assessment important or significant?
- How is the assessment to be conducted?
- When does the assessment occur?

Morgan (1997) suggests a business model for WAC assessment, likening it to the management principle of "total quality management" (TQM). According to Morgan, in TQM, the questions for assessment should ideally be determined at the point of program creation by setting measurable goals. The steps for assessment then become 1) set goals; 2) establish goal-achievement activities; and 3) create measures (p. 148). The questions arise naturally from the goals that have been set.

Selfe (1997) presents what she calls a "contextual model for evaluating WAC programs" (p. 51). This contextual model is essentially a social constructivist approach that requires assessors to move away from a positivistic view and instead view each program as socioculturally situated with the participants themselves constructing the program. Using this model, Selfe lays out not a series of questions–because they will be determined by the participants and their locally determined needs–but rather a series of steps:

- Collect benchmark information.
- Collect student and parent stories and histories regarding writing.
- Collect faculty stories and histories regarding writing and writing programs.
- Collect administrators' stories and histories regarding writing programs.
- Collect program artifacts.
- Conduct observations of WAC in action.
- Collect student performance artifacts (not limited to papers, but drafts, notes, etc.).
- Interview students and faculty.

A wide range of instruments for assessment and evaluation are mentioned in the literature. The most common are surveys and questionnaires given to faculty and to students. The surveys may be administered after a WAC faculty workshop, after a WAC-oriented course, after a program has been in place for a measure of time, or when an assessment is called for by an administration or accrediting organization. Other more qualitative instruments include interviews, again with faculty and students, observations in classrooms or writing centers, and examination of portfolios of student writing. According to Huot, the more conventional writing assessment procedures and instruments (i.e., the timed writing exam evaluated by trained readers, gauged for interrater reliability) present major difficulties when applied to WAC programs because the writing evaluated comes from a range of disciplines, each with their unique rhetorical features (1997, p. 70). What

would be considered "good writing" in a chemistry course might be "atrocious" in an English literature course, hence the challenge of a generic evaluation of student writing.

Fulwiler (1988) points out that the goals of the program drive assessment. Only by understanding program goals can measurable factors be isolated and studied. He outlines five goals and presents possible measures for each (pp. 65–72):

- Building a Community of Scholars
  - Survey of who is participating in WAC workshops
  - Evaluations from participants after workshops
  - Follow-up surveys
- Pedagogy
  - Post-workshop evaluations
  - Survey or interviews that ask, "Do you notice a difference in your teaching?"
  - Comparison of syllabi before and after workshops
  - Student evaluations
- Improving Student Learning
  - Student interviews
  - Statistical studies of student performance before and after WAC program
- Improving Student Writing (the most common and most challenging goal to measure)
  - "Writing Apprehension Test" (see Daly & Miller, 1975)
  - Evaluation of student writing over the span of one course
  - Longitudinal, qualitative studies
- Improving Faculty Writing
  - Faculty interviews
  - Tracking of faculty articles, books, and presentations that involve WAC participation

Most assessment literature emphasizes that the outcomes of assessment can stretch well beyond the need to gain or maintain funding; the assessment process can, in itself, build bridges between program administrators and faculty working within the WAC program. Walvoord (1997) points out that faculty can play a variety of roles within the assessment process, ideally working as program creators and research collaborators and coauthors.

Selfe views the assessment process as one of increasing what Schön (1983) termed reflective professional practice, following the assumption that teachers that reflect on their own teaching will enjoy professional growth. The study "In the Long Run" (Walvoord, Hunt, Dowling, & McMahon, 1997), discussed in Chapter 5, evaluates the long term effects on disciplinary instructors of participation in WAC seminars.

Once the assessment has been conducted, the assessor is left with the problem of how to present the results. Haswell and McLeod (1997) address this with the following recommendations that will particularly assist those involved in assessment to be transmitted to administrators:

- Ask questions of the audience(s) before designing/beginning the assessment process in order to determine what information they value.
- Examine the genres of informational documents of the audience(s) and use them as models for the report.
- Focus on recommendations and action.
- Time the report(s) to coincide with appropriate points in the fiscal/budgetary cycle.

In their discussion of reporting assessment results, Haswell and McLeod wisely stress that the entire process and the resulting documents are, by nature, rhetorical. Consideration of purpose, context, *kairos* (timing), and audience are of paramount importance (p. 218).