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History of the WAC Movement

American Roots of Writing Across the Curriculum to 1970

The set of conditions in United States' universities that gave rise to the Writing Across the Curriculum Movement in the latter part of the twentieth century arose out of a much longer history of secondary and higher education in the United States. That history resulted in a specialized undergraduate curriculum and the isolation of literacy and rhetorical instruction from the rest of the curriculum.

Prior to the late 19th century, a four-year college education was primarily rhetorical and was directed toward the production of a religious and secular elite. College education aimed to create leaders who could speak eloquently and articulately from the pulpit, in the chambers of government, or among the leaders of commerce. The subject matter and professional training offered by the colleges of the colonies and early republic were closely associated with the forms of public presentation that the students learned to master and that marked their achievement. The education was comprised largely of making oral recitations and studying principles of rhetoric in a liberal arts curriculum as preparation for careers in law, medicine, or theology (Adams, 1993). However, college was not a necessary precursor for employment. Both future lawyers and doctors could certainly attend college lectures in politics, government, or ethics but their practical training happened through apprenticeship. Thus higher education was as much a marker of class as of specific career training.

Two events, however, marked major turning points in the nature of college education. First, the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 defined a new mission for higher education. The act established the agricultural and mechanical colleges, making new kinds of careers available for college study and altering the college curriculum at many schools (Brereton, 1995, p. 9). "By 1900," writes Adams, "at the more than 750 universities, colleges, and technical institutes across the country, students generally took liberal arts courses in their first two years and then chose among tracks in engineering, agriculture, education, library science, business home economics, the humanities, and other fields [...] [for] the last two years" (Adams, 1993, p. 1). Second, the opening of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 indicated a turn toward the German research university as a model of higher education. The research university brought with it specialization of departments, directed towards the faculty production of new knowledge in distinct domains, and the training of students to become researchers and specialists. These disciplines each developed its own specialized form of language, but had no place within its curriculum for disciplinary language training, rhetoric or writing. Indeed no field had at first focused responsibility for these areas, for even English Departments found their research focus in philology and literary studies. Rather competence in literacy and communication was assumed at the student's entry into the specialty, as it still is currently in many European universities that also adopted the German research model.

However, the specialization of the research university came in conflict with the democratization and increased accessibility of the university, leading to renewed interest in literacy education at the university. As student enrollments began increasing around the 1870s, these students were deemed deficient in writing skills, particularly mechanics and correctness of writing (Connors, 1991), and parents, professors, and the general public grew anxious over this presumed deficiency. Harvard responded to this increased public concern over literacy and linguistic correctness by implementing college entrance exams in written English in 1874. In the first year, over half the students failed the exams and people questioned how students who hailed from the best secondary schools could not write correctly. Several other colleges began administering similar entrance exams and before long the Harvard examiners and other academics soon began to push for "better training on the secondary level and for more effective writing instruc-

tion on the college level" (Connors, 1991, p. 4). In short, the mandatory freshman year composition course was created in response to the literacy crisis of 1875–1885. However, while principles of argumentation, exposition, logic—tools of the classical rhetorician's trade—were a necessary part of the pre-modern American university, practice in these areas was relegated to a single composition course at the beginning of the student's college career at the turn of the 20th century. This course separated writing from the subject matters and career orientation pursued by students, and aimed at developing general writing skills based on a model of general cognitive faculties (Adams, 1993).

Concerns for the preparation of students for the university also led to reform of the nation's secondary schools. Secondary schools had been since their inception directed towards college preparation. At first, when colleges offered rhetorical education for the elites, Latin grammar schools were the most common form of the secondary school (Tanner & Tanner, 1990). These gradually were supplemented by more practically oriented private academies, but not until high schools were formed in the last decades of the nineteenth century was there a major change in secondary education. The public high schools were community based and had more open access. They offered electives fitting the interests and career goals of students within a contemporary world. Nonetheless, the curriculum was shaped by college entrance requirements, even though in 1890 only about 15 percent of high school students were preparing for college. The disciplinary-focused college preparation curriculum was cemented by the so-called Committee of Ten, organized by the National Education Association. This influential committee, which included five college presidents and was chaired by President of Harvard Charles W. Eliot, recommended in 1893 a high school curriculum based on nine subjects that directly corresponded to and prepared students for university courses: Latin, Greek, English (literature, composition, grammar), other modern languages, mathematics, physical sciences, natural history (biology), history and government, and geography. This curriculum reinforced the effect of the disciplinary research university on writing, pushing down into secondary education the same pattern of writing taught only as part of a literary-dominated English curriculum.

The logic of this disciplinary organization of universities and secondary schools located responsibility for writing instruction within a single discipline of English that found its higher aspirations in litera-

ture rather than student writing. Nonetheless, a "cooperation movement" attempted in the opening decades of the twentieth century to enlist the teachers of all subjects into the teaching of writing (Russell, 1991). But this movement was difficult to maintain in the face of the increasing specialization of secondary and university departments and the management of educational institutions for efficiency through specialization and bureaucratization. The cooperation movement diminished with WWII, but did survive at the margins, along with other progressive educational ideas.

While writing instruction for students in general became restricted in scope and subordinated to a literary curriculum, some specialized forms of writing developed niche presences. Creative writing had become a widely offered university course by the early twentieth century, as did journalistic writing (Adams, 1993). In both cases a number of career-focused degree programs had developed by mid-twentieth century. Two other kinds of specialized writing courses also developed around the turn of the twentieth century to meet the special needs of students in engineering and business degrees, often instigated by complaints of employers. Although such courses were originally taught within English departments, as the courses became increasingly specialized in character there was a tendency for the courses to be offered through the professional school (Russell, 1991). Even today the pattern remains mixed, with technical writing sometimes being taught by a program in technical writing located in the engineering school and sometimes located in the English department. A similar diversity of arrangements has developed for business writing. Nonetheless, in both cases, the courses were designed and offered for the needs of a particular group of professional students, coordinated with their professional training. Students outside those professional programs were not expected to enroll in these specialized writing courses. These courses and programs also developed practices, beliefs, and goals that for the most part became quite distinct from those of composition.

Between 1920 and 1930 enrollments at American universities nearly doubled from 598,000 students to over one million, and the mandatory college course—freshman composition—became both highly visible and the target of attack (Connors, 1995). At the 1931 National Council of Teachers in English (NCTE) meeting, Alvin C. Eurich shared findings from a late 1920s study conducted at his university, the University of Minnesota (Eurich, 1932). Essays collected from 54

freshmen both before and after completing their freshman composition course at Minnesota were reviewed using one of several popular essay rating scales. The essays revealed that no significant improvement was made over the course of three months. The conclusions drawn from Eurich's scholarly research report were that extended habits of written expression cannot be influenced in such a short time, and he advocated one of the earlier forms of WAC where English teachers and those in other fields would collaborate to design writing-based assignments. This early push towards WAC was fervently discussed but not taken up seriously until several decades later. Yet spirited debates regarding the usefulness of a term-length composition course—essentially the heart of Eurich's conclusions—did ensue. One of those debates carrying additional WAC undertones was sparked by the 1935 NCTE Committee on College English's *The Teaching of College English,* which decried the freshman year composition model and advocated moving it to the sophomore year instead. The *English Journal* published all the arguments and ripostes on the topic in one of their sections titled "Symposium." Oscar J. Campbell, chair of the Symposium committee, posited an implicit writing across the curriculum message himself when he remarked:

> What your students need is not more instruction in writing but a few teachers of geology who are capable of describing not only geological phenomena but also of teaching their students how to think consecutively and logically about geology [...]. Since most teachers of geology, history, or economics find themselves incapable of it, they conceal their incompetence from themselves by shifting the responsibility of their failure upon the harried instructor in Freshman English, who labors valiantly to accomplish the impossible. (Campbell, 1939, p. 181)

However, his intentionally inflammatory comments had little effect as World War II tabled discussions about the value of freshman composition. (For further discussion of this debate, see Russell, 1988.)

In the post-war years, tremendous changes in secondary and post-secondary education occurred in America. The returning solders attending college on the GI Bill were the leading edge of an expansion, democratization, and diversity of higher education. In the ensuing de-

cades, race, class, and gender became less and less barriers to enrollment at increasingly large numbers of institutions. At the same time technology soared and federal and corporate research funding led to a "knowledge explosion" at colleges and universities as well as in the workplace. Completing a secondary education became a minimum requirement for success in life. A college education began to resonate with more and more Americans and many viewed it as an attainable necessity. Thus, as more people raised the bar of success for themselves and society, a new quest for literacy excellence began and with it increased scrutiny on writing quality. "Americans learned that poor writing was a serious problem, from the high-school dropout to the Ph.D. candidate," says Russell. And "[i]ncreasing specialization in education and in work demanded that students be taught to write for a host of new situations" (Russell, 1991, p. 240). A call to improve the quality of writing was sounded and the communications movement of the postwar era took up this cause.

The communications movement originated "from a new interest in semantics and scientific study of communication and the mobilization of American education for the war effort and postwar adjustment" (Russell, 1991, p. 256). While it did not do much to alter writing pedagogy, it did begin to move the onus of teaching writing to disciplines outside of English and literary study. This shift was largely accomplished by the theoretical backing of I. A. Richards' *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) where he proposed a "transformed discipline of rhetoric [that] would study all types of discourse as *functions* of linguistics behavior" (Russell, 1991, p. 257). Richards's efforts to modify language instruction resulted in the Progressive Education Association releasing a report connecting "the development of language skill with learning in all disciplines" (p. 257) and associating language facility with critical thinking. The linkage of language to critical thought soon extended to the linkage of language and disciplinary modes of thought. The four areas intricately tied to language development—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—were given renewed status as foundational in many disciplines. The communications movement laid "the groundwork for a revival [...] in rhetoric in the 1960s, which in turn led to the WAC movement in the 1970s" (Russell, 1991, p. 256–257).

The social and political forces at work in the 1960s, including racial integration in mass education, exposed the divisions in school

language policy and the need to teach the dominant language to excluded populations. Composition theorists such as Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Donald Graves, and James Moffett were making their presence known with their Deweyian emphasis on classroom communities and student-centered teaching. While Jerome S. Bruner's (1963, 1964, 1986) important research on the effects of language in all disciplines would take some time to be widely disseminated, his focus on disciplinary rigor quickly drew considerable attention (Bazerman & Russell, 1994). On the surface, although his discipline-centered approach seemed a stark contrast to the student-centered one posited by some of the composition expressivists noted above, it was largely influenced by Jean Piaget and Dewey and focused on student development and progress.

The renewed interest in communication, rhetoric, and writing in the U.S. in the 1960s manifested itself in the rise of composition studies as an academic discipline, replete with its own books, journals and scholarly methods (Connors, 1995). The formation of this discipline offered a new academic forum for experimentation in writing instruction and pedagogy, and the professionals drawn to this field, though usually situated in English departments, were more interdisciplinary by professional nature, further opening the door to writing across the curriculum theories.

The Influence of British Reforms in the 1960s and 1970s

While the structure, growth, and demographics of the American university set the stage for the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, it was educational reform coming from Britain that provided the catalyst and sources for the movement. Curricular developments and research fostered by James Britton and his colleagues at the London School of Education from 1966–1976, in particular seeded the WAC movement (Russell, 1991; Bazerman & Russell, 1994). Britton's work was first introduced to American educators at a 1966 Dartmouth Seminar (Dixon, 1967). Composition was only marginally addressed at the conference; the main focus was on pedagogical reform and student liberation. However, several British conference participants, James Britton, Douglas Barnes, and Harold Rosen, soon became key figures in the WAC movement.

In an instance of educational irony, the British approach to education broadly paralleled the American progressive tradition of the 1920s and 1930s posited by Dewey and emphasizing "experience-centered awareness" (Russell, 1994, p. 11). In the U.S., however, this approach had been largely abandoned since WWII in favor of a pedagogy more focused on disciplinary rigor, general curricula, and objective evaluation. American NCTE leaders at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar were harshly criticized by their British counterparts (NATE) for sticking to overly rigid models of writing, language, and literary instruction. Concerned with the linguistic, social, and personal development of the student, the British favored a looser form of classroom talk and privileged students' personal responses. The British critique resonated sharply with American reformers, and the States soon imported British language and writing theories into their curriculum.

While the WAC movement in America was to focus mainly on reform in higher education, British efforts targeted secondary education (Russell, 1994). In 1972, Britain's national education commission—as it was periodically requested to do—investigated the current educational crisis created by the demand for increased access to secondary schools and colleges, similar to the challenges open admissions policies had created in the States. The commission was given the hefty task of investigating everything they could find related to teaching English. They did so and three years later issued their 600-page investigative report. In it they noted the difficulty involved in determining whether written and spoken standards of English had actually slipped. They focused instead on the higher standards demanded by the changing workplace and higher education and determined it was these higher standards and the subsequent exposure that led to the cries of communication "deficiencies" (Russell, 1991, p. 277). The commission proposed curriculum reform that advocated "informal classroom talk, especially in small groups; expressive writing; and teacher-student collaboration" (Russell, 1991, p. 277). As a commission member, James Britton played an influential role. His 1970 book, *Language and Learning,* which argued that language is central to learning, figured significantly in the commission's recommendations (see also Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1970). Later, he served as the main contributor to *The Bullock Report's* chapter on "Language Across the Curriculum," where language was noted to play an important role in discipline-specific learning (Bullock, 1975). The chapter called for writing in all

classes, not just English classes—the title phrase made its way across the Atlantic and was transformed into Writing Across the Curriculum, or WAC, in the U.S.

One of the most influential studies coming out of the British writing-across-the-curriculum research and later informing the American WAC movement was another project spearheaded by Britton. At the behest of the Schools Councils Project, a high-level advisory group comprised of business, government, and educational leaders (Russell, 1991, p. 279), Britton and his colleagues conducted a detailed survey of student writing in British schools. At the center of their landmark study was Britton's theory "that children develop writing ability by moving from personal forms of writing (what he calls *expressive* and *poetic*) to more public, workaday forms, which communicate information (what he calls *transactional*)" (Russell, 1991, p. 278). The study found that most writing in British schools was transactional with children receiving very few opportunities to write in the expressive or poetic style and consequently very few chances to develop their writing abilities organically. On the basis of this study reported in Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen's 1975 book *The Development of Writing Abilities,* the Schools Council Project recommended a complete curricular change to redress the lack of expressive writing in schools. Works coming out of that initiative include Marland (1977), Martin (1976), and Martin (1984). These British theories were the American educators' antidote to the formalist/cognitivist writing pedagogy in place for several decades, where correctness of form was associated with the development of intellectual habits and abilities. American compositionists embraced both the expressivist pedagogy and the project's name, writing across the curriculum.

Workshops, National Organizations and Dissemination

How did word spread about this new idea that came to be known as Writing Across the Curriculum? A progressively more aggressive campaign to move writing out of the exclusive domain of the English department is documented in professional journals:

1939: "The Failure of English Composition" *English Journal* (Campbell)

1949: "Faculty Responsibility for Student Writing" *College English* (Wright)

1960: "College Wide English Improvement" *College English* (McCullogh)

1967: "English Does Not Belong to the English Class" *English Journal* (Kaufman)

1968: "Written Composition Outside the English Class" *Journal of English Teaching Techniques* (Emmerich)

By 1975, published accounts of an official university program actually moving writing outside the English department began appearing, with "Teaching Writing Extra-territorially: Carleton College" in the *ADE Bulletin* being the first (Carleton College, 1975).

According to Fulwiler and Young writing in 1982, however, the dissemination of program information was at that time problematic:

> To date few mechanisms have been available for disseminating information about WAC programs in a systematic and comprehensive manner. At present, information about WAC programs is generally shared in three ways: 1) by reading professional English journals such as *College English, College Composition and Communication, Writing Program Administrator,* and *Association of Departments of English Bulletin;* 2) by attending conferences such as the National Council of Teachers of English and/or the Conference on College Composition and Communication—where individual programs and special-interest sessions are conducted; and 3) by inviting writing consultants to campus to introduce program ideas or conduct workshops. The limitations are obvious: only English teachers read the English journals; only those who can afford it—primarily English teachers—attend the English conferences; and the consultants are few, busy and fairly expensive. (Fulwiler and Young, 1982, p. 2)

In recent years, however, a number of forums have grown for the exchange of information. The National Writing Across the Curricu-

lum Conference was first held in 1993 in Charleston, North Carolina. The biannual conference was jointly sponsored by Clemson University, Cornell University, the University of Charleston, and the Citadel. In 1999, the conference was held outside of Charleston for the first time at Cornell University. In 2001, the conference was jointly sponsored by Indiana University, the University of Notre Dame, and Purdue University. In 2002, the conference officially became an annual event with its sixth meeting held at Rice University.

In 1994, the *Journal of Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* was launched as a print journal to "provide a forum for debates concerning interdisciplinarity, situated discourse communities, and writing across the curriculum programs" (http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/archives.cfm). Since 1998 it has been distributed online at the Academic.Writing website which has since become the WAC Clearinghouse website (http://wac.colostate.edu/llad). Back issues are also archived at the location. Another online WAC journal, *Academic.Writing,* founded in 2000, was distributed at the same website (http://wac/colostate.edu/aw/). In 2004 the two journals merged to form *Across the Disciplines* (http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/). These journals provide a place to share program designs, assignments, research, writing theory applied to WAC, discussions of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, and discussions of writing within specific disciplines.

The WAC Clearinghouse offers "national support for communication across the curriculum" (http://wac.colostate.edu/). The online clearinghouse offers links to a variety of resources and documents related to WAC, including program descriptions, landmark texts on WAC theory and practice, conferences, research and dissertations related to WAC, and numerous lists of links to additional online information. The WAC Clearinghouse also publishes online new reference, resource, and research books. The journal *Writing Across the Curriculum* is also accessible online through the WAC Clearinghouse. The journal, which began as a regional publication out of Plymouth State College in New Hampshire, has been national in scope since 2000.

The National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs (Elementary-University) facilitates informal support among programs and teachers, including the exchange of ideas and practices. The Network meets at the annual Convention of College Composition and Communication and provides numerous resources at its website (http://wac.gmu.edu/national/network.html).

In many WAC programs, the writing center serves as the nerve center of the program, disseminating information to the university community and providing writing support and services to both faculty and students across disciplines. Consequently, articles on WAC occur frequently in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Writing Center Journal.*

Within university settings, an institution-wide newsletter on the local WAC program is quite common. These newsletters contain personal experience essays from faculty; tips on everything from the creation of assignments to assessment strategies; news about the program's development and implementation; and non-technical articles on composition theories and practices. The publications are as varied as the programs themselves—slick and professional, chatty and informal, top-down or bottom-up, frequent and regular, infrequent and spotty.