

*Continuing problems, troubling trends, and many opportunities face WAC planners as we look to the future. How can we deal with these in order to sustain the success of the movement?*

## *The Future of Writing Across the Curriculum*

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It's impossible for me to talk about the future without first estimating where writing across the curriculum is now. Many ideas fit under the WAC umbrella. At more and more schools, WAC means the writing-intensive or writing-emphasis courses taught within a major. This can imply careful instruction in the phases of the writing process—discovery, revision, and editing—or it can merely mean increasing the required word count in a course. At many schools, including some of those with writing-emphasis courses, WAC means teachers in diverse fields using writing-to-learn techniques, such as journals, reading response logs, systematic note making, impromptu exercises, role playing, field studies, I-Search papers, collaborative research, informal and formal debates, process analyses, formative assessments, and so on.

Writing across the curriculum also means research. Curiosity drives the vanguard. Although many of us got into this movement (it is, for all our modest disclaimers, messianic) because someone in our institution consulted us based on our experience as teachers of writing, we stick with it because we quickly see the limits of our knowledge and find, humbly and gratefully, that we can learn a lot about our profession from the people "out there," teachers in other fields. The collaborative research projects described in Chapter Eight raise to the level of art the spontane-

ous collaborations that ideally go on in every cross-curricular workshop—indeed, in any earnest exchange of ideas and questions among teachers.

The cross-curricular urge is not, in my view, an offshoot of the teaching of writing but is its foundation. We can't know what and how to teach unless we mess around in the beautiful muck of people's texts and their purposes, backgrounds, fears, fantasies, and delusions in regard to writing. And to do this we must go outside the boundaries of our departments and beyond the fringe parking of our campuses.

I talk as if this is simple truth, but I realize how revolutionary—and evolutionary—it is. People who enjoy studying writing across the curriculum in its myriad guises, or writing in the workplace, or the composing processes of young children are people who marvel at the diversity and unpredictability of culture. These are not the same people who think of "writing across the curriculum" as a mandate to impose a single standard of syntactical correctness or a short list of required readings across the curriculum. Those, I would argue, are antithetical meanings of the concept and reasons why the term occasions resistance and confusion. Most of the WAC people one meets have swum around in cultural stews throughout their careers. We tend to be the ESL people, the writing center people, the pop culturists, the Third World historians, the Geertzian anthropologists, the quantum physicists, the epidemiologists, the systems engineers—entrepreneurs of every stripe.

We have seen that using language can empower people, enable them to survive in body and flourish in spirit. We have seen how the force to limit communication—whether that force takes the form of monopoly in mass media or the radical narrowing of standards of "acceptable language"—can intimidate, passify (not pacify), and disenfranchise people. Yes, writing across the curriculum advocates want people to write about whatever they study, because they see writing as power, whether that power be political or spiritual or therapeutic or intellectual.

WAC has succeeded because workshop participants have felt this power themselves in the workshops and then in their classrooms. They have reached the same insights as those achieved by such writing-process researchers as Emig (1977) and Shaughnessy (1977), who convinced our profession more than a decade ago that writing is learning and growth, that the act of writing defines writing, and that no text is more than a step in anyone's development. WAC would never have spread had its advocates had nothing more to offer fellow teachers than correction symbols, syntax rules, and pious lectures about the need for "good" writing. When workshop participants praise their experience, they always focus on how writing serves intellectual and social purposes: "I feel that I understand my students better," "Writing gives them an outlet for their confusion, their frustrations," "They reach insights I never hoped for before." Not surprisingly, as Shaughnessy predicted in *Errors and Expec-*

tations, teachers also see gains in the quality of student texts: "They write a lot better than previous classes."

As we confront trends and issues in planning new and continuing WAC programs, we need to keep in mind the bases of our success: our desire to learn from our colleagues and our sense of the power of writing. It is on these strengths that we can build the future of the movement.

### **The Future of WAC: Two Troubling Trends**

Ironically, as I look to the future of WAC, our very success troubles me. Just as "the writing process," through the perseverance of many teachers and researchers, has become so successful that now almost everyone in our field slaps the name onto whatever they do, so the term "writing across the curriculum" stands in danger of the same thing. Two trends need to be watched closely: the textbook-title syndrome and the top-down decree.

*The Textbook-Title Syndrome.* When I review manuscripts with "across the curriculum" or "in the content areas" or "across the disciplines" in the title, I've learned to ask a simple question: What makes the book different from the books published before the "across the curriculum" furor began? A disappointingly large number have merely substituted sample essays about physics, sociology, and computers for such previous staples as E. B. White's trip to the lake, Annie Dillard's sojourn at the creek, or John Updike's idyll of the grocery store. Though they provide different grist for the composition mill, such "content area" essays still exist as static texts, imposing for their polish and learnedness while the processes of their writers remain opaque. Such textbooks assume, as their predecessors did, that the composition course stands isolated from the rest of the curriculum. If it did not, then students in the composition course would write about what they are reading, hearing, discussing—and writing—in the other courses they actually take. They wouldn't need a book full of assorted essays.

Indeed, I feel that such texts can actually hinder writing across the curriculum more than they promote it. The student who must write about Loren Eiseley or Stephen Jay Gould in the composition class will not have the chance to get her or his peers' or the writing teacher's feedback on the draft of the research paper she is writing in cell biology. Even those textbooks that present samples closer to the actual college curriculum (for example, sample lab reports, field studies, or business case analyses written by students) essentially privilege static texts that have very little to do with the actual classes our students are taking now. If faculty at an institution really talk with their colleagues on the next floor or in the next building and if they take steps to find out what their students are really studying and writing in their other classes, then there

is no need for any teacher or publisher to have to fabricate reading matter, topics, purposes, or audiences for their students. If our message is that "writing is important in every field," then what better way to show this than by taking seriously in the writing class the writing that the students really must do?

If you suspect that your students are not writing in their other classes (many teachers use a student questionnaire to find this out), then that "cross-curricular" textbook won't convince students that they should be. Yet even if students are not writing on assignment in those classes, they are still reading, hearing lectures, perhaps doing hands-on work, and taking notes (so they *are* writing). You can turn your writing class into a writing across the curriculum class by teaching your students such writing-to-learn strategies as double-entry note making, reading response logs, and I-Search papers, using the readings and lectures from their other classes as topics. Meanwhile, you can be politicking for more WAC faculty development workshops on your campus.

***The Top-Down Decree.*** The other problem with success is that administrators try to decree it by decreeing WAC programs, rather than by assisting the growth of grassroots efforts. One assumption on which this sourcebook is based is that some faculty development, primarily voluntary, should precede legislated or decreed changes in curriculum. The activities described in Chapter Two presuppose a cross-disciplinary core of faculty who have already understood some writing-process and writing-to-learn theory. This core need not be large. Every faculty has at least a few, maybe many, teachers who quickly pick up the spirit of the workshop, probably because of their own experience as writers or because, like many teachers I've met, they are already using writing-to-learn or process techniques in their classes. Without these people—and without some faculty development structure to spread their ideas—faculty are liable to think that "WAC" merely means: (1) "adding the English teacher's job" to theirs or (2) "adding writing" to their courses.

At our meetings of the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs and in my conversations with program directors, I keep hearing the same lament about mandated WAC curricula, particularly of the writing-intensive or writing-emphasis variety. Several large public universities, plus many smaller schools, have decreed such programs, in some cases without prior faculty development, sometimes even without faculty debate and consent. Often faculty resist, and those in charge either can't meet their quota of writing-intensive sections or are forced to accept as writing intensive some sections taught by faculty who don't know how to handle student writing but who understandably want the usual reward of reduced class size or release time. Let me suggest, first of all, that the granting of such rewards reinforces the misconception that writing is additive, not instrumental. Experienced WAC folks know

that sensibly using writing as a mode of learning in classes does not mean that we reach fewer students or expend more time in teaching; it just means that teaching and learning occur more efficiently.

Another common complaint concerns students: They'll tolerate the one or two writing courses they need to graduate, but woe to the teacher who requires writing in any other course! As long as writing is presented as the production of more words, rather than as an essential tool of thought, then we can only expect that students will resent it as an imposition.

*Suggestions for Resisting These Trends.* If mandatory WAC, either through decreed writing-intensive courses in the majors, through committee selection of a so-called writing across the curriculum anthology, or through some other expedient, is considered by a college or department before a cross-campus enthusiastic core of faculty has been developed, we should resist it, even though it might appear to represent an administrative commitment to writing. We need to keep pointing out to administrators that every WAC program that has endured and flourished was built on a firm basis of faculty development before sweeping changes in requirements were made.

As for compensation, rather than doling out release time and reduced student loads to faculty who teach writing-intensive courses, spend the release time or some other suitable reward on faculty development workshops and on continuing coordination of the faculty development program. The same amount of money or time that is spent to support the same small percentage of writing-intensive courses could be spent each year instead to train new faculty in writing-process and writing-to-learn techniques, with a far greater payoff. In doing so, the number of trained faculty will increase continually, hence the number of potential WAC sections will increase as well. Under this plan, there is no limit to the spread of WAC in the institution; moreover, students will not regard writing requirements as extraordinary, because no classes will be identified exclusively as "writing-intensive."

As for text selection, keep in mind that no externally published text can give your faculty working knowledge of their colleagues' courses, assignments, and ways of dealing with student writing. Questioning fellow faculty from other departments or assigning your students to conduct interviews with their other teachers will give you better data about writing across the curriculum than any anthology. Anyone experienced in cross-disciplinary workshops has learned that what is asked of students in writing and how the teacher handles it can vary drastically from one course or one teacher to another within the same subject.

For a writing across the curriculum course itself, choose texts that help you teach students ways to identify each of their "discourse communities" during the current semester, rather than assigning them any

anthology's homogenized ideas about "writing in science" or "writing in the humanities." If your current text teaches writing-to-learn techniques and if it helps students understand the writing process so that they write discovery drafts, get good feedback, and revise, don't change it. Understanding the process of writing and how to use writing to learn will allow students to handle any form, format, or criterion a teacher may throw at them, regardless of the discipline.

### Other Issues in the Future of WAC

**Cultural Literacy or "Method" Versus "Content."** This is not an issue of the future, really, since WAC people have always had to answer the skepticism of faculty who see the time devoted to writing-to-learn activities as time taken away from the teaching of content. We have always had to confront the unexamined notion that people learn any body of information (whether the names of Greek philosophers or the lyrics of a rock song) merely by being given a text and being told to read it, or by having someone stand before a class and tell it to them. What is new is the slick term "cultural literacy" and the facile coupling of this boost for a certain list of names, events, and abstract terms with an attack on schools' alleged overemphasis on methods of learning.

Those who have studied writing and learning across the curriculum—to use Nancy Martin's (Martin, D'Arcy, Newton, and Parker, 1976) still-incisive phrase—know, of course, that real attention to how we learn has always taken a backseat to schools' and colleges' concern about the books required and the content of lectures. College faculty discover that students can't match dates with events and that they look puzzled when classic authors are mentioned. Faculty therefore assume that students were never told about the events and were never required to read Shakespeare or Hawthorne. Even a brief look at high school curricula, however, would tell college teachers that all the stuff was in the books and on the syllabus but that it somehow didn't become part of students' knowledge (or, if it did, the college teacher just hasn't used enough writing-to-learn exercises to access it!). After more than twenty years of research in what James Britton (1970) called "language and learning," we know that it is method that makes the difference. Content and method are not opposed; one is the means to the other. To place them in opposition is to assert, ironically, that the content is not worth achieving.

There is no better way to achieve cultural literacy (or cross-cultural literacy or intercultural literacy) than through writing to learn. A WAC workshop could even be called "The Pragmatics of Cultural Literacy," if that is your interest. And if you want to cite classical precedents for your methodology, they are everywhere. Is there a better example of a language-intensive class than that of Socrates? All those teachers who just



lectured their students have been forgotten; Socrates, the expert and patient discussion leader, has continued to teach through the ages. And how does he continue to teach? Through the student, Plato, who kept the most complete learning log. If it weren't for Plato's writing in order to understand the intense debates led by his mentor, would we even have a Greek philosophical "content" to talk about? Without the "thinkwriting" of a Newton or Darwin or . . . well, you can see what I mean.

**General Education Reform.** Though colleges and universities continually tinker with required courses, enthusiasms for general education reform has been fueled by Secretary of Education Bennett in Washington, by privately funded studies and association reports, and, most recently, by the cultural literacy debate. Much WAC activity has come about as part of institutions' desire to upgrade students' writing, and this improvement has been seen as a task of the general education curriculum. Rarely (there are exceptions) does a school undertake a writing across the disciplines effort unless it already has what it considers to be a strong freshman composition course or unless it creates one. Happily, almost all faculties now see written communication as a vital component of any core. A primary goal of WAC in the future should be to make writing to learn as widely accepted.

I would urge any WAC planner, if he or she is not already part of the institution's general education or core curriculum committee, to politick for membership. Such membership offers a wonderful opportunity to raise faculty consciousness about the essential link between writing and learning. And, if you are already a member of the committee, you are in the right position to suggest WAC alternatives to a ghettoized English composition course: (1) You can design a composition course that teaches writing-to-learn skills as well as drafting, peer feedback, and research techniques; (2) you can suggest pairing or clustering the writing course with other courses so that some assignments apply to more than one class; (3) you can suggest writing-to-learn techniques that suit each course in the core and that give students practice in a variety of skills; (4) you can argue the necessity of regular faculty development for general education teachers, and you can write the proposal for the funding of these workshops; and (5) you can counter every iteration of the content-or-myth.

**Cooperation Between Colleges and Secondary Schools.** At last year's Virginia Conference on Language and Learning, a high school history teacher asked if college history teachers were doing things with writing to learn that she and her colleagues were trying in their classes. Though the answer was an emphatic yes, I realized that all disciplines face the same lack of across-levels communication among practitioners that we in English have always faced. Before WAC, college teachers of writing were concerned about what went on in the high school English classes

their students had taken; high school teachers wanted to know the same about college English classes and customarily invited the local college composition director in for a chat. Now, as WAC succeeds in diffusing responsibility and spawning variety, it will be harder to isolate a spokesperson about an institution's writing program. Who can speak authoritatively about writing in the university after WAC workshops have been going on for several years? Who can represent "the writing program" at a WAC-inspired public high school?

If we accept both the intimate connection of writing and learning and the teacher's freedom to adapt WAC theory and strategies in new ways, then we can't ask a high school or a college for a definitive outline of required writing skills. I think we need to be forthright about this in our communication with secondary schools and make a virtue of necessity. Rather than pretend that there is consensus where there are only individuals experimenting and adapting, talk up the dynamic nature of the enterprise. Rather than pretend that you are the expert on your campus, list the names and numbers of your WAC nucleus. If you have gone the extra mile and have developed an in-house WAC newsletter (the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs has about fifty of these among its 500 member institutions), be sure to show copies to those who inquire about your program; the articles by teachers give substance to your anecdotes.

It will become important to use whatever liaison between your college and the schools that you have (for example, a National Writing Project site or another in-service or recertification program) as a launchpad for networking across the curriculum. Like Bernadette Glaze, the high school history chair who serves as assistant director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project and who has organized annual language and learning conferences in Virginia, take as your goal to find out what's going on in your area in both colleges and schools. Use the easiest means—newsletter, conferences, informal meetings between the WAC rep from a college department and the WAC rep from its high school counterpart—to get people talking. Knowing that college professors are using writing-process and writing-to-learn techniques can boost the high school's WAC effort, and vice versa. Ignore conventional prejudice that says that high school teachers can't change the teaching methods of college faculty. I've seen it happen many times on my own campus, and every other National Writing Project site tells similar stories.

**WAC, LAC, and ?AC.** From the inception of WAC, logic has exerted pressure on the narrowness of the concept. The British Schools Council research teams in the 1960s saw that the marvelous teaching they witnessed cultivated all modes of language. Robert Parker (Martin, D'Arcy, Newton, and Parker, 1976), the American coauthor of *Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum*, 11-16 (still one of the best books in the field),



has always insisted that the movement be called "language across the curriculum." Anyone who has been involved in WAC knows that the writing part works only if reading, talking, and listening work with it. That WAC has remained a viable term probably shows that we have not yet succeeded in freeing the concept from its association with the English composition course and from our preoccupation with the production of student texts.

Logic and experience demand that we go outside conventional associations and share our findings with those who have achieved expertise in other language areas, such as reading specialists and oral communication specialists. A few years ago, a book project (Thaiss and Suhor, 1984) allowed me to work closely with several speech specialists. We were surprised to learn from one another how many techniques we shared, yet how bound we were in our assumptions about the preeminence of the language area each represented. As language teachers, we saw how much we had to teach each other about our specific fields. I've had a similar experience the past two years in working with reading specialist Tom Estes (Estes and Vaughn, 1986) in a faculty development program for Blue Ridge Community College (Virginia).

Logic also demands that we listen to those colleagues who (sometimes facetiously) remark, "If we have writing across the curriculum, why not math and science across the curriculum?" Indeed, and why not music and economics and physical exercise? In a way, of course, such remarks beg the question: "Do you mean to imply that we don't already have these subjects across the curriculum?" Just as the WAC planner should never assume that writing process and writing to learn are *not* going on in unexpected places, so no other discipline specialist should assume that students are not learning important lessons about his or her field in a nonspecialist's classroom. One of the underemphasized spinoffs of the WAC workshop is that each of us learns a lot about other subjects—as long as all the participants get opportunities to demonstrate their teaching. And, as we learn from one another, we gradually reshape our teaching to accommodate the new and varied knowledge. I am no longer the same teacher of Shakespeare or of freshman composition that I was before I began to design general education courses with sociologists and global historians and natural scientists. They are not the same teachers they were before they heard about journals and practiced in-class writing. It's no wonder that the folks who meet at the WAC workshop show up again on the general education reform committee.

I think that WAC planners should expect, even hope, to see their programs merge into more broadly conceived interdisciplinary ventures. One way to measure the success of your WAC workshops is to see, over the years, how many other cross-curricular initiatives sprout up, from research projects to team-taught courses to general education reforms to

grant proposals to degree programs to administrative offices. We have to be patient. We also have to abjure possessiveness. The longer we hold onto the WAC workshop as "our program" and the longer we stay chained to one format, the longer WAC will remain unassimilated.

Reports I hear through the network assure me that being willing to loosen the reins will not lead to our being thrown off. Indeed, as more and more people begin to own stock in branches of the endeavor, the calls for our experience become more frequent. Granted, those branches may not look like something we would have designed, but we have to live with the realization that inviting people into any workshop means that they will go off and do unique, sometimes disquieting things with the information. These variations are built into the model. Sometimes we will feel that we must intercede, as I, for example, sometimes do when a colleague's writing across the curriculum course appears to ignore process and just increase the required word count. Probably fortunately, we won't have time to intercede nearly as often as we would like. In talking with students, I have been surprised to learn how much they say they've benefited from writing assignments and teacher methods that I thought were misguided.

**WAC and "Good Writing": Who's in Charge?** In Chapter Four, Ellen Strenski raises the issue of style by describing a conflict between an English teacher and a teacher in another department, both of whom evaluated a student's paper. The other professor wanted technical language; the English professor wanted language for the layperson. To my mind, this shouldn't be an issue; it is an example of the success of WAC. The student felt the challenge of writing on the same topic for different audiences; how fortunate to have this experience before going into the business world! To demand that either teacher change criteria would falsify the experience and rob the student of a chance to learn.

While I say that conflicts in style should not be an issue, I realize that, as WAC proliferates and control of writing becomes diffused among departments (for example, through writing-intensive courses), students may encounter an even more bewildering variety of criteria than they would find in a non-WAC English sequence, where students always complain about inconsistency from teacher to teacher. If students do encounter a teacher who won't permit the first person, another who thrives on personal experience essays, a third who wants footnotes for every line, and a fourth who wants only original observations, lucky for them. That's the real world of writing, where tastes and formats differ wildly. If they get a sense of this from their WAC experience, hurray!

On the other hand, diffusion of responsibility and control may mean that the student of computer design or sociology or literary criticism might write only in a major-sponsored writing-intensive course, hence missing the fortunate frustration of writing for a teacher who doesn't

know any of the jargon—one thing that can always be said for us composition teachers is that our students always have to write down to us! It is of no small concern to many teachers of writing in schools with writing-intensive programs that students will not get the important practice of translating specialized knowledge for a lay reader. This is potentially serious, since a frequent complaint about college graduates is that they can't communicate except with fellow specialists.

We can look at this situation positively. After all, it's better for students to do substantial writing in at least one or two courses than to do none at all, even if the vocabulary is esoteric and the writer does not have to defend the assumptions of the discipline to the reader. If the writing environment in the specific writing-intensive class is salutary, then students can use the experience to overcome writing anxiety and learn through the composing process. Thus, if the alternative is nothing, then "writing intensive only" is certainly preferable.

However, this potential hazard should inspire us to richer possibilities: First, we can argue for ongoing faculty development money, in lieu of release time for writing-intensive sections, in order to train new groups of teachers each year in a variety of writing-to-learn and writing-process techniques, hence varying the experiences for students. This method truly spreads writing across the curriculum. Second, we can opt for an upper-level required writing course, taught by faculty who are not specialists in the students' majors (the University of Maryland and George Mason University do this through the English department), in addition to the writing that students do in major courses. And, third, at the very least, this problem allows us to argue more convincingly for faculty development, including release time for one or more WAC specialists who can support the writing-intensive teachers by showing them how to vary audience for their students (for example, through the case method, through writing for outside readers, and through peer response groups).

### **Our Best Hopes: People and Writing**

Though it's tempting to see our enterprise in terms of program models, teaching techniques, and course syllabi, the future of WAC, just like its present, depends on the imaginations and goodwill of people. The greatest thing we've got going for us is that people in every locale, every sort of school, and every subject area have become enthusiastic about the writing-learning connection. We may indeed have achieved a critical mass: I keep encountering teachers who've been using writing in their teaching for years—"I just started doing it one day and it worked"—and who only now are discovering that what they've been doing has been named—"I never called it anything, but I guess it was a learning log"—and that there are lots of other teachers who are equally excited about their success.

We have to remember to trust what we claim. We say that writing promotes thought, both critical and creative; we say that people who write about what they hear, read, and say come to fuller understanding. If we believe in these claims, then we can feel confident that WAC will continue to grow as long as people write and are encouraged to do so. Whatever else we have faculty do in our workshops, we must at least have them write. If we believe what we claim about writing, then the benefits of the writing will be so evident to our colleagues that they will need no push to share them with their students. Conversely, if participants do not feel these rewards, then no amount of pressure will spread writing across the curriculum, and the movement will vanish. This does not appear to be happening.

Further, I think we can also trust in the continued widening and intensifying of networks. People want to talk about these writing, learning, and teaching techniques; they want to write about them; they want to learn from others. Not a day goes by when I do not hear from two or three or six or more people, on my own campus and from all over the country, about what's going on in WAC. Nothing speaks so eloquently about the future of the movement as this frequent note: "I just wanted to let you know that I've asked for information from other people in the network. Everyone has been so willing to help."

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