PREFACE

The current collection of essays on writing across the curriculum (WAC) defines terms, presents helpful suggestions, even provides models for useful documents (everything from workshop evaluation forms to contracts for visiting consultants), and in short, makes everyone's work easier. As I read the manuscript, I found myself often agreeing, sometimes disagreeing, but always wishing that somehow this book had existed in 1974 when many of us were first embarking on the collegial enterprise now known as writing across the curriculum.

In the mid-seventies, a few colleges provided space and time for composition instructors to exchange ideas with colleagues in other disciplines. Often these conversations began as confrontations at meetings of curriculum committees, with instructors from “content” disciplines offering diatribes on the various failings of English 101. Carleton College (Northfield, Minnesota), under the academic leadership of Dean Harriet Sheridan, was the first institution that I know of to move the venue of these cross-curricular exchanges to the more civilized setting of a summer workshop. With modest funding from the Northwest Area Foundation, Carleton College instituted the first faculty writing workshops during the summers of 1974 and 1975. These workshops included under graduates who were later designated “rhetoric fellows” and during the academic year were assigned to assist instructors of writing-intensive courses, performing the functions of what we today call writing fellows or writing associates. (In 1979, when Harriet Sheridan became dean of the college at Brown University, she moved quickly to establish the well-known Brown Writing Fellows program, which she had already conceptualized and implemented at Carleton.)

In December of 1975, immediately after Mina Shaughnessy's stunning talk, “Diving In,” at the meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in San Francisco, I had the great good fortune to meet Harriet Sheridan on a cable car heading for Fisherman's Wharf. Before that cable ear ride, I was one of many beleaguered and very junior composition instructors who had spent the previous autumn as flak catcher for the faculty's frustrations over student writing. After that cable car ride, I had in my possession something that could transform angst and indignation into productive collegial exchange. I had what we then called “The Carleton Plan.” That plan had the seeds of all the basic principles of writing across the curriculum:

- Faculty writing workshops can create a nonhierarchical setting for real dialogue across disciplines.
- Curriculum change depends on intellectual exchange among faculty.
- Faculty members must feel a sense of ownership in a WAC program.
- Collaboration is the key to success, among faculty members and among students.
- Undergraduates can be integrally involved in commenting on work-in-progress and can take a leadership role in a WAC program.

- Writing across the curriculum is built on a definition of writing as a complex process closely related to thinking.
- Writing across the curriculum helps students to learn subject matter as well as to improve fluency in writing.

In 1975, I was an assistant professor at a small, private, residential liberal arts college (Beaver). Today I am a dean at a large, urban commuter campus (Queens College/CUNY). As I approach the two-decade mark of thinking about writing across the curriculum in very different institutional settings, I conclude with some confidence that the movement has created momentum for real change in the academy. WAC is not merely a catch phrase to describe a fad of the seventies and eighties. The nineties are here, and writing across the curriculum is also here.

The current text will be enormously useful to readers who are now planning to initiate or expand writing across the curriculum on their own campuses. But let me take the privilege of the preface writer by adding a few suggestions on how best to use this book. I would strongly suggest listening to the cautionary words of several contributors who warn against the quick fix and urge careful study of individual institutional settings. Those who would change curriculum must become ethnographers of their home campuses. Advice in this book—or in this preface—must not become reified. The contributors to this volume are experienced enough to provide frequent road signs, warning against dogmatism and keeping readers focused on general principles that apply to a wide range of colleges and universities. When one author slips occasionally and says, "Never do such-and-such," several others will remind us never to say never. On the whole, this text provides a useful balance between individual perspectives and collective wisdom. We all have too much to do to waste our time reinventing wheels. But we cannot forget that all wheels—even those invented by others—must be carefully road- tested on home terrain.

Although much has already been accomplished, much remains to be done. We still need a great deal more work on the place of the freshman English course in writing across the curriculum. Linda Peterson's excellent essay provides a starting point. But at far too many colleges and universities, a required first-year course often bears little connection to ambitious programs across the curriculum. Whether we like it or not, definitions of writing are communicated explicitly or implicitly in a required first-year course and those definitions become difficult to modify later. We ought to give more attention to freshman composition as a road map to understanding complex definitions of writing in college and beyond.

In 1981, in *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, my co-authors and I presented a plan for freshman composition based on the concept of contextual variability. Our goal was to map a course that would prepare students to move gracefully and fluently from one setting to another, understanding differences, learning intellectual tact. Such tact, we thought, had the best chance of developing in students the confidence to question conventions and to challenge rules. Generic approaches to freshman composition depend on understanding this paradox: rebels are people who know the landscape and who can move easily through it. Those who would keep students ignorant of the academic landscape in the name of helping them to find their own rebellious voice do not understand much about guerrilla warfare.

Whether readers accept my way of connecting freshman composition with writing across the curriculum or Linda Peterson's approach or some other interesting mode of connection, we must develop institutional strategies to make this link. Yet, it is easier on most campuses to develop

sophisticated approaches to writing almost anywhere except in the freshman composition program. On too many campuses we depend on underpaid, underprepared, and overworked adjuncts and graduate students to teach this definitive first-year course. We will have difficulty in making any productive intellectual connections until we address the larger issues of institutional priorities.

And, in fact, the most important theme in this collection is the connection between writing across the curriculum and reform in higher education. Changing institutional priorities so that freshman composition has resources and status depends on political and economic reforms. We have made very little progress in these areas. Yet, we are beginning to recognize that a coherent program of writing instruction is fundamental to reforming undergraduate education. As Shirley Strum Kenny, president of Queens College/CUNY, has remarked, “By any standards, in any institution where undergraduate education is important, writing across the curriculum is important.” The implicit message in every essay in this collection is that writing across the curriculum is central to improving undergraduate education because WAC gets at fundamental principles of teaching and learning.

Learning occurs at the intersection of what students already know and what they are ready to learn. Writing to learn then becomes more than a way for students to learn new subject matter. Journals, letters, and other cognitive writing tasks also reveal to instructors and peers something of the writers' thought processes. Writing to learn becomes a way for instructors to learn about the individuals seated in that classroom. Who are they? What do they already know? What will connect them vitally to the abstractions in our lesson plans? Writing across the curriculum means involving students in their own learning, enabling students to establish dialogue with each other, with their textbooks, with documents of their culture, and with the world.

The years of faculty workshops, writing intensive courses, writing centers, and all the other projects described in this book have led us to understand that writing across the curriculum is about more than writing or reading or problem solving or critical thinking. Writing across the curriculum is a wedge into a reform pedagogy.

Farris and Smith in this volume talk of breaking into the safe pattern of lecture/test/lecture. Writing across the curriculum has broken through this pedagogic wall. Through responding to what students write in a variety of contexts, instructors can break through the undifferentiated mass of students in a lecture hall to connect with individuals in all their diversity.

Questions of text selection—the canon—often dominate our discussions of education for diversity. But the choice of assigned texts matters much less than our ability to connect those texts to the individual and differing minds, hearts, and life experiences arrayed before us in the classroom Writing across the curriculum implies a set of powerful ways to make classrooms interactive. And an interactive classroom is one that is much more likely to respect difference.

Writing across the curriculum means incorporating student responses into teaching. When we take student responses into account, we give new meaning to teaching for diversity. A student born in Cambodia sits in a history classroom and writes a journal entry on U.S. immigration policy in the early twentieth century. An African-American born in Jamaica (Queens) writes a first draft of a critical analysis of *Huckleberry Finn.* An Italian-American born in Howard Beach works with the other two students in a peer group assigned to exchange individual approaches to solving calculus problems. The three students write acknowledgments for the interest and attention that the other students paid to their work-in-progress.

When classrooms in all disciplines focus on writing as a process of self-discovery and as a means for social interaction, we are really attending to the voices of diversity in our classes.

Yet, as we debate the expansion of the curriculum to encompass the globe, the most resilient enemy of WAC, fear over "coverage," gains strength. The first issue raised by wary faculty members had always involved the "C word." And the obsession with covering material is often more to bolster the professor's sense of self-esteem than it is to benefit students. Often we race through material, so that instructors who teach our students in later courses cannot accuse us of neglecting to mention something. If students don't remember what we said, well, that's their problem, but we can feel smug about covering the material. I'm still waiting for a T-shirt inscribed with the motto "I know that I taught it because I heard myself say it."

But in the nineties, as the academy plays a zero-sum game about what to cover, we need to work harder to communicate that WAC is a way of changing the rules of the game altogether. WAC provides practical means for reconceptualizing the goals of a course or of a curriculum plan. One of the most important outcomes of faculty writing workshops, as the essays in this volume confirm, is the reexamination of practices in light of redefined goals—goals that are realistically directed to student learning, not to abstract conceptions of what should be covered in a course. As I have said very often in writing workshops, the unexamined syllabus is not worth teaching; the unexamined curriculum is not worth implementing.

WAC is as timely in the nineties as it was in the seventies. But in addition to its resilience, WAC has also matured. We now have important works of scholarship to provide perspective for ongoing activities. One of the most significant scholarly works is *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990, A Curricular History* by David R. Russell. Russell demonstrates that attempts to incorporate writing instruction have always been linked with reform movements in higher education. The history of writing in the academic disciplines is a story of teachers committed to the principle that education must be respectful of students' abilities to be active participants in their own learning. More than a century of reform should encourage our efforts to make preface of what is past. *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs,* to which this essay is preface, provides a road map for continuing reform.

ELAINE P. MAIMON

QUEENS COLLEGE/CUNY