4

A High School/College Writing Across the Curriculum Project: Successes and Constraints

Brenda Greene and Lorraine Kuziw

A colleague of ours recently noted that when he is providing school workshops he can always tell whether faculty members requested or were mandated to participate. Faculty members who have requested staff development always respond differently from faculty members who feel they have no choice about participating. Administrators often come up with creative ideas that affect curriculum; however, they also often neglect to get faculty input when it comes to implementing these ideas. Thus we have come up with a rule that should be learned by all those who wish to develop writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs: be aware of the processes that administrators have used in trying to institute curriculum reform and do not go into those territories where you have not been invited by all involved. Unfortunately, we did not formulate this rule until after we had ventured into territories unknown.

Our high school/college WAC project was developed in response to a high school administrator's desire to enrich the social studies curriculum. During the summer of 1989, the chair of the social studies department approached our college basic language skills coordinator (Brenda Greene) and asked if we could collaborate on a project that would provide students with skills that would enable them to be successful in high school and enhance their chances of going to college.

After much discussion and a series of meetings, Brenda and the social studies chair wrote a proposal that was funded by both the high school and the college. They developed a program that would use writing to reinforce what students were learning in social studies. One basic goal of this program was to create a learning environment in which tutors from the college's tutorial program would come to the high school on a daily basis and work with small groups of students.

The Social Studies Enrichment Center was scheduled to open during September of 1989; however, because funding for the center was approved after the academic year began, September and October were designated for program planning. A faculty resource person (Lorraine Kuziw) from the college was designated to coordinate the project and implement the program. Lorraine accepted this position in mid-October and immediately became aware of the absolute necessity of prior planning and preparation.

This paper provides an overview of the program that was developed, identifies its successes and constraints, and makes some recommendations for incorporating writing to learn in the social studies curriculum. It is written from the college perspective, and it also includes the voices of high school teachers and students. Its intent is to provide would-be administrators and teachers of WAC programs with our reflections on what is needed and on what works and does not work in the development of WAC programs.

Program Description

The underlying premise of our high school/college program was that the responsibility for writing instruction should not be restricted to teachers within English departments. We viewed writing instruction as the responsibility of the entire school community and we believed that teachers in all disciplines should find ways to incorporate writing into their classes. We were intent on helping our high school colleagues understand this concept, and the inclusion of writing in the social studies curriculum seemed an ideal place to start.

The program was situated in a large, inner-city high school in Brooklyn, New York. Many of the students who attend this high school do not go on to college. During the 1988–1989 academic year, only 3.8 percent received Regents diplomas; 2.9 percent passed the English Regents exams; 19.6 percent passed the Global Studies Regents exam; and 57 percent passed social studies. Students' performance is often poor because the exams require the interpretation of questions and the writing of essays. The Social Studies Enrichment Center was created to serve these students. The targeted student population consisted of students in honors classes (those reading at grade level) and students in college discovery classes (those reading two or more levels

below grade). As the social studies chair stated, the goal of this WAC program was "to move students from functional literacy in an economically impoverished and culturally limited environment towards collegiate literacy."

The Enrichment Center, open during three school lunch periods, was staffed by a paraprofessional who maintained and monitored the center and often tutored students. A college tutor was assigned to assist students with writing and research. In the center were project assignment sheets (students completed three projects per semester), supplementary books, and a computer used for telecommunications.

Faculty Development

Each semester Lorraine, the faculty resource person (FRP), worked with two teachers who each had two classes that participated in the program. Lorraine held one workshop and thirteen staff meetings during the program. In addition, she provided teachers with specific recommendations for incorporating writing into their classes, for example, in the form of logs or essays. It is primarily in this area that we believe this program did not achieve all that it could have.

As we progressed through this program, it was frequently pointed out that at least one semester is needed to plan such a WAC program. Because we did not allow for adequate planning, many of the difficulties that we encountered in the program's implementation were problems that could have been overcome if meetings and workshops had been held a semester or year before the program went into effect. This situation was further complicated by the fact that the FRP did not have an opportunity to become more familiar with the content-area curriculum, the particular school setting, and the needs of the particular school population. We also realized the importance of securing teachers who were committed to the program and to the philosophical concept of WAC.

Planning meetings could have enabled the FRP to collaborate with teachers to develop materials and strategies for addressing the curriculum needs of the social studies program. Moreover, she could have also had an opportunity to observe a variety of social studies classes. In short, she could have been provided with a more comprehensive context for developing and implementing the WAC program. However, since the FRP began in October, she did not have adequate time to plan and found herself faced with a situation where writing projects were already designed and in place, where teachers were halfway through the syllabus, and where the introduction of new elements such as logs and writing instruction was difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, much of her assistance to teachers was in response to needs voiced by teachers and tutors. We believe that a WAC program should have the

flexibility to respond to needs as they arise, but to run a program on this premise is problematic.

Despite the limitations discussed above, the FRP attempted to work with the faculty. Since no one had release time for this program and all had full teaching schedules, meetings were difficult to schedule and there was full attendance only once in thirteen meetings. As a result, coordination of efforts, communication, and assessment tended to be fragmentary. The above factors made it difficult to assess immediately that teachers were not incorporating writing into their social studies classes. While teachers did assign extra projects and essays, tutors were the ones who worked with students on these writing activities.

The FRP used the meetings to present instructional materials that would enable teachers to assist their students in using writing as a way of learning. For example, since one of the main objectives of the program was to improve student performance on the essay portion of the Regents Competency Test (RCT) or the Regency Exam, the FRP analyzed the test essay questions to determine the rhetorical strategies needed to answer the essay questions adequately. She then prepared materials that described the format of the questions and that illustrated ways in which teachers could adapt their social studies essay assignments, tests, and projects to that format.

Teacher response to materials prepared by the FRP varied. Because teachers were required to assign certain projects that had been determined by the department before the WAC program started, the use of the materials was fragmentary. Some teachers developed essay questions that incorporated the suggestions made by the FRP; however, many left all aspects of writing and analysis of essay exams to the tutors. Rather than provide classroom time in which students could actually engage in the process of using writing as a way to learn, teachers operated on the premise that students' writing would improve with the aid of the Enrichment Center tutors.

The major limitations to the faculty development component of our program were therefore that teachers were asked to revise their curriculum after the semester had begun; teachers had not agreed to make such curriculum changes; and teachers had not committed themselves to the philosophical concept of WAC. These limitations underline the absolute necessity of providing for prior planning meetings and workshops at least one semester before such a program begins.

Program Successes

Although faculty development was limited, the program was successful in a number of other ways. Students and teachers found the Enrichment Center quite helpful. Approximately 350 students participated in the

program and student attendance was excellent. The table below indicates the improved student performance in courses and on tests after one year of participation in the WAC Program.

WAC STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Percentage of Students Passing	1989	1990
Social Studies in General	57.1%	59%
Global Studies Regents Exam	19.6%	29%
U.S. History & Government Regents	35.9%	42.2%

Unfortunately, because of financial constraints, our college could not continue its role in this collaborative effort, but the Enrichment Center at the high school is still in operation. Tutors are working three days per week and some of the materials prepared by the FRP have now been incorporated into the curriculum.

The clearest indication of student opinion about the Enrichment Center was that 40 to 45 students per day came to the center during their lunch period to work on projects or homework or to study for Regents exams. According to one of our tutors, the initial attitude of students was that they could not find enough information to write about, but after receiving tutorial assistance, they discovered how to find and use information and consequently were more confident about their writing.

In June 1990 a survey was given to the students in the four pilot classes. About 75 percent of these students felt their writing had improved. They also indicated that they had learned more. Some of their comments were, "I got a higher grade"; "I know more"; "It helps me understand what I learn about in class"; "I can write faster"; "I know how to find information"; "I improved my map skills"; "I have extra study time"; "I write better essays"; and "Before I just wrote what was in the book, and now I can write what's not in the book." These comments reveal that students appreciated and felt they benefited from the program. They had learned to synthesize information from a number of sources: class lectures, class texts, and materials from the Enrichment Center. Students' comments also indicated that they needed and appreciated individual attention. They stated: "It's a great place to go when you need help"; "I learned to express myself and be more creative"; and "They treat you with courtesy and respect and make you feel like a real human being."

All teachers whose students participated in the Enrichment Center responded to a survey. Their comments about the value of the center also corroborated the students' opinions. One teacher felt that the extra writing assignments, the tutorial assistance, and the Enrichment Center itself had a positive effect on student learning. Another teacher

stated that these additional projects "reinforced the material covered in class," and that the Enrichment Center improved students' abilities "to put material into their own words and to discover information on their own." He also stated, "Students who did not do projects, did not increase knowledge the same way"; and "The center seems quite able to serve a cross-section of courses in the department. It is highly desirable that its utilization be encouraged and its continuance be made certain."

These comments reveal that teachers and students saw the program as valuable. In the words of one teacher, the help that tutors gave students with homework and projects provided "the support the students need in the learning process" and decreased "most of our students' fears of reading, answering questions, and writing essays." The words of the paraprofessional epitomize the symbolic value that the center had for students. "Many students are motivated to return, and this is an encouraging sight. They prefer to come in and do their homework rather than spend their time in the halls. They also come back and show me the high marks they have received on the projects they did in the Enrichment Center."

Finally, the social studies chair saw the center's value as follows: "Given the fact that ten to fifteen students each period report to the Enrichment Center at a time of their own choosing, this must be deemed a great success. Self-discipline is an essential element in educational success."

Program Constraints

A major problem encountered in the program was the realization that the high school personnel and the FRP did not have the same pedagogical views about the use of writing as a way of learning. For the high school teachers in the program, the writing component of the collaborative program existed outside of their classroom; their perception of the program was that their responsibility was to assign extra essays and projects for students to complete in the Enrichment Center with the assistance and guidance of tutors. The FRP, however, operated on the premise that the writing component should have been an integral part of the social studies classroom itself. According to this view, the teacher should be responsible for instructing and engaging the students in various writing activities (note taking, summarizing, research skills, essay structure and organization, learning logs, and essay questions), and the Enrichment Center, through its tutors and materials, should help the students use writing to facilitate, reinforce, and enhance their knowledge of social studies.

The conflict between teachers' and the FRP's perceptions of WAC

was manifested in the way teachers responded to the kinds of assignments recommended by the FRP. In referring to logs, for example, one pilot teacher said that they were not successful with his classes. In his words, "Students were reluctant to do work that they perceived as not part of the curriculum. Perhaps I should have ridden them a little harder on this issue, but I did not want to teach them to write by negative coercion. Students did enough writing in class and they felt the logs were superfluous."

Two problems can be seen here: first, it is counterproductive if students infer that any work they are doing is superfluous or extraneous, or that it "doesn't count toward the grade"; second, it seems that the teacher himself was not convinced of the value or importance of logs. If the use of logs had been discussed and established during program planning, pilot teachers would have been both convinced of their value and committed to using them.

Although most teachers balked at the use of logs, one pilot teacher did use logs in the second semester and found them helpful to the students and herself. She explained, "The students were able to give me feedback about the lessons dealt with during the week. In many instances, I was able to respond to some of the students' comments." This teacher's response validated our wanting logs to be a significant component of the classroom. We wished to reinforce the idea that in addition to helping a teacher assess her effectiveness, logs could also be a more relaxed form of student writing, a private dialogue between teacher and student, and an indication to the teacher of the connections students make between information presented in class and their own lives and experiences.

Perhaps a good way of convincing teachers about the usefulness of logs would have been to have the teachers themselves keep logs. Logs could have been used to maintain an open line of communication between teachers and the FRP and could have also served as a way for teachers to define, analyze, and work through their successes and problems with incorporating writing into their social studies courses. Both teachers and the FRP could have then used such logs to assess the effectiveness of the program.

It would also have been helpful if the tutors had kept logs. This would have allowed us to have more immediately answered and dealt with the student needs that the tutors directly observed. For example, in March a tutor informed us that many students did not know how to use a book index, a card catalog, or a table of contents, and some could not read a map. If we had known this sooner, we could have immediately developed a lesson on the use of social studies research materials and methods.

Evaluation Constraints

The criteria used to evaluate the program and students' growth in writing were also problematic. There were difficulties with pretests and posttests, the nature and grading of such tests, and their correlation with students' performance on the RCT and Regency exams. Furthermore, we were unable to secure a consistent student pilot group, reducing the number of students whose writing growth we could assess over the full year.

Students were pretested and posttested at the beginning and end of each semester. In a forty-minute period, they were asked to summarize a newspaper article that the teachers had selected. Although the FRP had suggested that the teachers use a holistic process for grading the essays, she noticed that students who extensively copied from the article received higher grades than those who painstakingly tried to summarize the article in their own words. In view of the results of this grading process, we believe that either all graders should have been required to attend a workshop on how to grade the summary, or outside graders should have been used.

One pilot teacher gave his students an article on the 1989 revolution in Romania. The problem here was the way the teacher presented the assignment. In trying to make students feel less pressured and more at ease with their writing, and in not wanting complaints for springing extra work on his students, the teacher told students that the tests did not count toward their grade. Again, if teachers have a misconception about the relationship of writing to learning, they may convey this misconception to students, who will probably also see writing as a superfluous rather than a learning activity in their social studies classes. All of this made the validity of our pretests and posttests problematic.

One suggestion for a pretest at the beginning of the term would be to inform students that they will be given an open-notebook essay test at the end of the second week of school. During those two weeks, students would cover a social studies unit. They would be given instruction on how to take notes and would take notes in preparation for the exam. This could both provide students with a meaningful context for note taking and make them less apprehensive about taking an exam. As a follow-up, students could compare the quality of their notes with the quality of their graded essays. In such a test, students would also be responding to a question, not just paraphrasing (or copying) as they would with a summary pretest. This is not to minimize the value of learning to summarize; teachers, for example, could show students how to summarize when preparing them to do research in the Enrichment Center.

In addition to using pretests and posttests to assess the effectiveness

of our program, Regents and RCT scores were also used as indicators: if test scores improved on either the objective or essay sections, or both, then we hypothesized that learning increased through the added writing component.

Finally, we found that there are often teachers in the content areas who may themselves have writing problems or inhibitions about writing. Thus it may be necessary to assess which faculty members could benefit from or are most capable of participating in a program that promotes writing as a way of learning. One way to ascertain this could be to obtain some sort of writing sample from all faculty. This information could then be used as a motivational device for teachers to explore strategies for improving their own writing as well as the writing of their students and could fully illustrate the concept of using writing as a way of learning.

Budgetary Constraints

Our budget came from two sources: the college and the high school. The college provided $6,730 for the FRP, tutors, and staff development, and the high school provided $18,950 for equipment (including a computer), supplies, and a staff person (paraprofessional). If we had continued with the program, we would have recommended that the budget be revised to allow more release time for staff development.

Since planning is a central component in the implementation of a WAC program, the need for adequate compensation prior to and during the program is critical for its success. This compensation can come in the form of money and/or release time. We found that release time was crucial, especially for the FRP, who needed time to prepare materials and consult with teachers who were often burdened with administrative responsibilities not related to instruction. Although the FRP was compensated monetarily, she also had a full teaching load (nine courses throughout the academic year). The high school teachers in our program had full teaching schedules and were paid only for their attendance at meetings and for their hours spent marking the writing samples. This demanding workload for both the FRP and the teachers greatly reduced the amount of time that could be devoted to the program.

Program Recommendations

We explored the unknown without testing the waters. We tacitly accepted the idea that teachers would buy into the concept of WAC and would be willing to accept whatever we were selling. This collaborative program needed workshops and meetings prior to its

implementation for the following purposes: to create a curriculum that incorporated the teaching of writing strategies into the social studies content area; to ensure that tutor efforts and activities were not haphazard but were coordinated with teacher in-class efforts; to secure faculty members who were committed to (and capable of) incorporating the teaching of writing in their content area; and to work out scheduling problems so as to obtain a consistent student group for one year.

We believe that collaborative projects work best when faculty members are brought together as colleagues who share ideas, identify concerns, and suggest possible ways to resolve their concerns. Therefore, we recommend and view it as critical that all teachers involved in any collaborative project be brought in and consulted as soon as any initial discussion of curriculum reform begins.

We would also recommend that the participating teachers and resource person be given release time from at least one course per semester. Although this could place a strain on a school budget, the participating teachers could, for example, exchange their required hall, study, or lunch duty for tutoring duty in an enrichment center. The staffing of an enrichment center by teachers instead of tutors and a paraprofessional could serve two purposes: to decrease the amount of money needed for tutors, and to provide teachers with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the individual needs and capacities of the students. Teachers would be able to observe their students engaged in the process of writing. As they saw their students struggling in this process, teachers might come to see their roles not only as disseminators of information, but also as guides and facilitators to help students learn ways of absorbing, using, organizing, and synthesizing different kinds of information.

Finally, we learned that there should be no outsiders in a collaborative program. The FRP was an outsider thrust in the middle of the semester into a learning environment with which she had not yet familiarized herself. Consequently, she spent the first year during the implementation of the program becoming an insider. Unless teaching strategies, projects, and assignments are agreed upon and developed by all program participants before the implementation of the program, the resource person will appear to be a taskmaster whose role is to have teachers perform superfluous activities. The resource person should have adequate time to become acclimated to the learning environment, so that he or she can move from the perspective of theory to realistic praxis. This process will also enable teachers to have time to reflect on their teaching and on the value of incorporating writing into their content-area courses.