

Double Helix: History and Origins

The first time that the idea for a critical thinking and writing journal housed at Quinnipiac University was committed to paper for discussion on our campus was November 11, 2008, following our creation of the first regional WAC association in the country (what is now called NEWACC¹). The idea for the regional association grew from the need in tough economic climates to provide a clearinghouse of tools and ideas for greater New England area colleges and universities with an interest in WAC or with an existing WAC or WID program. Creating a journal seemed to those of us involved in WAC at Quinnipiac University to be a natural outgrowth of the effort to create a regional association. Our hope was that issues common to those area schools and universities could find a critical articulation in a journal for which we all provided editorial leadership.

The critical aim of the journal was to explore and expand the linkages between critical (and creative) thinking and writing-across-the-curriculum efforts at our respective institutions. By 2008, we were hosting our second international conference at Quinnipiac, and it occurred to the campus WAC steering committee (QUWAC²) that the biennial conference provides a promising venue for the new journal: every two years, an issue devoted to papers selected from the conference program might be used to showcase strong work from the conference, and then during the odd year, papers on a separate topic in the broader subject area of critical thinking and writing might be published in a separate issue unconnected to any conference topic. Thus, one issue of *Double Helix* would be created per year.

At the November 2008 meeting of our steering committee, someone asked why we named the journal *Double Helix*. It originates from the work of longtime WAC advocate and teacher of critical thinking Ann E. Berthoff, emerita from U. Mass, Boston. Ann not only published a vital circulating newsletter called *Connections* for a number of years, but in her series of books designed for teachers of writing³ she provided theoretical contexts for and exercises exploring the nexuses between critical thinking and writing. It's from one of those texts, *The Making of Meaning*, that the actual title of the journal comes:

After reading several accounts of the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule, I constructed for my own amusement a model of the composing process as a double helix, trying to let the relationships articulated in that form help me discover those of composing. I had heard Francis Crick remark that you know a model is working for you when you get more out of it than you had put in—and I was delighted to see this happen. Although the process begins at the bottom and works its way upward, in each of the units, the four acts of mind, whether perceptual, conceptual, or rhetorical, can be read from top down as well as from bottom up. Naming, opposing, defining I have identified as acts of mind, which are continuous in all phases of the composing process. (7)

¹ The New England Writing Across the Curriculum Consortium

² Quinnipiac University Writing Across the Curriculum

³ *The Making of Meaning* (1981), *Reclaiming the Imagination* (1984) and *Forming, Thinking, Writing* (1988), all published by Heinemann, Boynton-Cook.

Ann and I met when I was a faculty member at Bradford College in Massachusetts, in a faculty development workshop that she kindly agreed to run on our campus for 26 high school teachers from the area. We used *Forming, Thinking, Writing* to introduce these teams of teachers from thirteen area school districts to the power of the thinking/writing pedagogy that Ann's work promoted. Many of her ideas and much of her commitment to this linkage found their way into the WAC/WID program at Quinnipiac University, and it is this understanding of how writing works within the academy that we sought to capture in the pages of *Double Helix*.

Presently, five years after the first discussions about starting a WAC journal devoted to the many iterations of the thinking/writing connection, we have the inaugural issue. Much has happened since 2008 at Quinnipiac University: we have designed and implemented an innovative writing-in-the-disciplines program with the generous support of the Davis Educational Foundation; we have trained over 450 faculty (full- and part-time) in WAC techniques, and we have presented on our work at many national and international venues. But, I would argue, little has changed regarding the impetus and the aim for publishing a writing journal. From teaching First Year Writing classes to teaching in various Graduate Programs, we remain committed to promoting and exploring the ways in which the linkages between critical thinking and writing provide students with opportunities to do their best academic work. And we seek to publish the very strongest thinking and teaching about how best to do this.

We owe much to Glenda Pritchett, Paul Pasquaretta, Justin Hayes, and the editorial staff for *Double Helix*. Without their determination to make good on the promise from five years ago, this particular moment would be lost. We also have much to be proud of in this inaugural volume: the editorial work, the essays and perhaps most of all, the promise that once started, this vital conversation about the thinking/writing connection will find its place among the most useful contributions to pedagogy. I think Ann would approve.

Robert Smart
Chair, Professor of English
WAC Program Director
Quinnipiac University