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Changing Attitudes about General Education: Making Connections Through Writing Across the Curriculum

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As Director of a Learning Center, a faculty advisor, and a parent of two college graduates, I have frequently heard students rationalize their minimal performance in courses by saying, "It's just a gen ed." To faculty who teach general education courses[1] , who believe in the value of general education requirements and advocate a liberal arts education, those five words raise concerns. General education programs have several goals in common with Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs. These commonalities, along with several ideas about writing and learning, persuade me that WAC programs, and Writing Intensive (WI)[2] courses, in particular, have the potential to effect positive change in student attitudes toward general education courses, and ultimately to effect reform in pedagogy in general education courses.

Since 1978 when the Carnegie Foundation indicted colleges and universities for the lack of coherence in their general education programs, slow but steady progress has been made toward reforms in general education. At the same time, we have seen growth in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs; one would hope this growth would be accompanied by increased influence of WAC on college general education curricula.

Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs and general education programs share common goals. For example, both aim to broaden intellectual interests, give students practice in different modes of inquiry, and improve critical thinking, reading, and writing across the disciplines (Lucas, 1996;UNH catalog, 2000) in the hope that students gain the "ability to think like an educated person" (Menand, 1997, p.4). While the aims of general education programs are admirable, there are reasons for student disinterest in or indifference to general education courses.

Negative Student Attitudes about General Education

General education courses constitute one-third of their undergraduate curriculum, yet most students are unaware of the goals of general education. They do not see the point of taking general education courses except to fulfill some vague requirement, so they tend to choose courses that conveniently fit their schedules without regard to how the courses might be relevant to their major field of study or enhance other interests. As a result of constructing their programs in a haphazard or in a seemingly practical but misguided manner, they too often do not engage in their general education courses. Berthoff (1997) observed that until students' minds are engaged, "no meaning [is] made," i.e., no learning takes place (p. 308).

There are other well-known reasons for the students' attitude. First, universities and colleges convey the message that general education courses are unimportant or less important by offering those courses in large lecture halls where students' attendance goes unnoticed and student participation is minimized (Schilling as reported by Hardge, 1998). Second, breadth often takes priority over depth in lower division general education courses, thus reducing opportunities for higher order thinking. In survey courses, especially where classes are large, and lecture is the preferred mode of instruction, assessment tends to be done by multiple choice tests. Writing requirements tend to be limited to one long research paper, and class discussions are rare. Recently, one of our writing tutors told me he found writing in his general education courses difficult because he felt he had nothing to say; the teacher had said it all. While there is research about changing pedagogy in large classes, and there are individual efforts to make large general education classes more student centered (Bean, 1996; Brookfield, 1987), too many classes unintentionally encourage students to be passive recipients of knowledge instead of active makers of meaning. Third, some students find little challenge in their general education courses, or they perceive the teacher to have low expectations (Schilling as reported by Hardge, 1998). Although a few students complain when a course is too hard for "just a gen ed," most students associate a challenging class with a valuable class that is integral to their learning.

Fourth, and most importantly, students do not make connections among their general education courses and/or to their majors (Schneider, 1998). This disconnect may be due in part to students' immaturity, their inexperience with college, their stage of cognitive development. How-

ever, it is also due to the fragmentation in most general education curricula (Carnegie Foundation, 1978; Schneider, 1998). By fragmentation, I mean there is no discernible guiding and unifying principle for student choice of courses. The guiding principles may be clear to faculty and even to experienced students, but they are not clear to students as they experience their general education courses. Unless students have an attentive faculty advisor who takes time to help students see the relationships among courses and choose accordingly, students select unrelated courses and fail to make connections among them. This practice results in a lack of coherence in the overall program and undermines some purposes of the general education program. The Carnegie Foundation (1978) denounced such fragmentation as unjustifiable in general education, the curriculum which "should most clearly reflect institutional objectives" (p. 172). One of those objectives is to provide students with a coherent, meaningful undergraduate curriculum.

The Possibilities of WAC to Address the Problems

While WAC Programs and Writing-Intensive courses are not a cure-all, together they address the issues of the transmission model of teaching and student passivity, the lack of challenge in undergraduate courses, and, most importantly, the lack of connections and coherence in the general education curriculum. Each of the points which follows could be an article unto itself, but each one is necessarily summarized and oversimplified for this brief overview of the relationship between Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and general education.

Writing facilitates and improves learning

McLeod and Maimon (2000) point out that the concept of writing to learn has been central to WAC since its beginning; WAC serves students needs "both to write to learn and to learn to write" (p. 573). Writing helps teachers reach their goals of improved learning and student engagement because, as composition teachers know, writing facilitates and improves learning and thinking (Bean, 1996; Bertoff, 1981; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Emig, 1977; Fulwiler, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). Ever since Vygotsky clarified for us the connection between writing and thinking, researchers in composition have explored this relationship extensively. Nickerson, Perkins, and Smith (1985) claim writing is important to teaching thinking skills because "writing is so paradigmatic a case of thinking…. To teach

people to write *is* to teach them to think better in an important sense" (p. 254). Thinking on paper is writing to learn.

Researchers in composition have learned that informal writing assignments offer students the opportunity to find their voices and discover what they know about the topic (Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Fulwiler, 1988; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990). Students may write poorly in some classes because they do not think they have anything to say; sometimes they do not yet know enough. Writing to learn invites students to write about what they do not understand as well as to show what they know and understand. Students learn that they have something to say before they are expected to write formally on the subject. Through informal writing, students make connections in the course content; they are not dependent upon a lecturer to make connections for them. If our students have opportunities to think on paper before they write extended essays or take essay tests, they may feel more positive about these tasks.

Writing provides a way of assessing learning

Besides helping teachers reach their goals of improved learning, writing provides teachers a better way of assessing learning. A student's writing is a better representation of his learning than other forms of assessment, such as a multiple choice test (Bean, 1996). Vygotsky (1987) writes in *Thinking and Speech:* "With written speech, we are forced to create the situation or – more accurately – to represent it in thought" (p. 202). In other words, what students are able to put into writing represents what they really know about the subject. The student is constructing an answer rather than memorizing one. From writing, teachers can gain a better idea of what students really know and understand, versus what they have memorized.

Writing helps students make connections

Writing improves learning and thinking because it engages students in their learning and assists them to make connections. When students write, they are challenged to stretch intellectually to make connections among lectures, readings, class discussions, and prior knowledge (Bean, 1996). Levine and Cureton (1998) testify to the importance of making such connections: "The ability to make connections between, build on, and synthesize knowledge is crucial if purposeful learning and understanding are to take place" (p. 162). Unless students make connections, they

lack a context for critical thinking.

Writing assignments add rigor and depth to a course

Writing, a student-centered pedagogy, makes students feel responsible for devoting time to their courses. On the Spring 2000 evaluations of WI courses, UNH students commented that frequent writing assignments made them keep up with assignments, helped them organize their time, and helped them be prepared for class. Their comments are supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) study in which researchers found *no* campus where students claimed to spend the recommended two to three hours outside class for each class hour, yet most students received satisfactory or better grades. The students in AAC&U study reported students doing little writing for their courses. One of the AAC&U researchers, Karen Maitland Schilling (1998, as reported by Hardge) concluded that when students are not required to write often, they get the message that little is expected of them in the course. Furthermore, Schilling found many students persisted in habits they established the first year. The programs that best convey high expectations are those that send "clear and persistent…messages about what students are expected to do" (Schilling, 1998. as reported by Hardge, p. 7). Writing Intensive courses help to clarify institutional expectations about students' responsibility for their learning.

Well-designed writing assignments add rigor and depth to a course and provide students more opportunities for higher order thinking (Bean, 1996). Writing is the near-perfect tool for promoting what Cinthia Gannett (personal communication, February 6, 1992) calls "creative disequilibrium," the uncertainty that can prompt dialectical thinking and higher order thinking. Richard Paul (1994) suggests that students learn to engage in dialectical thinking when they are presented with more than one view and are required to provide evidence for both views. Writing is the ideal medium for requiring students to practice dialectical thinking because having their ideas in print allows them to step back and examine the arguments on both sides. In so doing, students apply the higher order thinking skills of analysis and synthesis.

Well-designed writing tasks also promote more careful reading (Bean, 1996), what the UNH catalog (2000) calls "reading with discernment" (p. 14). Faculty comments on the WAC surveys at UNH from 1998 to 2000 indicate that faculty used regular informal writing assignments to encour-

age deeper reading. When teachers assign writing that requires students to process content, not just regurgitate it, they convey high expectations for students and for the course (Schilling, 1998, as reported by Hardge). WAC programs, and WI courses in particular, have the potential to create and convey such messages.

A Survey of Writing-Intensive Instructors at UNH

A survey I conducted at UNH in November and December, 2000, suggests that UNH teachers concur with the research that students learn by writing. My research question was: Are WI courses, in the faculty's view, improving learning and writing as they are intended to do? My survey questions were shaped partly by faculty and student comments on previous WAC/Writing Center evaluations at UNH, and partly by my beliefs and assumptions about the power of writing and my concern for the integrity of the general education curriculum.

After several attempts at phrasing the questions, I piloted the survey questions with twenty WI faculty. Finally, I e-mailed a cover letter to 293 faculty who had taught at least one WI course since 1997 in which I explained the survey and asked for faculty participation. Faculty were asked to complete the survey posted on a web-site linked to the UNH Writing Center. I chose the media of e-mail and the website because faculty had indicated in previous evaluations a preference for e-mail and on-line surveys or evaluations. Posting the survey on a website also allowed faculty to respond anonymously. The completed surveys were sent directly to my mailbox with no sender identified. A few faculty requested that I provide either an e-mail copy or a hard copy, which I did. Fifty-two surveys were completed by the end of the semester, and two additional surveys were sent to me after the study. This constituted a return rate of 20.5%. Twenty-eight male and 26 female faculty responded; of these 29 were tenured, and another 10 were tenure-track faculty.

While the number of respondents provided only a small sample, the range of responses to the questions, the relatively even division between male and female faculty, the fact respondents came from all seven colleges of UNH, and that the majority were tenured or tenure-track faculty gives me some confidence in viewing the 54 responses as representative of most UNH faculty teaching WI courses. Many of the findings are consistent with the research reviewed above.

* Sixty-eight percent of WI faculty who responded to the survey

said they believe students learn more in WI courses than do students in non-WI sections of the same course. Some faculty had no basis for comparison because they teach only writing intensive sections. One professor commented that since he had implemented teaching strategies he learned in WAC faculty development sessions, his students had begun to make connections between class discussion, lectures, and readings. This is consistent with the research of Levine and Cureton (1998).

* Two measures of student engagement are attendance and participation. Seventy-four percent of UNH survey respondents said attendance in the WI courses is good to excellent. Likewise, seventy percent reported that student participation is satisfactory to good in their WI sections. The survey indicated that students who are required to write frequently about their reading and thinking are better prepared to participate in class, and the ensuing class discussion promotes better writing and thinking. This is consistent with the research by Chiseri-Strater, 1991.

* Writing Intensive courses tend to be smaller, as they should be. Forty-four respondents indicated their WI classes had fewer than 40 students, and half of those classes had no more than 20 students. Smaller classes mean attendance can be monitored, students can actually be expected to participate, and teachers have time to read and respond to student writing. One respondent indicated that his classes had recently become too large to continue individual conferences, and he was considering dropping the WI designation from his course.

* Writing Intensive courses increase teacher contact with students. Thirty-six percent of UNH survey respondents reported that their contact with students had increased significantly, and others noted a moderate increase in student contact. While some teachers may see the increased time as a drawback, retention experts tell us that connections to faculty and frequent contact with them positively influence students' decisions to stay in college (Tinto, 1975). Students are also more likely to commit to their assignments if they feel teachers have an interest in them and their work. The increase in face-to-face contact was attributed to conferences; however, it appears faculty included increased time for reading papers in their responses to this question.

* Two-thirds of UNH respondents said their students made effective use of teacher conferences, and 88% said students made satisfactory to excellent use of teachers' written comments on their papers.

* In addition to improved learning, UNH faculty who responded to

the survey said Writing Intensive courses improve student writing. They indicated students made improvements in grammar (50%)[3], syntax and diction (56%), tone and voice (54%), use of topic sentences (52%), thesis statements (66%), development of ideas (80%), organization (84%), coherence of argument (60%), and integration of required reading (66%). It is likely that faculty emphasized in class the areas in which they saw the most improvement – development of ideas, organization, thesis sentences, and integration of reading – and perhaps they offered instruction or models in those areas. Disciplinary faculty may feel less comfortable commenting closely on grammar, syntax, and voice than on content and organization. It is also likely that the writing improved as the students learned more about the subject (Bean, 1996).

* Asked to what extent writing was helping them reach their teaching goals, 20% responded "not at all" and another 30% said only "somewhat." This finding suggests some faculty have not integrated their reasons for using writing with their teaching goals. Writing to learn does not *add* goals; it supports and works in tandem with the teacher's goals for the course. Bean (1996) recommends that teachers look at writing assignments "as useful tools to help students achieve the instructor's content and process goals for a course" (p. xiv). This is an area where WAC Directors might direct their attention for faculty development.

Nurturing the Tie that Binds

McLeod and Maimon (2000) discuss the "actual transformative possibilities WAC offers" (p. 578). Among those possibilities they include changes in pedagogy from a teacher-centered transmission model to a student-centered model that emphasizes "active engagement with ideas and content knowledge" (p. 578). I have asserted the potential of WAC to effect positive changes in student attitudes toward general education courses by using what we know about writing and learning to reform general education. Realizing the transformative possibilities depends on several things, all of which present more challenges to WAC Directors.

1. Faculty need training in how to design writing tasks that promote analysis and synthesis so students and integrate information and make connections. Teaching students to see connections within and beyond the course should be a goal of WAC and of WI course faculty, but teaching in this way may be new for some faculty. In

designing professional development activities, WAC Program Directors and Writing Center Directors could include activities that help WI faculty incorporate metacognitive activities and develop assignments that help students make the connections explicit within and beyond the course. Writing can be the "tie that binds" discrete pieces of information, helping students to see relationships and to construct a web of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. WI faculty need support from WAC programs in the form of frequent opportunities to share what they have learned, with regular faculty development opportunities.

3. WI faculty need institutional support in the form of trained teaching assistants, Writing Fellows, or class-linked writing tutors so they are not discouraged from using writing as a means of learning.

4. WI courses need to be small enough so teachers can assign writing frequently and give timely feedback, either in writing or in student conferences. WAC coordinators and writing center directors can continue advocating for reasonable limits on class size in WI general education courses.

5. WI faculty and WAC Program administrators need a voice in reforming general education reform. WAC is potentially an excellent tool for achieving the goals of general education, yet WAC program directors appear to have been only peripherally included in conversations about reforms in general education. WAC Directors need a voice on curriculum committees and in institutional efforts toward general education reform. WAC programs alone cannot effect change. Forming alliances with supporters of general education and participating in general education reform efforts are among the ways WAC Program Coordinators and Writing Center Directors can help to re-design undergraduate education. Any reform of General Education curricula should include an examination of how WAC is incorporated into the purpose and goals of general education at the institution and its potential to effect a shift from fragmented to connected learning.

Many colleges and universities have begun to reform their general education curricula; however, Schneider (1998) has found that few of the "new designs for integrative … learning infuse the entire curriculum" (p. 5). I suggest that, given administrative and financial support, WAC programs that include writing intensive courses have the potential to infuse the general education curriculum with the momentum to integrate, rather than fragment, students' academic experiences.

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Endnotes

[1] For purposes of this paper, general education courses is understood to mean those courses or areas of study required of most students.

[2] At UNH, Writing Intensive courses are those courses in which students are encouraged to participate in the full writing process from prewriting to revision; both formal and informal writing are required, and at least 50% of the grade is based on writing assignments.

[3] The percent in parentheses indicates percent of faculty reporting improvement in that area.