

# A Reflective Strategy for Writing Across the Curriculum: Situating WAC as a Moral and Civic Duty

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Two recent books on writing across the curriculum—*The WAC Casebook: Scenes for Faculty Reflection and Program Development* and *WAC for the New Millennium: Strategies for Continuing Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs*—provide two operative words that are vital to any discussion of WAC: “reflection” and “strategy.” As Chris Anson contends, “We do not always find opportunities to reflect on the teaching process, even though it makes up an important part of our professional lives [...] But such investigations work most successfully when they become public—when we talk about our teaching, share ideas, and solve problems with our colleagues” (xii). To reflect upon WAC now is timely, especially if we heed the advice of Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia, who argue in *WAC for the New Millennium*, that “higher education is facing massive change in the next few decades, which could spell trouble for WAC programs” (1). A reflection on WAC, consequently, becomes dependent on particular strategies to keep the movement vital for the future. At St. Norbert College, a Catholic, liberal arts college of 2000 students in Wisconsin, we have developed a WAC program that complements our mission to provide for a values-centered curriculum. Our program, which situates writing as a moral and civic responsibility, has been a key factor in gaining both ad-

ministrative and wider faculty support for WAC, resulting in a reaffirming and reforming of the program at both the macro and micro levels. By reflecting on writing as a moral and civic duty, we have developed concrete writing and administrative strategies that can become the foundation for reform of WAC in any college or university setting.

In an important article in *College English*—"The Future of WAC"—Barbara Walvoord examines the various challenges that WAC will have to meet in its latest stage if it will continue to be a viable method for teaching writing in college and university settings. She contends that "WAC must act now as a mature reform organization" (74) which pays particular attention to macro- (administrative) and micro- (pedagogical) level challenges. Current debates surrounding WAC often focus on assessing its feasibility—whether it "works" on both pedagogical and administrative levels. For colleges and universities, the consequent reassessment of WAC may conflict with a program's attempt to take root on a campus, due in part to tough budgetary constraints and the reactionary impulse to return to the "Golden Age" of the 3 R's, which essentially translates into a return to conventional basic English composition courses. In the Foreword to *WAC for the New Millennium*, Elaine Maimon accurately suggests that "like every educational reform movement, WAC has developed within the paradox of the academy, the simultaneous commitment to conservatism (the preservation of knowledge) and to radicalism (the generation of new knowledge). WAC's staying power as an educational reform movement is based on its resilience in resolving paradox" (vii). WAC's responses to these challenges—this ultimate paradox—has been a continual move to redefine and situate itself on campuses. Now, as Walvoord advocates, WAC needs to become more pronounced as a reform movement. WAC can and should respond to Walvoord's call for reform and in doing so address the perennial challenges that confront it. After all, WAC is simultaneously a radical and conservative movement: it returns to the basic

emphasis on writing, while persuading (especially to uninitiated) teachers, students, and administrators that a WAC approach to teaching writing is valuable and essential.

One way to address both administrative and pedagogical concerns is to view WAC from an ethical perspective, to argue that learning to write is a moral and civic duty that is central to higher education. It follows, then, that the teaching of writing is also such a duty. In “Conceptualizing Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking,” Sandra Stotsky argues that “ethical, or principled, thinking across a broad spectrum of moral concerns is fundamental to academic ways of knowing” (794). “Indeed,” suggests Stotsky, “if teachers consciously conceptualize academic writing as a moral as well as cognitive (and affective) phenomenon, their students can probably best develop the habits of responsible thinking while they are learning how to do research and to write for academic purposes” (806). Stotsky’s thesis applies broadly to WAC; indeed, a moral and civic-minded perspective on writing provides a foundation for WAC. Stotsky’s ethical perspective clearly views writing as an integral academic methodology and thereby can nudge teachers across the curriculum to uphold their responsibility to guide students in their moral and civic duties as they write. In a sense, this moral and civic focus can revitalize and reinvigorate—shall we say reform?—the teaching of writing across the disciplines. While affirming the importance of WAC pedagogically, conceiving writing as moral and civic duty justifies administrative costs, for it is hard to argue against both sound pedagogy and morality. Consequently, WAC becomes integral to the educational process.<sup>1</sup>

Walvoord’s theory that WAC must define itself as a reform movement, and Stotsky’s premise that writing is a moral and civic duty, are operative in the WAC program at St. Norbert College. Our college’s WAC program creates an *ethical space* that complements the college’s mission, which leads to a *writing space* on campus that houses instructors from across the disciplines, merging micro and macro concerns. Situating WAC in

an *ethical space*, we will suggest, can be an important foundation for programs at other institutions, for ethical and moral concerns are integral to the mission of any college or university.

### **A Brief Institutional History**

The development of the St. Norbert College writing program into a *bona fide* WAC program, and one central to the curriculum, coincides with the gradual clarification of the college's commitment to focus on values (Stotsky's moral and civic responsibility) in all of its classes. This awakening—actually re-awakening—to an explicitly values-oriented education occurred in the early 1970s. A survey of the faculty, students, administrators, and alumni disclosed a clear consensus of opinion on items considered most important to a definition of St. Norbert College: liberal arts tradition; self-educating students; Catholic affiliation; values-oriented classrooms.

At the same time, the faculty were addressing the issue concerning *who* should teach writing, little suspecting that the issues of a values-oriented education and the teaching of writing were related. The faculty voted to drop the freshman composition requirement in favor of courses in any discipline designated as “verbal skills.” In the late 1970s, with the arrival of a new academic dean, came a thorough revision of the general education core. One of the results was that in the 1980s, writing became still more prominent. Verbal skills courses were now chosen from courses in the general education core at both the lower (first-year and sophomore) and upper (junior and senior) bienniums. The institutional foundation was in place for WAC.

Two key developments occurred in the 1990s. The first was the renovation of the writing center, which became a place for tutoring as an important stage in the process of writing an essay, rather than primarily a remedial center for under-prepared writers. The second, and more far-reaching, undertaking was the complete revision—Walvoord's term “reformation” applies—of

the writing policy and practices. This task took two years to complete and resulted in a faculty-endorsed WAC model that is published in the college's *General Education Handbook* and college catalog (available through the SNC website). This model, based on process writing and writing-to-learn pedagogies, includes specified Writing Intensive (WI) courses and establishes writing expectations for the major disciplines or discourse communities. The revised program thus promotes writing in all disciplines as an integral part of a liberal arts education; it also emphasizes that different disciplines have particular methodologies and writing conventions. These revisions were not new, of course, but the systematic application of them, at St. Norbert at least, was *evolutionary*.

What was *revolutionary* at St. Norbert in both concept and in practice—and indebted in considerable measure to Stotsky's argument—was that the revised program placed writing within a moral framework, tying it even more closely to the mission and identity of the college, further affirming the principle of WAC. The mission of WAC was designed specifically to enhance the mission of the college.

To give an example, the *St Norbert College Catalog* defines its educational philosophy as follows: "to provide a superior education that is personally, intellectually, and spiritually/morally challenging" (10). Furthermore, as a liberal arts college, its goal is to offer "an education that provides all our students with the broad knowledge, skills and experiences to live in a complex world, and an on-going commitment to enhancing our traditional strength in the liberal arts and sciences" (10). As a Catholic college, it subscribes to "the philosophy that all human activity is essentially related to human values and, therefore, it urges that this be reflected in every discipline taught" (15). Such catalog rhetoric is familiar to most of us, and we may smile ironically when we read those idealistic goals. Quite frankly, these lofty claims sometimes go unfulfilled for want of concrete and practical ways of implementing them. WAC, how-

ever, situated as a moral and civic duty provides a way of making writing, potentially, central to the entire educational enterprise and a concrete manifestation of a school's mission. Stotsky's view of writing as a moral and intellectual behavior in all disciplines or discourse communities has helped the faculty make the connection between the teaching of writing and the discussion of moral values in *all* classes.

### **WAC as a Moral and Civic Duty at St. Norbert College: A Sample Design**

To provide the ethical framework for our WAC program, we began by modifying Stotsky's "Categorization of the Academic Writer's Responsibilities," which provides the ethical framework to the program by focusing on the *respect* writers need to be concerned with as they engage in the writing process. St. Norbert's "General Writing Policy" section of its WAC program begins with a general introduction to the writing process and then situates this process into an ethical framework:

#### **Respect for the Subject**

*Students should engage the course material on an intellectual level, demonstrating a respect for the integrity of subject material. Thus written work must reflect that respect for the subject by displaying that the writer has honestly and sensitively explored the subject and presented it in an intelligent and well-organized form. Such respect also means that students will be careful not to plagiarize.*

#### **Respect for the Reader**

*Students should demonstrate that they respect the values and concerns of their readers. Thus written work should address the needs of its audience, which includes an intelligent, coherent, and grammatically correct presentation of information; a use of unbiased language to avoid sexist or other pejorative rhetoric; and an awareness and tolerance*

*of alternative viewpoints.*

### **Respect for Language**

*Students should join the discourse community of the course and present written work that reflects an understanding of and respect for the conventions of that community. Thus written work should use the proper language (or terminology) of the course, the proper format, and the proper documentation style.*

### **Respect for Fellow Students**

*Students should respect their fellow students as writers. Thus students have an obligation to turn in their assignments on time (since instructors often respond to essays only after all are submitted), to keep library sources available to classmates, to respond constructively to fellow students' written drafts when working collaboratively, and to turn in only original written work.*

### **Respect for Self**

*Students should take pride in and ownership of their writing. They will assume personal responsibility for all elements of their written work. (St. Norbert College 2001-2003 Catalog 74-75)*

Though the listing of “respects” is cast as responsibilities that students must meet in their writing, the clear implication is that instructors will guide students directly in the ethical obligations of being a writer in the academic setting, which will extend to writing in the workaday world. Thus the ethical framework is an overarching statement that allows for a philosophical discussion about writing and its conventions across the disciplines, as the following selected examples illustrate. “Respect for the Subject” leads to a discussion of what it means to maintain the “integrity of subject matter,” while it allows for the prac-

tical discussion of plagiarism that is best discussed from a disciplinary perspective. While discussing the “Respect for the Reader” and “Respect for Language” sections, instructor and students would be concerned about the importance of audience generally and the specific disciplinary audience that is tied in with the discourse conventions of that particular community. As Robert Jones and Joseph J. Comprone stress in “Where Do We Go Next in Writing Across the Curriculum,” WAC

must work toward balancing humanistic methods of encouraging more active and collaborative learning in WAC courses with reinforcing the ways of knowing and the writing conventions of different discourse communities. In other words, teaching and research need to be combined in a way that encourages joining conventional knowledge and rhetorical acumen. Only then will students know enough to negotiate between the constraints of different fields and the self-imposed needs of their individual intentions. (61)

By focusing on the ethical concerns involved in writing in a discipline, the instructor and students do indeed negotiate about writing conventions and the ethical repercussions of writing. To restate briefly, the ethical dimension to WAC becomes integral to the pedagogical concerns of teaching writing generally and specifically within disciplines.

### **Implications of WAC as a Moral and Civic Duty: Other Colleges and Universities**

WAC is robust at St. Norbert College, thanks in part to our adapting of Stotsky’s emphasis on morality and writing that has led to macro-level reform. Surely any liberal arts institution or any institution with a religious affiliation will be responsive to the notion of writing as a moral and civic responsibility. But religious and liberal arts colleges do not have a corner on values. When Stotsky calls writing a moral phenomenon, she does not mean that such is the case only at religious liberal arts



schools. Stotsky's phenomenon applies to all institutions of higher learning.

The general benefits of an ethical space for WAC at any institution are fourfold:

1. It can convince faculty members that they should share in the teaching of writing since each discipline—as well as each individual member of a discipline—is concerned with the ethical obligations of its practitioners.
2. It can persuade students that writing is fundamental to all disciplines, especially when writing is seen as both a product and a process that involves moral responsibility.
3. It should improve students' writing ability across the curriculum as they strive to become better thinkers and writers in their discourse communities, with the guidance of instructors.
4. It should justify WAC to the faculty and administration in terms of pedagogical and administrative costs. Some costs, of course, are monetary, and WAC can be an expensive endeavor when class size is reduced across the curriculum to account for writing, not to mention administrative costs of a WAC program that will include training, assessment, and so forth. But there are other costs as well: the cost faculty may feel when they pare down content in order to allow for writing instruction, or the cost for faculty as they spend more time responding to writing.

How, then, can other institutions employ the philosophy of WAC as a moral and civic duty? The following three steps, based on the St. Norbert experience, seem fundamental to this application:

1. In accord with Walvoord's advocacy of macro-level reform, an institution's writing program should be defined concretely in terms of the college's or university's mission statement. It must be central to the educational focus of the school, a part of its institutional identity.
2. The case for the inclusion of writing in the institution's mis-

sion statement can be made based on the recognition that writing is not only an intellectual but also a moral behavior and one of the best ways to engage students in the examination of moral values. As such, writing should be a central concern of any college or university. As Stotsky posits: "Indeed, it is possible that learning to understand and observe the obligations embedded in academic writing may contribute more to the development of a student's moral character as a citizen than discussions of the teacher's personal values and the moral meaning of historical events, contemporary public issues, fictional dilemmas, or applied science and technology" (798-99). And, as Stotsky further suggests, the moral principles involved in writing "can be taught without indoctrinating students"; these principles "can be developed in a multi-religious society without recourse to specific religious values" (806).

3. Writing, considered as a way of teaching moral and civic duty, logically stretches across disciplinary lines and in fact includes all disciplines, thus promoting WAC in two ways. First, all disciplines should share the responsibility for teaching writing since writing in any discipline is an important way to teach students to reflect on their moral and civic responsibilities in general. Second, each discipline needs to teach writing in its own discourse community, not just for the practical purpose of introducing students to particular writing conventions or styles, but also to involve them in a sophisticated manner in the ethical concerns that arise within that particular subject. Instructors, one hopes, would wish to promote morally responsible conduct in their fields of study.

Furthermore, an ethical focus on WAC can aid in both the developing and sustaining of WAC. As Eric Miraglia and Susan H. McLeod report in *Writing Program Administration*, "WAC programs are still being born and the landscape continues to be dynamic" (46) because WAC "seems to be attaching itself to (or becoming part of, or working in tandem with) other educational

movements as they come along—critical thinking, freshman seminars, learning communities, computers across the curriculum” (57). And may we add *ethics across the curriculum*? Miraglia and McLeod conclude that “three compelling and related factors [. . .] contribute to the long-term endurance of WAC programs”: administrative support philosophically and financially, “grassroots/faculty support,” and “strong, consistent program leadership” (48). Jones and Comprone contend that “one of the reasons WAC has yet to establish any permanent presence in universities is its failure to coordinate the administrative, pedagogical, and research aspects of its program” (61). A WAC program centered around ethical concerns, as we have argued, can certainly address positively Miraglia and McLeod’s compelling factors as well as Jones and Comprone’s call for coordination.

Defining WAC as a moral and civic duty, of course, can itself become mere catalog rhetoric. Such a reform philosophy is a guiding philosophical principle, but does not necessarily guarantee that WAC will be self-sustaining and fruitful. Like any WAC program, St Norbert’s needs much nurturing, lots of faculty training, writing center tutor training, budgetary discussions with the administration, a continual concentration on program assessment, and so forth. But the most important implication may be that by fusing the macro with the micro issues, we have situated WAC firmly within the college’s identity. The college now pays attention to WAC because it defines who and what we are. Our President and Academic Dean, believe it or not, often use WAC as a “marketing tool” to attract students to our campus, especially since *U.S. News and World Report’s America’s Best Colleges* (2003 edition) has a separate listing for schools embracing “writing in the disciplines” where “programs typically make the writing process a priority at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum” (114). It is hard to wince at such marketing moves when writing is involved in this way! Barbara Walvoord claims that “WAC must act now as a mature

reform organization [. . .] needing to reinterpret, to dive in, to take its place in what history may call the era of teaching, the era of education reform; must work to refine and reshape its goals and to move skillfully, powerfully [. . .] among the complex forces and discourses of the academy” (74). And Miraglia and McLeod argue that WAC is shape-shifting “into a new form of what WAC has been all along—a renewed emphasis on undergraduate teaching and learning in higher education” (58). A moral base to WAC may be considered one of those new forms.

This article began by claiming that WAC needs to reflect and strategize to ensure its viability. While WAC programs by nature deal with the nuts-and-bolts of the present, they by necessity must project a vision for the future if they are to be useful. Situating writing as a moral and civic duty can provide an unshakeable foundation for future growth and evolution of a college’s curriculum on the macro and micro levels. On the macro level, for example, the movement to incorporate service-learning opportunities into the curriculum can be enhanced by a civic-based WAC program, for what can be more instrumental to public service than having citizens who can clearly articulate themselves in writing that has at its heart an ethical dimension? WAC in this light can be a powerful ally to outcome-based assessment. On the micro-level, such a WAC program can introduce critical discussion about the complex issues related to intentional and unintentional plagiarism. WAC programs must be elastic while being realistic in their goals. And these programs should be based on reflective strategies that provide a sound foundation for writing that is integral to the mission of any institution of higher learning. Any WAC program may want to consider centering itself in terms of such moral and civic duty.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The terms *moral* and *ethical*, we understand, are highly charged words. For this essay, we use *moral* and *ethical* inter-

changeably to denote, as Stotsky defines, “the various principles, or ethical constraints, entailed by academic research and writing” (795), which help “students understand that many, if not most, of the intellectual standards they are expected to meet in their writing should also be seen as ethical responsibilities to their readers” (799). *Moral* and *ethical* are further defined in St. Norbert’s mission statement, where moral and ethical development of students encourages them “to come to grips with cultural and societal change so as to confront, to shape and to grow with the future” (12) and “to clarify their own values and embrace their beliefs from personal conviction. The campus, like the pluralistic society in which we live, offers a laboratory for testing and strengthening human values” (13). We use *civic* to refer to the responsibilities citizens have to their society, responsibilities defined by the college as students “*understanding and serving* their world . . . using their talents, for the betterment of family, local community, society, and humankind” (12). While we recognize that these terms are slippery with multiple meanings, we intend to define them in a way so that we can apply them to practical writing situations.

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