Up Close and Personal with a WAC Pioneer: John Bean

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Reputation speaks volumes, and when it comes to a towering reputation in WAC, John Bean stands as an icon. He would also hate every word in the preceding sentence, for John Bean, Professor of English and Consulting Professor in Academic and Professional Writing at Seattle University, sees himself as just a hard-working college professor and textbook author. Period. John's modesty is as genuine as his contribution to higher education. Author of many articles in literature as well as composition and rhetoric, he is well known for his textbooks, *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings* (Longman, with John D. Ramage and June Johnson, 6th edition in press), *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* (3rd edition., Longman, 2003, with John D. Ramage and June Johnson), and *Reading Rhetorically: A Reader for Writers* (Longman, 2002, with Virginia A. Chappell and Alice M. Gillam). But the scholarly work that brings his name immediately to mind is *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1996). This book, which speaks to faculty new and old, offers solid, accessible advice on ways to consolidate the teaching-learning relationship in the college classroom.

Based on the success of *Engaging Ideas*, John is in great demand as a consultant and workshop leader. With about eighteen months advance notice, I invited John to come to my small, liberal arts college in December 2002 for a three-day workshop on writing in the major, and he was able to fit us into his sched-

ule. Carleton has had a WAC philosophy since the mid-1970s, and our faculty are quite experienced with writing as a pedagogy. Nevertheless, John captivated 27 of us for three full days. Months later, faculty still credit insights from that workshop for informing their teaching in subsequent courses—not to mention solving problems in their own professional writing.

At the 2003 CCCC meeting in New York, I invited John to sit down with me and talk about how he became a WAC guru. He graciously consented (while wincing at the "guru" label); the resulting dialogue represents a distillation of two conversations and extensive correspondence. Acting out his own pedagogy, he used questions I submitted in advance as exploratory "thinking pieces" to prepare him for the interview. The exchange not only produced thoughtful answers to my questions but demonstrated once again that the WAC strategies John Bean teaches in his books and workshops apply beautifully to situations outside of the classroom.

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C.R. My first question derives directly from something you told me when you were on my campus: You describe yourself as a WAC person who got into WAC before it existed. Could you explain how a nice Spenserian scholar found his way from a literary specialty to this area of pedagogy?

J.C.B.   I was teaching at a small, Catholic liberal arts college in Montana—the College of Great Falls—where there were only four persons in the English Department. Most of my friends came from other disciplines. My friends assigned writing in their courses but admitted to me, almost embarrassed, that they didn't know the proper technical terms to really "correct" student writing. In 1977 the Lilly Endowment announced a competitive grant program to strengthen communications curricula in liberal arts colleges. I decided to try my hand at grant writing. The exter-

nal evaluator who flew into Great Falls to size us up was Ed White. I later learned that Ed was becoming nationally prominent for his work in writing assessment. I am forever grateful to Ed for changing the direction of my career. He must have bit his lip on several occasions because my main vision for conducting workshops was to teach faculty how to use the correction symbols at the back of the *Harbrace College Handbook*. I was doing "grammar across the curriculum." I didn't have a clue about the revolution occurring in composition studies—what Maxine Hairston was to call the "paradigm shift" from current-traditional to process pedagogies. In 1978 we brought Harvey Wiener to spend the summer with us at the College of Great Falls as a consultant and workshop leader. Harvey told me about Elaine Maimon at Beaver College and helped cement my new interest in composition studies. I also discovered with my College of Great Falls colleagues that our real interest was not in grammar and correctness but in exploring deeper problems of how students learned to pose questions, think, compose, and make arguments.

In 1979 I took a new job at Montana State University, where the composition program immersed me in a supportive environment of extraordinarily talented adjunct faculty and a variety of colleagues from across the disciplines interested in the new writing-across-the-curriculum movement. My colleagues Dean Drenk, John Ramage, Jack Folsom, and I planned and co-directed the Montana State University Thinking Skills and Writing Project, funded by FIPSE. By the early 1980s, I found composition studies to be an engaging intellectual enterprise combining theory, nuts-and-bolts classroom instruction, and a love of students. In 1980 or 1981, I think, I quit subscribing to *PMLA* and began reading—cover-to-cover in those early days—both *College English* and *CCC*.

C.R. One of the criticisms of WAC holds that it is difficult to sustain in a given institution over time, given variables of cur-

*riculum and personnel. Have you observed a "WAC cycle" as
you have taught and consulted in various institutions? If so, how
would you describe it? If not, how would you answer claims that
WAC—if not a cyclical phenomenon—rides sort of a sine
curve in many institutions?*

J.C.B.   The sine curve is a good metaphor if an observer wants
to focus directly on visible WAC programs. But, to be honest, I
sometimes don't know how I would define a WAC program or
know for sure whether one actually exists. Institutions without
any WAC program by name might still have many dedicated
faculty across the disciplines assigning writing in WAC-savvy
ways. Conversely, an institution with a very visible W-course
program might isolate campus writing into W-courses only. But
there is no question that a dynamic faculty leader can generate
widespread campus involvement in WAC activities. On my own
campus, where we have no WAC program by name but encour-
age writing in every course, interest in WAC has been stimulated
by the assessment movement. By the assessment movement, I
don't mean writing assessment—such as the ground-breaking
compositional work of Ed White, Brian Huot, Kathi Yancey,
Michael Neal, Bill Condon, Bob Broad, Rich Haswell, and many
others (including your own work with portfolio assessment at
Carleton). I mean rather the work of persons who often identify
professionally with AAHE or POD, who focus on student learn-
ing, and often seem unaware of composition or WAC research.
For example, an influential book on our campus is Mary E.
Huba's and Jann E. Freed's *Learner-Centered Assessment on
College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learn-
ing* (Allyn & Bacon, 2000). This book has excellent chapters
on course design, writing assignments (which they call "assess-
ment tasks"), rubrics, and portfolios, all largely in harmony with
our own practices in WAC. But its bibliography includes almost
no work from WAC or composition scholars. It's as if two par-
allel discourses are proceeding side by side toward the same goals

without overlap. My point, then, is that WAC might be happening without being visible as a program.

C.R. Could you elaborate a bit more on what you mean by the way assessment has stimulated WAC on your campus? On many campuses, assessment is the kind of word that can clear a room.

J.C.B. To me, assessment goes wrong when it focuses too much on statistics-driven accountability for accreditation instead of on local, faculty-owned research aimed at improving student learning. The work of Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson in *Effective Grading* focuses on this kind of course-embedded assessment that promotes curricular change. The best assessment research occurs when departmental faculty discover something like, "Wow, about half the students in this chemistry lab don't know the difference between the Results and the Discussion section of an experimental report." By identifying typical problems in student performance, faculty can often discover ways to improve curricula or instruction.

Let me give you an actual example. The Department of Finance at Seattle University wanted to assess students' critical thinking in a senior-level finance course. They developed a case assignment asking students to propose a best solution to an open-ended finance problem occasioned by a hypothetical client's particular investment dilemma. Students were to write memos addressed to a lay client supporting their solutions with reasons, evidence, and appropriate graphics. All seven members of the department participated in a norming session using a departmentally-developed rubric and then staff-scored the memos. The resulting discussion uncovered recurring problems in the memos such as students' failure to translate finance jargon into lay language or to create rhetorically effective graphics. Finance faculty began exploring ways to teach these skills earlier in the curriculum through new kinds of class activities or short writing assignments. At a deeper level, they explored ways to assign more

inquiry-based problems requiring arguments rather than standard algorithmic homework sets.

You can see that the assessment research of the finance faculty resulted in departmental discussions about a question that mattered to them. Their question wasn't initially about writing but about problem-solving in finance. I suspect that few of these faculty would have signed up for a typical WAC workshop. This is what I mean by the assessment movement's stimulating WAC in new ways.

C.R. You have worked with faculty in dozens of disciplines in many institutions as a colleague and consultant. In your experience, can you categorize disciplines as more or less open to WAC pedagogy? In what fields do you feel your message is most welcome? Least welcome? Have you been surprised either by rejection or embrace of WAC in a particular situation?

J.C.B. I'd say that the discipline least open to WAC is the literature side of English departments. There are many exceptions, of course, but in my experience few literature faculty are interested in WAC. I am saddened by this observation because I believe a WAC pedagogy can help new English majors learn to write critically about literary or cultural texts. Helping students learn to pose interpretive questions about texts and to position themselves in highly theorized conversations is a pedagogical challenge of the highest order. I think WAC discussions in English departments could accelerate English majors' growth as apprentice literary scholars and critics.

As far as the disciplines most open to WAC, I can't identify any particular patterns. I have long felt that the primary determinant of a teacher's openness to WAC is not discipline so much as personality type or a particular view of learning. Almost every department has one or two teachers who are energized by pedagogical workshops as well as many who dismiss pedagogy as lightweight methods training. (Often those uninter-

ested in pedagogy are highly regarded teachers; I'm not at all suggesting that great teaching depends on WAC practices.) Whether the degree of one's openness to WAC can be explained by personality or learning style theory such as Myers-Briggs or Kolb, I don't know. But persons interested in how students think and learn tend to like WAC. They are able to suspend direct discussions of subject matter to focus on meta-discussions of how experts read and talk and write in a discipline, how they conduct inquiry. I wonder if it would be too much to say that those open to WAC tend to remember what it was like to be a new learner in a discipline. Perhaps too they tend toward constructionist rather than positivist views of knowledge.

C.R. Your book Engaging Ideas *is often cited as a "WAC bible" and is a staple of faculty development programs. What led you to write* Engaging Ideas*? How has its popularity affected you?*

J.C.B. My interest in writing about WAC started at Montana State University when my colleagues Dean Drenk, Denny Lee, and I wrote an article on microthemes published in C. William Griffin's early WAC collection *Teaching Writing in All Disciplines* (Jossey-Bass, 1982). Our microtheme article combined critical thinking theory with nuts-and-bolts suggestions for incorporating short writing assignments into large classes. The positive responses to that article encouraged me to put more of my ideas about WAC into writing, especially ideas that combined theory with practical classroom applications. When I moved to Seattle University, I had the opportunity, under a grant from the Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education, to convert a series of handouts into an in-house book for Seattle University faculty illustrated with assignments from on-campus WAC workshops. That book became the first draft for *Engaging Ideas*, which I wrote during my sabbatical year in 1994-95.

I have been both gratified and stunned by the success of *Engaging Ideas*, which has indeed changed my life. I have met

wonderful teachers from across the United States and Europe in the process of conducting workshops based on the book's ideas. I try to make workshops fit the needs and situation of the institutions that invite me, and I regularly bring new ideas back to my own campus. But because I work full-time at Seattle University, combining teaching with faculty outreach in WAC and assessment, I find that doing workshops, along with my own textbook and research writing, puts enormous stress on me and my family. I often feel over-extended and exhausted. I am blessed, however, by a supportive wife who directs the writing center at a community college in Seattle and shares my passion for composition.

C.R.   I see from your resume that Engaging Ideas *has been translated into Dutch. How did that happen?*

J.C.B. There is a growing movement in European higher education toward active learning in the curriculum including the use of new writing pedagogies. In the European system, there is no equivalent of first-year composition, nor are there liberal arts gened requirements. Students in European universities plunge immediately into their professional disciplines. They often aren't required to write anything other than exams until late in their undergraduate careers when they must produce long seminar papers or a thesis in disciplinary academic style. Because students have no training or instruction on how to do this kind of writing, some European universities are experimenting with ways to teach or coach academic prose, as is evident from new professional organizations such as the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing or the European Association of Writing Centers. At the 2003 CCCC convention in New York City, several sessions were devoted to WAC in international settings including a featured session on writing centers in Europe and South Africa and a presentation from writing teachers at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

The Dutch translation of *Engaging Ideas* is one aspect of this movement. A former nursing professor and textbook writer in Holland, Dr. Rob van der Peet, became interested in the American critical thinking movement and visited the United States to attend a series of workshops on critical thinking. During these workshops he came across *Engaging Ideas* and thought its practical orientation might have an influence on Dutch educators. He arranged for publication through a Dutch academic press and translated the book in 1998. While Rob was working on the translation, he and I became friends via email. Since then, my wife and I have stayed with Rob and his wife in The Netherlands, where we have experienced on several occasions the pleasures of biking through the Low Countries.

C.R. As a classroom teacher, you consciously employ techniques to engage students and promote learning. Do you have the sense that students recognize this? Do they know what you are up to?

J.C.B. I like to explain to students why I do what I do. I have been influenced by Kenneth Bruffee's views of collaborative learning and by George Hillocks' identification of the "environmental mode" of teaching in which teachers have clear goals, design sequenced assignments or tasks to help students learn desired skills or knowledge, and create a classroom environment that promotes inquiry and critical thinking. Students, often working in small groups, develop "best solutions" to teacher-designed problems and support their solutions with arguments. Teachers model critical thinking by critiquing their solutions and by showing how disciplinary experts might approach the same problem. They also create rubrics showing students the criteria by which their work will be judged. I make this process explicit to students, showing how my daily "thinking piece" assignments generate ideas for class discussions and upcoming writing assignments or exams. I want students to see that nothing is extraneous or tacked on as busy work. But my mode of teaching is just

one of many ways to teach. I'm not a very good lecturer, so Hillock's environmental approach fits my particular strengths. If a person is a good lecturer, then that way of teaching can be very effective also, with active learning and critical thinking built into the homework and assignment design of the course.

C.R. If you were advising new faculty about ways to extend their teaching repertoire or to acquire killer strategies with the potential for advancing learning, what would you suggest? Do you look to new media? Networked environments? Something else?

J.C.B. I advise new faculty to become more reflective about their teaching by developing course goals and becoming more conscious of their pedagogical choices. For example, in many instances a teacher can arrange classroom chairs in lecture rows, in a large circle, or in small groups. I'd like teachers to articulate why they make such a choice in the way they do. Likewise teachers can choose to assign one long term paper or several shorter papers. They can choose to comment on drafts or to read and comment on final copies only. They can choose to assign exploratory writing or not. The more teachers can explain their choices as conscious ways of helping their students achieve course goals, the more they are developing as reflective teachers.

The "killer strategy" I would like new teachers to learn is the value of giving students "ill-structured problems," a term I've picked up from cognitive psychologists. An ill-structured problem is open-ended and messy. It doesn't have a single right answer. It doesn't announce which data or which theories or approaches are relevant. It requires the thinker to propose a tentative best solution in light of all available data and to justify the solution with reasons and evidence while taking account of alternative views. The research problems we faculty pose for our own scholarship are ill-structured; as scholars we address problems that divide our research communities or constitute impor-

tant unknowns. Students come alive in the classroom when they wrestle with genuine disciplinary or civic problems. Once teachers see the power of assigning ill-structured problems—issues, conflicts, dissonance-producing situations—they have a variety of ways they can present these problems to students. They can give these problems as critical thinking tasks for exploratory writing, for class discussion or small group problem solving, or for short or long papers. The key is to get students thinking critically about issue-laden problems in a disciplinary field.

Your question also mentioned new media and technology. Many faculty have been successful at using networked environments for stimulating critical thinking and promoting discourse. The new technology also permits powerful multimedia work. Recently I have discovered how quickly some students learn rhetorical strategies in visual environments, for example, when they are asked to argue a claim within the genre of a visual poster, a verbal-visual advocacy advertisement, or an advocacy Web page. We clearly have to expand WAC into communication across the curriculum and to incorporate numeracy, information literacy, visual rhetoric, and speech into some of our assignments. Maybe what we really need is RAC—rhetoric across the curriculum—helping students make their emerging ideas publicly effective in a variety of genres and media.

C.R.   Any final thoughts, John?

J.C.B.   Thanks, Carol, for this interview opportunity. I think what sustains us in WAC (or CAC or RAC) is the pleasure of seeing our students grow as writers and critical thinkers. But I'm also sustained by the graciousness and collegiality of the WAC community. People attracted to WAC tend to be among the friendliest, most enthusiastic, and most supportive folks in the academy. What a pleasure! I've been fortunate indeed to find a career in the WAC community of innovative scholars and teachers across the disciplines.

WAC
Techniques and
Applications