Dangerous Partnerships: How Competence Testing Can Sabotage WAC

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Ensuring that students graduate from post-secondary institutions with good writing skills presents two related challenges: assessment of writing and the teaching of writing. In this essay I want to address a commonly-used solution to these twin challenges: the administration of an institution-wide competence test to place students in WAC courses.

I will begin with some of the reasons that this combination of a writing competence test and mandatory WAC courses is an attractive, and therefore commonly used, solution to this challenge of both certifying writing skills and educating those who do not earn certification. In the remainder of the essay, however, I will use a case study of the University of Calgary, and to a lesser extent Laurentian University, to illustrate some serious dangers of this relationship. I don't want to suggest that competence testing and WAC can never exist in harmony. Like all WAC stories, the stories of the University of Calgary and of Laurentian are enmeshed in local politics that could well be different elsewhere. There may be ways to avoid the pitfalls I describe. But I will be quite candid: my experience has led me to become soured on the idea of combining institution-wide competence testing and WAC. I believe that their seemingly complementary approaches to what appears to be the same problem mask some deeply divided pedagogical assumptions that threaten to undermine the benefits of a WAC program, leading me finally to advise those who would contemplate such a potentially Faustian bargain to use extreme caution or avoid it altogether.

I will end with a brief look at an alternative way of gaining traction on the difficult problem of ensuring students graduate with adequate writing proficiency—first year seminars. In first-year seminars students learn and practice academic writing in a content-specific environment, and instructors are less apt to feel burdened by low-performing writers than in a course that links instruction to universal testing.

Why Combining Testing and WAC Looks Attractive

Let us set to one side for a moment all the pedagogical and theoretical arguments for and against institution-wide writing competence testing (though I will come back to these arguments briefly later in this essay), and assume for

a moment that an institution, for whatever combination of political and pedagogical reasons, has decided that it should test writing competence. The significant question raised by all competence testing is what to do with students who don't meet the requirement. Typically they are placed in some form of writing course or series of courses that are considered likely to help them improve. However, with this structure comes a broad set of problems. Some are logistic or political: the department that offers this course (almost always the English department) gets disproportionately burdened with a huge number of sections of a "service" course and the legions of underpaid adjuncts that generally accompany them, and a disproportionate amount of scarce institutional resources are directed toward this particular enterprise. Other problems, perhaps more worrying in the larger scheme of things, are pedagogical, and centre on the problems that attend a course in which writing floats free of a larger rhetorical context—what Russell (1995) and others have castigated as "General Writing Skills Instruction" or GWSI.

A WAC requirement therefore seems like something of a solution to the dilemma of competence testing. If students who do not meet the requirement are required, not to take a separate "writing" course, but to enrol in some specified number of designated writing-intensive or WAC courses, they will receive the benefits of discipline-situated instruction and no one area of campus is unfairly burdened (or blessed, depending on how much funding is attached) with doing this job on its own.

Of course, one might ask why we would need a test at all if a well-established WAC program is available to all students. Normally, the only sensible answer must be, "Well, we wouldn't." But what of institutions in which WAC is relatively marginalized for either philosophical or financial reasons? Good writing-intensive courses are apt to be expensive: they usually feature small sections, and it can be difficult to find sufficient numbers of faculty members interested in teaching writing and willing to, or capable of, undertaking the ongoing faculty development required to do it well. Where WI courses are not in sufficient supply or held in sufficient regard that all students can be required to take a robust number of them, writing competence testing can offer a mechanism for seeing that students who really need it are channelled into WAC without having to make WAC a complicated and possibly expensive universal requirement. The test identifies the problem; the WAC program provides the solution.

Why This Partnership Is Dangerous: A Case Study

As noted above, I am now convinced that this relationship between WAC and competence testing, though attractive. is so fraught that it is seldom worth the risk. I have been reluctant to come to this conclusion, as it represents the unravelling of a long-held administrative scheme of my own, by means

of which I had hoped to be able to establish an effective WAC program at the University of Calgary. To contextualize this, let me back up and compress almost three decades of writing program history at the University of Calgary into a few paragraphs.

The University of Calgary has had a fairly well developed institution-wide writing test, known locally as the Effective Writing Test, since 1976. The test is a fairly well-managed example of the genre. It asks students to produce a fully developed essay which is marked by two assessors, on larger-order criteria as well as surface correctness. Theoretically all students must pass it before beginning their second year, giving underprepared students a window of grace to bring themselves up to snuff through the Writing Centre or by other means. However, a wide variety of exemptions for high school English scores, university-level first-year English courses and optional non-credit writing courses means that the test in practice works as a placement test rather than a pure admission test, streaming students into one of a number of ways to demonstrate that their writing already is, or has been made to be, up to standard.

As an administrator who has had varying degrees of responsibility for this system over almost the entire twenty-eight years of its life, I have often been tempted to try to set in motion the processes that would do away with it. I am not convinced that it succeeds very well at either of its twin missions of placement and certification, and it comes with all the baggage that has made high-stakes testing suspect throughout the rhetorical community. Alderson and Banerjee (2001) summarize these objections crisply:

> The limitations of a one-off impromptu single writing task are apparent. Students are usually given only one, or at most two tasks, yet generalizations about writing ability across a range of genres are often made. Moreover, it is evidently the case that most writing, certainly for academic purposes but also in business settings, takes place over time, involves much planning, editing, revising, and redrafting, and usually involves the integration of input from a variety of (usually written) sources. This is in clear contrast with the traditional essay [on a competence test], which usually has a short prompt, gives students minimal input, minimal time for planning and virtually no opportunity to redraft or revise what they have produced under often stressful, time-bound circumstances. (p. 228)

These arguments are fairly commonplace, and I don't want to do more than allude to them now.[1] My point here is that one of the reasons I stayed my hand from moving too abruptly against the test was political rather than pedagogical. The University would doubtless be more than happy to save the budget committed to the test and to downscale services such as the Writing Center, and might well feel little need to replace it with a relatively expensive

alternative such as a robust Writing Across the Curriculum program. My strategy, therefore, was to let the test remain on the institutional radar screen until I could generate interest in something to take its place.

I was bolstered in this strategy by the experiences of a colleague at Laurentian University, Laurence Steven. Writing about the experience in an article optimistically titled "The Grain of Sand in the Oyster: Competency Testing as a Catalyst for Attitude Change at the University," Steven describes the ways in which the forces of WAC at Laurentian were able to use a test as a lever to create a WAC program that I have long envied. In Steven's narrative, the presence of a competence test created an institutional climate of dialogue—sometimes strained dialogue, but dialogue nonetheless—about what to do about students who could not seem to pass it nor find room in the English course required of those who did not. The ever-increasing pool of students stranded in this institutional limbo kept up the pressure for administration to find a more workable solution. The result was a mixed system in which the test was used as a device to sort students into writing-intensive courses across the curriculum with varying degrees of compulsion.

It was this success story that persuaded me at the time to avoid tampering with our test. Steven writes:

> To drop the test in the near future because it seems antithetical to aspects of our current ethos would perhaps be to lose the catalyst for change, perhaps not. Aviva Freedman acknowledges that "the symbolic power of a test is immense" (17). And clearly ours has acted, and continues to act, as a spur to Laurentian to keep writing at or near the top of our list of priorities. Before dropping it, we would need an infrastructure to support the programmes already developed and to ensure faculty participation. (117)

For these reasons, then, I did not make as many threatening gestures toward the test as I might otherwise have done, despite the fact that it is antithetical to my current ethos for all the reasons cited above.

The reason such political contrivances are necessary at the University of Calgary is a very long tradition of WAC resistance. For instance, a proposal to establish a relatively modest WAC program in 1992 foundered partly because it would have been too expensive and partly because of faculty resistance. The report of the Academic Programs Committee notes,

> During their deliberations, members of APC were made aware that many members of faculty are unwilling or feel themselves unable to evaluate the quality of student writing and to make it a factor in the evaluation of student work. Indeed, instances were reported to the Committee in which members of faculty had been explicitly told not to do so. Fewer were willing to pro-

vide assistance to improve student writing. (1-2)

To make a very long story short, this resistance has resonated through the intervening decade with no sign of abating.

The literature is full of depressing stories of this nature. However, the meat of the present story lies in the unfolding of my alternative strategy to use the Effective Writing Requirement to leverage WAC.

As noted earlier, students are exempted from the requirement if they attain a sufficiently high grade (currently B- or better) on any first-year English course, even though the English department offers no composition courses as such and ends up exempting most students on the strength of a literature course. Therein, I thought, lay a potential chink in the anti-WAC wall. If we trust our colleagues in the English department to certify students as acceptable writers on the basis of their performance in literature, surely we would trust colleagues in other departments who are arguably neither less nor more qualified to assess writing than are professors of literature. If the university was not willing to create WAC from the top down, perhaps I could use the continued existence of the Effective Writing Test and its many exemptions as a way to create a WAC-like entity from the other direction—that is, by gradually certifying writing-intensive courses outside the English department as qualifying for exemption from the test. This seemed to be working reasonably well at Laurentian, despite some mixed reviews from colleagues in the trenches of that institution. Ultimately, I hoped, I might be able to gain enough traction on WAC that I could begin taking steps to dismantle the test.

In the remainder of this article, I will attempt to articulate several reasons why I now think that this strategy of using the test to drive WAC was wrong. In doing so, I don't simply wish to add one more to the depressing list of local WAC failures, although I am aware that in one sense I am doing exactly that. Rather, I want to use the University of Calgary experience to articulate reasons why WAC and writing competence testing make dangerous partners.

Problem One: Shifting the Ground

First, I want to take up the delicate stresses between a WAC and a WID model of discipline-based writing courses. In an often-quoted recent article, McLeod and Maimon argue that the dichotomies between WAC and WID are largely false ones constructed from extreme cases, and that WAC and WID are variants of a common mission (2000). I find these arguments largely convincing. Nonetheless, there is still a material difference in programs that emphasise writing-to-learn and those that emphasise learning-to-write in the disciplines. The former use various kinds of writing to help students reflect on, study, actively manipulate and therefore to "learn" the content of a discipline. The latter, on the other hand, foreground the different, though often comple-

mentary, goal of learning to write—specifically, learning to write as a historian, a physicist, an art critic might write, with the epistemological constructions that come in tow (Bazerman 1988). Learning to write in the disciplines works well under some of the special conditions that makes writing to learn work: a relative absence of prescriptive and formalist assumptions about how writing works and how the teaching of writing works.

This delicate balance is hard enough to maintain in any WAC program. When that program is figured (if only in the minds of some of the instructors) as being chiefly a response to a "writing requirement," not only does the job of the WAC instructor feel more "remedial," as discussed above, it also shifts the balance sharply from "writing-to-learn" to "learning-to-write." Feeling under pressure to help students learn to write because a test has shown that current students don't meet the university's "standard," instructors find it hard not to feel that the mission of writing to learn is less important than the mission of learning to write—not just in the sense of learning to write in the disciplines, but in the sense of learning to write according to generalized standards of "correctness." Particularly when the test that got students in there in the first place is a test of grammar (see Martin 2003), or even partly on generalized surface conventions (as is the case with the Effective Writing Test at the University of Calgary), it would take more than a few faculty workshops to convince the average faculty member that the job does not reduce to the inculcation of correct form.

The pedagogical damage can be particularly severe because one of the chief advantages of a writing-to-learn stance in a WAC setting is that it gives tacit permission to the discipline-specific instructor to adopt new pedagogies without having to shift fundamental objectives. That is, the instructor, though sensitized to ways of helping students improve their writing, can continue to see himself or herself primarily as a historian, physicist or art critic who simply uses writing as a means to help students become more engaged with and reflective on these areas. If the status of the course is artificially shifted to learning-to-write (if only in instructors' minds) as a result of its being a means of fulfilling a writing requirement, most conscientious instructors would feel compelled to step into a learning-to-write role, whether comfortable with that role or not. The frequently noted comment of the instructor in this situation is generally some form of "I don't have the time/training/interest/skill to do that on top of all the other things I have to do." Teaching students to write thus becomes an added burden on top of the "regular job" rather than an integral part of it.

Administrators of most WAC and WID programs, whether tied to a test or not, hear these complaints all the time, of course—as did the committee examining the University of Calgary's potential for a WAC program as noted above. I argue, however, that formally attaching WI courses to a writing re-

quirement in many ways legitimates these complaints by casting the course as a way to fix a deficiency rather than as a way to use writing to help all students learn better.

Problem Two: Raising the Stakes

Not only are stakes raised for the instructor, they are raised for students as well. To articulate this second problem, I need to make another brief digression to discuss one of the more successful forms of quasi-WAC to be found at the University of Calgary: the first year seminars offered through my faculty, the Faculty of Communication and Culture.

Communication and Culture houses many of the interdisciplinary programs that might otherwise be offered in a more traditional Faculty of Arts and Science (in the organization of Canadian universities, faculties are mid-level organizational groupings above the level of a department, much as a college or school might be in a U.S. institution). In keeping with the University of Calgary's mandate as a research-based institution, the first-year seminars we offer (titled General Studies 201) follow the "academic content" model (Murphy 1989). Throughout the term, instructors work with students on an extended research project, broken down into manageable, cumulative subprojects, coaching them on matters such as focussing topics, finding material, writing research papers, and sharing findings through oral presentations. The teaching of writing, like the teaching of the other skills, is done bottom up rather than top-down. Students are given "just in time" instruction as they are coached through the process rather than "just in case" instruction up front.[2]

Because the course is centered on the production of a research paper, and typically uses a wide variety of writing-to-learn techniques to get there, I see the course as an excellent example of WAC in practice. Therefore, in keeping with the strategy of using the test to drive WAC that I mention above, I raised the idea of allowing the course to qualify as an additional Effective Writing exemption. Although certifying various other courses across the curriculum for Effective Writing exemption has remained problematic, it seemed that General Studies 201 was an ideal candidate to be given this (as I thought it at the time) honor. An inquiry seminar in which writing is at the center of the inquiry process could be an important seed for a WAC program.[3]

In deliberating this question among the cohort of instructors who regularly teach the first year seminar, I was initially surprised by the level of resistance I received. Some was the usual I'm-not-qualified-to-teach-writing gag reflex that so frequently arises at such junctures. But there was another strand to the resistance that I think is more thoughtful, and which I am convinced is telling me something important about the relationship between WAC and writing competence testing.

One colleague contributed the following comment to the faculty list-

serve, where this discussion was running with some vigour:

> My conceptualization is that it is more important to foster develop-
> ment than it is to ascertain that students have attained a certain mastery
> of the course subject matter or writing skills. However, by linking the
> assignment of a certain grade (B- was suggested) to the equivalence of
> a pass in the Effective Writing Exam, my ability to motivate students
> is being limited. For example, I may have a weak group of students,
> who work very hard, or would be motivated to work very hard, by the
> promise of a better grade, but I am prevented from so motivating them
> because assignment of a grade of B- or better should indicate that they
> have attained the equivalence of a pass in EFWR.

Upon reflection I see a good deal of wisdom in this comment. It illus-
trates a quite different objection from the usual it's-not-my-job argument, By
linking superior performance on any one course to the fulfillment of an exter-
nal high-stakes requirement, the stakes in the course itself are raised. I would
differ from my colleague in that I would prefer not to characterize the problem
quite so crisply in terms of ability to motivate students by dangling a grade.
Nonetheless, I have to agree with his concern that an explicit connection to a
writing competence requirement has the potential to raise writing from one of
a complex set of goals and strategies to an over-riding emphasis on certifica-
tion. The standards of the university ultimately come to rest on the shoulders
of any course that takes on this burden, to the possible detriment of progressive
pedagogy.

We can see this concern in a different form in a comment from another
colleague:

> I am also concerned about what allowing B- to stand for EFWR would
> do to class relationships. My students have always enjoyed the "unthreat-
> ened" atmosphere of my 201—not that there are no standards, of course,
> but as courses go it is relatively constraint-free. I'm afraid bringing in the
> EFWR would skew the course in the direction of grades chasing.

The first-year seminar works the way it works in part because the writ-
ing-to-learn pedagogy upon which it is founded emphasizes experimentation
and chance-taking in a low-stakes atmosphere. A mediocre grade on a particu-
lar interim assignment is merely a sign to students that they need to rethink
what they are doing, consult with the instructor and peers, and get the project
back on track. If they were put in a threshold situation in which a low B- would
exempt them from the Effective Writing Requirement (with its potential to

block them in their course of studies), and a high C+ would not, the low-stakes atmosphere would become a high-stakes game in which students are motivated to do everything possible to get that extra 1/10 of a point that will ensure that they are over the line.

Returning to the Laurentian experience, I can see how it also illustrates the problems that can be caused by confusing WAC with certification, despite its positive aspects. Faced with this content/competence dilemma, some instructors found an interesting but disturbing way out of the bind by setting separate exam questions for students identified as "WAC students"—that is, students who were in the course because they had not yet achieved the writing competence standard. Among the other essay questions on the exam would be one that was scored purely on writing competence rather than understanding of history, physics or art criticism. If students did not display competence on the "WAC question," they were not certified as having met the WAC requirement. It's hard not to marvel at the ingenuity of this strategy, but it's also hard to imagine anything farther from the fundamental WAC principles of integrating language and learning.

The Laurentian program has now been largely dismantled. The proximate cause is, as so often happens, a change in administration, a severing of the program from its upper-administration supports, and a flurry of budget-cutting measures. Ironically, the administration offered to keep the test even while it was threatening to cut the writing-intensive course structure, a "compromise" that the faculty members associated with the program vehemently rejected. Local politics and economics, again—but it is hard for me not also to blame the yoking of the WAC program with large-scale competence testing, a partnership destined, I believe, to perpetuate the conflicts I have outlined.

Conclusions

As noted in the introduction to this essay, I don't want to argue from two case studies that WAC and competence testing cannot and should not ever be linked. With a clear awareness of the pitfalls, possibly others in environments more congenial to WAC can make this partnership work in the ideal way noted in the section headed "Why Combining Testing and WAC Looks Attractive." But the general conclusion that I take from this survey of local histories is that WAC programs are generally well advised to keep themselves as far away from writing competence testing as they can. Certification of competence is like the rays of the sun. Dispersed, it sheds a certain amount of pleasant light and warmth. Focussed to a single intense point through a magnifying glass, it can burn a hole in your jacket. When WAC courses become formally linked to writing competence certification driven by an institution-wide test, the focus on certification can become so tight that the delicate balance between writing-to-learn and learning-to-write can be seriously endangered. The high

stakes of the test can be imported into the course, and the goals of situated writing can become deeply compromised.

This essay may seem to end on an irretrievably gloomy or even bitter note, since it chronicles what I see as a total failure of one of my schemes to institute WAC. However, now that I have backed away from my ill-considered attempt to link them to the Effective Writing Test, let me say that I am immensely optimistic about the WAC-like entity represented by the faculty's first-year seminars. As long as I don't try to link them to the competence test, no one castigates them as "remedial." No one has ever refused the chance to design a small-enrollment seminar based on his or her research passions. And so far, no-one has really complained that what they are doing in practice turns out to look a lot like WAC. They turn out for meetings on inquiry-based pedagogy, and find that classic WAC techniques of writing-to-learn blend easily into the business of learning-to-write-research-papers. They seem comfortable developing close ties with the library on one side and the writing center on the other.

In short, other forms of "stealth WAC" are possible and desirable even in an institution that appears far more committed to testing writing than to teaching it. As I argue more fully elsewhere , first year seminars offer themselves as an alternative means of accomplishing many of the goals of WAC within a somewhat different framework that may have more cachet with students, faculty members and administrators alike than the full-frontal WI program that the University of Calgary rejected a dozen years ago. I have made no inroads on the test, but I have WAC roots spreading rather nicely underground whether I call it that or not. The final lesson I take is that in environments where a WAC/testing partnership proves too dangerous to be workable (arguably, almost everywhere), there are other ways to leverage WAC. I would advise others to consider these alternatives before making a Faustian bargain with testing.

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19-24. Quoted in Steven.

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Notes

1. The College Composition and Communication position statement on writing assessment provides an excellent summary of cautions against arhetorical competence testing, as does Edward White (1996).
2. These seminars are described in much greater detail in two papers I have submitted to the *Journal of the First-Year Experience* and *College Composition and Communication.*
3. For examples of other institutions that have followed this evolution from composition to First Year Seminar as WAC, see Runciman (1998) and Moon (2003).
4. Patricia Donahue (2002) gives us a particularly stark look at this phenomenon in "Strange Resistances," an article that makes one wonder why the profession has any WPA's left at all.
5. Brent, D. Reinventing WAC (again): The first year seminar and academic literacy. Under review by *College Composition and Communication.*