Stephen Wilhoit:
A Stealth WAC Practitioner

CAROL RUTZ

When I asked Steve Wilhoit of the University of Dayton whether I could interview him for this series in *The WAC Journal*, his response was characteristic: "Did you send your request to the right guy?" Despite regular appearances at conferences, strong scholarship, robust experience as a campus leader, and long years as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) advocate at many levels, Steve prefers to operate below the radar. Therefore, this interview will expose him as the WAC expert he truly is.

Through professional conferences, I gradually became aware of Steve's remarkable range as a teacher and scholar. I am honored to have appeared on a number of conference panels with him, often at the annual convention of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. We share an approach to faculty development that we both find rewarding in itself as well as a vehicle for spreading the teaching practices that undergird WAC. One visible outcome of our commitment to faculty development and WAC was an invitation to write a chapter defining faculty development for the 2013 volume, *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, edited by Rita Malenczyk. Doing so was a pleasure.

Steve did his undergraduate work at the University of Kentucky, earned an MA in English and creative writing from the University of Louisville, and completed a doctorate in composition studies at Indiana University. His post-doctorate career has been spent at the University of Dayton in Ohio, and, as readers will soon see, his work has varied a great deal. Steve's career shows how WAC thinking, teaching, and evangelizing inform professional success. As Steve's work demonstrates, WAC in its broadest applications transforms institutions. Steve would not make that claim, thanks to his persistent modesty. Read on for the evidence and make your own judgment.

This interview was compiled through e-mail correspondence and mutual editing over several weeks in early 2014.

Carol Rutz: When you completed your graduate work in the late 1980s, did you expect WAC to require much of your attention? What led you to WAC?

Steve Wilhoit: A couple of things have led me in this direction—it's been more of an evolution than anything else. When I finished graduate work at Indiana University

in 1988, I was hired by folks at the University of Dayton to be the English department's first comp/rhet specialist and to run the Teaching Assistant (TA) education program, which I did for twelve years along with completing a couple of stints as Writing Program Administrator (WPA). Over those years, I did a few faculty development workshops on writing-to-learn theories and strategies, which were pretty well attended by faculty from across the curriculum. They were largely just extensions of what I was doing with the TAs.

CR: Ah, so you were plunged into WAC waters early on—and you must have been very busy.

SW: Yeah, those first few years were pretty busy, partly because I was also running a longitudinal study of writing at The University of Dayton (UD). Since I was new to the school, I had no idea what kinds of writing assignments or projects our students completed as they moved through their majors or whether our composition program prepared them at all for that work. I ended up having fifteen students participate in the study, each majoring in a different subject. These students agreed to give me a copy of every writing assignment they completed in every class they took at UD—preferably with the instructors' grade and comments on them—to complete a questionnaire about their writing experiences at the end of every term, and to sit for an interview at the end of each academic year. All of them completed the project with me—bless their hearts.

CR: Good for them! What did you learn?

SW: I got a glimpse into how student writing assignments changed by major and year in school at UD and a better idea of how faculty were and were not using writing to promote student learning. I began to incorporate those insights into the faculty workshops I offered. Then around 2000, I decided to organize a semester-long WAC seminar for faculty and staff. About a dozen colleagues signed up. I thought the previous occasional workshops had been helpful, but I wanted to offer an extended examination of WAC for a small group of interested faculty. I figured that over the term, the participants could actually test the theories or apply the strategies we discussed and report the results back to the group. The best way to overcome faculty doubts or hesitancy about WAC is for them to discover its benefits for themselves in the classes they teach. Plus, trying new things is scary for many faculty members, so having a peer support group was important.

CR: And what happened?

SW: The seminar was more successful than I anticipated—those initial participants were really happy with the results and talked up the program. I approached our school's associate provost for learning initiatives to see about support for a second seminar, and she loved the idea. She invited me to hold the seminar in our new Learning Teaching Center and even found some money to pay the participants a small stipend. We were off and running, and I still offer the seminar every year.

After that, I became increasingly involved in the work of the Learning Teaching Center, offering workshops and seminars on a range of topics—assessment, creative writing, critical thinking, graduate student education, and technology. All of these were really "spin offs" of that first writing across the curriculum seminar. Over time, I found myself transitioning from writing program administration to faculty development—via WAC. Eventually, I was asked to become an associate director of the Learning Teaching Center and head the Office of Writing, Research, and New Media. Now I split my time every term between the Center and the English Department, kind of jumping from office to office.

CR: Staying busy, I see. Turning to your publications, they include a popular guide for TA training as teachers of rhetoric and composition. What experiences led you to write that book, and how does it engage WAC? When you train graduate student teaching assistants, do you explicitly introduce them to WAC?

SW: Right—the TA book grew out of all the years I worked with the teaching assistants in our department. The question is interesting because I wouldn't say that I explicitly introduced the TAs to WAC—that "WAC" was a topic on a syllabus or something, but I can't imagine preparing someone to teach introductory college writing courses outside of the context of WAC. Composition programs can accomplish a lot of things—or try to accomplish them, at least—and can be used as a means to a lot of ends—but I think primary among them is helping students make the transition from high school to college writing and preparing them as best we can for the kinds of writing tasks they are likely to be assigned in their other college classes.

CR: Not everyone thinks about it that way. Some would say that first-year composition (FYC) should be about writing, per se, not necessarily writing in the larger college or academic context.

SW: Right—WAC is about understanding that context. Writing *across* the curriculum—whose curriculum, what curriculum? FYC doesn't stand outside of an institution's or a major's or a student's curriculum—it's a key part of one or all of them. Even if a first-year writing course does not specifically address that larger academic

context, it's taking place *within* it. I think writing teachers benefit from understanding that context, and that certainly influenced my work with the TAs.

CR: Let's talk about another teaching site. You are one of the few WAC people that I know of who has worked with local high schools on WAC at the secondary level. Tell that story—how did you get involved?

SW: It was really just a matter of local circumstances and saying yes to opportunities. I live in Oakwood, a small community just south of Dayton. Oakwood is a pretty close-knit community. It's got two elementary schools, one high school, no school buses—most kids walk to school and walk home for lunch. My three daughters all attended school in Oakwood, and over those years I got to know a lot of the teachers, the high school principal, and the school superintendent pretty well. In fact, a few of my daughters' teachers are former students of mine. Anyway, at some point, the principal and school superintendent asked if I would run a workshop for their teachers on how writing can promote student learning (I'd run similar workshops for the Dayton Public Schools). That workshop was well received; so they asked me back a few times. Eventually, the high school faculty and administrators decided they wanted to put together a coherent WAC program that would help guide writing instruction across the curriculum for grades 9-12 and asked me to lend a hand. That turned into the OWL Program—Oakwood Writing to Learn. Conversations then turned to how the school could best support student writing and they created a writing center in the high school's library. Finally, assessment became an issue, and I worked with the teachers and principal to create a rubric that faculty could use to evaluate writing across the curriculum, grades 9-12. These projects just followed one another pretty naturally.

CR: Has any research come out of that effort?

SW: I co-authored an article on OWL with the superintendent and an English teacher.

CR: How did high school teachers respond?

SW: The teachers in Oakwood are terrific—really smart and dedicated. Teachers from across the curriculum—English, math, physics, music, history, biology, you name it—built the curriculum and support systems. A lot of my work was just framing conversations, asking questions, offering feedback, and helping the faculty identify ways to build on what they were already doing in their classes.

CR: What evidence do the schools have that WAC serves their students?

SW: The assessments carried out in the high school show that these programs have been tremendously effective. Yearly, Oakwood is ranked as the best or second best high school in the state, particularly in math, science, and writing. Not surprisingly, the math and science teachers played—and continue to play—a central role in OWL. Another form of assessment: One day my oldest daughter complained about all the writing she had to do in her science classes—"Is that *your* fault?" she asked me.

CR: You have mentioned your close association with the University of Dayton's Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center. How did that appointment come about?

SW: The Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center (LTC) opened at the University of Dayton about a dozen years ago. It's located on the ground floor of the library and is unique because it consolidates a wide range of support services for both students and faculty in one location. Student learning support, instructional technologies, and faculty development—it's all located there. As I said earlier, I first became involved with the LTC when we moved the WAC seminar there. As the number and types of workshops and presentations I did in the LTC increased, I was named an LTC Fellow which allowed the associate provost who runs the place to buy out some of my classes and garner me some release time. To help facilitate my work, I eventually got an office in the LTC and then, when the place reorganized about 5-6 years ago, I was asked to officially become one of three assistant directors.

CR: Including your faculty development work, is it fair to say that WAC has influenced your career trajectory?

SW: Coming out of grad school and joining the English Department, I had no idea I'd eventually be doing this work. But, looking back, there's a logic to how things have progressed. My last couple of years in graduate school, I was a peer mentor to new TAs. Then I became Director of TA Training and WPA when I moved to the English Department at Dayton. That work led to offering WAC workshops for university and high school faculty and then to doing a wide range of faculty development work in the LTC. In my mind, it's all just various forms of teaching. Teaching undergraduate students, grad students, and faculty—all of it is mutually supporting. My training and education in rhetoric, along with my experience as a WPA and involvement with WAC, was the best preparation I could receive for work in faculty development. Looking around, professionally a whole lot of us are making this move—an awful lot of the leaders in faculty development have backgrounds in rhetoric, composition, and WAC. The skills transfer really well.

CR: Speaking of teaching and transferring skills, you and I recently gave a one-day workshop on faculty development at the annual conference of the Council of

Writing Program Administrators. We emphasized that a good faculty workshop requires effective teaching on the part of the leaders. As you review your experience as a teacher of faculty colleagues, can you articulate a philosophy of faculty development?

SW: Yeah—that was a very fun and productive workshop, wasn't it? This idea came up a couple of times in discussions that day—when doing faculty development work, you have to balance two important forms of service. On the one hand, you try to help faculty improve at the work they do—help them do it more effectively, more efficiently, in a more self-aware manner, etc. But on the other hand, you want to advocate for needed changes—you sometimes try to persuade faculty to do things differently than they do them now or to do different things all together. Support and advocacy—improving what is and pushing for what should be—both are crucial aspects of faculty development. To do this kind of work well, I think you need to combine effective teaching techniques with the principles of servant leadership. Faculty development is just another form of teaching and one key to effective teaching is to understand it as a rhetorical act. What are the best instructional practices to employ given the people I'm working with, what we all hope to get out of the experience, the reason we're all together, etc.? Along with that, servant leadership is also involved. For me—and I know this is a great simplification of a complex set of theories and practices—but for me, a servant leader's first impulse is to ask "How can I help?" To answer this question, you have to be quiet and listen—listen carefully, empathetically, and discerningly. What is it, exactly, I can do to move things forward or assist the process? That can include helping someone figure out precisely what it is they want or need. Once we figure that out, we can move forward together.

Now, the flip side of that is filling the role of advocate or instigator or change agent. If you assume that role in faculty development, you better be sure to know what you're about, what you hope to accomplish, and why. You need to articulate a guiding vision for the change you hope to bring about that will entice others to join in. Then, again, you rely on the principles of servant leadership and your skills as a rhetorician to bring about that end.

CR: As a person steeped in both teaching and administration, you are known for showing colleagues how people in that dual situation have opportunities to explore and exhibit leadership. Explain what you mean—the kind(s) of leadership and the ways faculty/administrators, including WAC directors, can become effective leaders. What challenges need to be overcome?

SW: Too often, those of us involved in composition, WAC, or TA education programs see ourselves as managers rather than leaders. I mean, what do we often call

ourselves? Writing program *administrators*. Good administration of any academic program is important and difficult work. Not everyone has the skills needed to do it well. But when we conceive of administration solely or largely as management, we shortchange ourselves. Leadership is different than management. Leaders inspire others to join them in pursuit of a shared vision. And any of us can be more effective leaders, whether we hold a position of authority or not.

For the past decade, I've been part of a leadership training program for faculty, staff, and administrators at the University of Dayton. I think the biggest step people have to take to become more effective leaders is to better understand what leadership really entails. It's not about power or authority or position; it's about facilitating change through service, collaboration, and caring; it's about building consensus and community around a shared vision or goal. Sometimes you take charge and lead from the front; most of the time you don't—you lead by enabling others, by facilitating change, by setting the example. Leadership is a form of service. Effective leaders listen more than they talk. They clarify the situation at hand, anticipate and articulate the challenges, and work with others to find a way forward.

CR: What other circumstances favor the development of leadership potential?

SW: Effective leaders also have a good sense of timing—they know when to speak up in a meeting, when to make a proposal, when to back off, and when to push forward. That's a hard lesson to learn—to hold off until it's the right time to act. Sometimes that's knowing when to speak up during a committee meeting—when you can move the group past a hurdle or around a stumbling block. Other times it's knowing when to make a proposal to the department, chair, or dean, and how to present that proposal effectively when you do. It's understanding your audience and the context.

CR: You are a swimmer and a coach. Is that more WAC in action? How does swimming fit with your life and work?

SW: Yeah—after twelve years, I'm about to "retire" as a volunteer high school swim coach. This season is my last hurrah. I'll still coach kids in the summer at our community pool (I get to work with the little kids—4-6 years old—they're a hoot).

I love to swim, always have. Growing up, I spent almost every free minute I had at Lakeside Swim Club in Louisville. And all of my daughters grew up swimming and swam through high school. Two swam in college. But as with so many other things in my life, I stumbled into coaching without planning to. My daughters all swam in a summer league at our community pool. I was there one morning with them and saw that a high school student I knew was having a hard time trying to coach two lanes

of very young children. I asked her if she wanted me to help. Seventeen years later, I'm still coaching.

CR: So you see coaching as teaching?

SW: Coaching, teaching—they're the same thing. The processes are essentially the same. You're helping people learn a set of skills. Let's stick with swimming. If I'm going to help someone improve their stroke, I'm going to have them swim a little bit while I watch. Allowing lots of room for individual style, there are certain basic mechanics of an effective stroke. You can watch someone swim and analyze their stroke in terms of those mechanics—their head or body position, their kick, their catch, their pull, their recovery, their turn, etc. You can then figure out a game plan for that swimmer, the changes the swimmer needs to make to improve and the order you tackle them in. If you try to change everything at once, the whole thing falls apart. It's too much to focus on—better to just focus on one thing at a time. When you see progress, you move on to the next thing on your list. You offer instruction, give feedback, and have them practice, practice, practice. Over time—faster for some, slower for others—if they stick with it, they become better swimmers.

But as a coach you also have to provide emotional support and motivation; you have to acknowledge and praise any and every improvement, no matter how small. If I'm working with a child who won't put her face in the water, for example, I make sure to celebrate the first time she manages it, even if it's just for a second. Then we'll work on getting her to do it for an entire stroke, then for a couple of strokes, and so on. In the end, you can't beat the feeling of watching a kid you coach put it all together in the pool. And they know it, too. It suddenly feels right and they are gliding beautifully through the water, performing without thinking about it, letting muscle memory take over.

CR: OK, pull that example into WAC for me.

SW: Sure. Helping an eight-year-old third-grader learn how to do a back-stroke flip turn, or an eighteen-year-old college student learn how to put together an effective sentence, or a forty-eight-year-old colleague learn how to promote student learning through writing—fundamentally it's all pretty much the same. Figure out where they are, work out an idea of where you and they want to be, and help them get there in whatever time you have to work with them. And if you manage to do it right, if you help them understand what you're doing and why, years after you're gone, they'll continue to teach themselves.

CR: Let's hope that WAC consistently works that way—for students and faculty. Thank you, Steve.

SW: Thank you. It's been great talking with you.

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