WAC Fearlessness, Sustainability, and Adaptability: Part One

CHRIS THAISS

Carol and I feel honored to have been asked to give the opening plenary address at this wonderful conference, which has been so long in the making and which has handled creatively the changes necessitated by our need to stay safe during the pandemic.[1] We offer our thanks to the inimitable Mike Palmquist and all the members of the team who have made this event possible.

Five Decades—Carol and I are giving this plenary not only because we can talk about the "early days" of WAC, but because both of our WAC-ky careers span the five decades from the 70s through the twenty teens. We can talk about the three WAC ideals of fearlessness, sustainability, and adaptability because we've lived them in our careers as teachers, writers, and program planners and administrators. Of course, we've been extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to work for many years at our institutions, and to reach funded retirements that give us the freedom to reflect on those decades of WAC work—and to keep contributing to WAC, as we choose, while also going down new paths. We are very thankful for that every day.

Fearlessness

Teaching well always requires fearlessness. It requires honesty, compassion, so many hours per week, and the will to ask tough questions of ourselves, our students, and those to whom we report. It calls for imagination, taking chances with new ideas, risking failure. WAC fearlessness has always meant breaking through the thick walls of the silos of academe: challenging the comfort of those who have grown complacent with their assumptions about students and their potential, assumptions about who can learn and who can't. WAC fearlessness challenges the complacent walls of disciplinary jargons and people's unwillingness to learn to speak a language, even create a language, that others can understand.

For those who want to build a WAC culture where they teach, fearlessness means having many awkward conversations with administrators and chairs already burdened by time and money woes; it means acknowledging our own ignorance of

1. Presented at the International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, August 2, 2021.

 DOI: 10.37514/WAC-J.2022.32.1.02

others' expertise, and listening to and keep listening to, and learning from people across an institution whose views on students and the goals of education differ from our own. WAC fearlessness always means asking others to come out of their own comfort zones, even as we must do the same. And if you do WAC for many years, fearlessness means learning to look forward to yet another opportunity to address the same concerns and answer the same questions that people have been asking you all those years: Why can't my students write? Why doesn't the English department/writing program do its job? How can I add writing to my teaching when I have so much material to cover? We already fund composition courses—why do we need to fund WAC?

In my own life, as I look back on when I began to get these WAC-ky notions, in about 1975, when my young family and I were struggling at the poverty line, I can't really account for why I became so enamored of the idea that students should be writing—and learning through writing—in all their subjects, not just in the first-year composition course sections, like those that I had been hired part-time to teach at two young colleges in the DC area, George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College. In fact, I liked this idea so much that I eschewed the path that was conventional for college English teachers in those days—teaching and writing about literature—in order to badger my colleagues and department chairs about this new thing, writing across the curriculum, that a handful of US and British scholars were writing about.

I guess you could call my stance "fearless," meaning I was too dumb and young to know that I should be afraid of dooming my career chances before I even knew I might have a career.

Nevertheless, those visionary scholars-teachers-writers who were conceptualizing writing and learning across the curriculum, people like James Britton and Nancy Martin in the UK and Janet Emig in the US, were so eloquent and persistent that they inspired a bunch of youngsters like me to put on a nervous air of confidence about, dammit, maybe making a career out of teaching writing, and maybe even writing articles about it, and maybe even cajoling faculty in other departments to take a hand in their own students' writing education. I remember a conversation with the English chair at George Mason in 1976 who was listening skeptically to my "plans," and saying sympathetically "well, I guess there might be a few places where you could make a career out of teaching composition," but clearly, he implied, not there or at any place he had heard of.

But what I'm not telling you yet is that I was abetted in my crazy ideas by a growing cluster of college, high school, and elementary school teachers across the United States who formed the nucleus of what was first called the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974, and then became the National Writing Project in 1977, when James Gray,

Mary Ann Smith, Carol Tateishi, and others were able to secure funding from the new US Department of Education to form new sites. By 1976, there were fourteen sites in six states, and that was just the beginning. I was so fortunate to be mentored at George Mason by Donald Gallehr, who founded the Writing Project site there in 1977, and who gave me the chance to work with him and thus meet and be inspired by the K-12 teachers who came to our first summer institute in 1978.

I cannot assert too strongly how that growing collective of teachers from across grade levels and states gave young people like me the courage to do the unthinkable: transgress those borders of school cultures and disciplines in order to learn from one another and then, audaciously, to begin building efforts in each of our schools to provide a home for other teachers who saw writing not as a barrier that only the few could scale, but as an avenue, a gift, for more students to learn and grow and succeed.

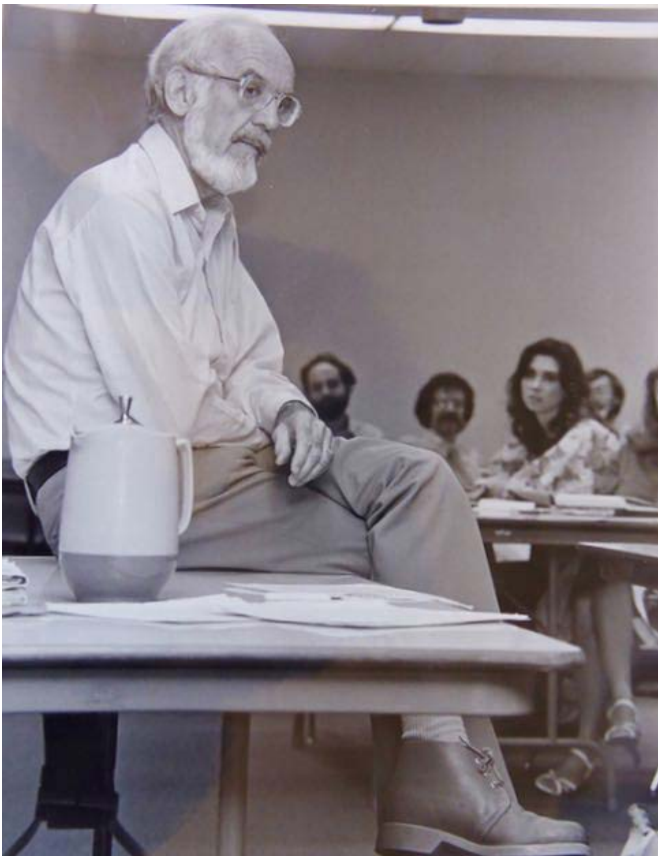


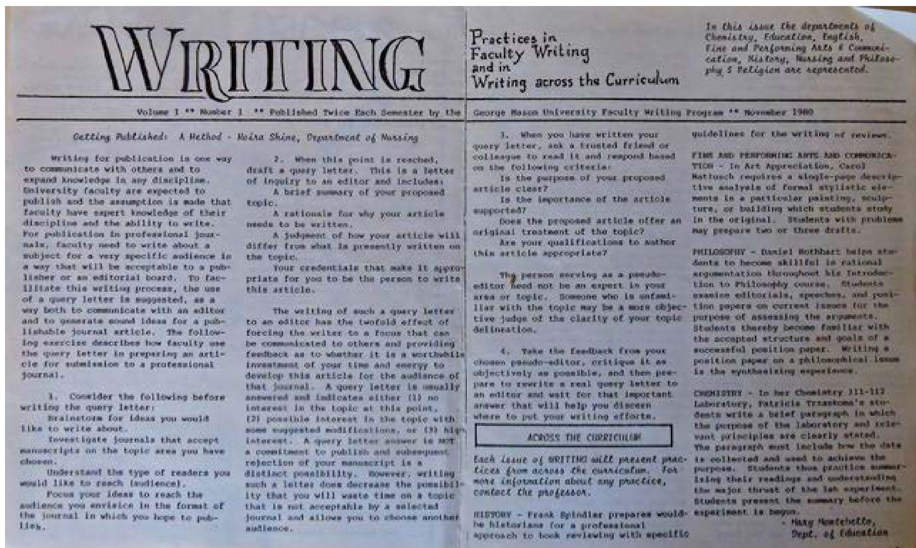
Figure 1. Photo of Ken Macrorie, visiting consultant to the NVWP and the WAC Program, 1980. In the background, that's me, second from left.

Sustainability

Though the term "sustainability" was still years away from becoming a buzzword in economics, in systems design, and in WAC, thanks to Michelle Cox, Jeff Galin, and Dan Melzer, the idea of sustaining what we started in the 1970s was always foremost in the minds of those of us who were initiating WAC in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One key toward sustainability was having the National Writing Project network and thus the ongoing invitation to talk to other folks over the phone and at conferences (no internet yet, some of you might remember) about what they were doing.

Beginning in 1981, we also had the National WAC Network that a few of us founded and that held semiannual open meetings at both 4Cs and, until 1985, at NCTE. The idea for this network came out of the annual workshops of the National Writing Project that were always held the day before the NCTE fall convention.

A number of program newsletters also sprang up and, if we wanted to, we could get on those mailing lists. Starting in 1982, a number of article collections and books on WAC programs began to emerge. Bit by bit, a research literature began to grow.



WRITING

Practices in Faculty Writing and in Writing across the Curriculum

In this issue the departments of Chemistry, Education, English, Fine and Performing Arts & Communication, History, Nursing and Philosophy & Religion are represented.

Volume 1 ** Number 1 ** Published Twice Each Semester by the George Mason University Faculty Writing Program ** November 1980

Getting Published: A Method - Moira Shine, Department of Nursing

Writing for publication is one way to communicate with others and to expand knowledge in any discipline. University faculty are expected to publish and the assumption is made that faculty have expert knowledge of their discipline and the ability to write. For publication in professional journals, faculty need to write about a subject for a very specific audience in a way that will be acceptable to a publisher or an editorial board. To facilitate this writing process, the use of a query letter is suggested, as a way both to communicate with an editor and to generate sound ideas for a publishable journal article. The following exercise describes how faculty use the query letter in preparing an article for submission to a professional journal.

1. Consider the following before writing the query letter:
Brainstorm for ideas you would like to write about.
Investigate journals that accept manuscripts on the topic area you have chosen.
Understand the type of readers you would like to reach (audience).
Focus your ideas to reach the audience you envision in the format of the journal in which you hope to publish.

2. When this point is reached, draft a query letter. This is a letter of inquiry to an editor and includes:
A brief summary of your proposed topic.
A rationale for why your article needs to be written.
A judgment of how your article will differ from what is presently written on the topic.
Your credentials that make it appropriate for you to be the person to write this article.

The writing of such a query letter to an editor has the twofold effect of forcing the writer to a focus that can be communicated to others and providing feedback as to whether it is a worthwhile investment of your time and energy to develop this article for the audience of that journal. A query letter is usually answered and indicates either (1) no interest in the topic at this point, (2) possible interest in the topic with some suggested modifications, or (3) high interest. A query letter answer is NOT a commitment to publish and subsequent rejection of your manuscript is a distinct possibility. However, writing such a letter does decrease the possibility that you will waste time on a topic that is not acceptable by a selected journal and allows you to choose another audience.

3. When you have written your query letter, ask a trusted friend or colleague to read it and respond based on the following criteria:
Is the purpose of your proposed article clear?
Is the importance of the article supported?
Does the proposed article offer an original treatment of the topic?
Are your qualifications to author this article appropriate?

The person serving as a pseudo-editor need not be an expert in your area or topic. Someone who is unfamiliar with the topic may be a more objective judge of the clarity of your topic delineation.

4. Take the feedback from your chosen pseudo-editor, critique it as objectively as possible, and then prepare to rewrite a real query letter to an editor and wait for that important answer that will help you discern where to put your writing efforts.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Each issue of WRITING will present practices from across the curriculum. For more information about any practice, contact the professor.

HISTORY - Frank Spindler prepares would-be historians for a professional approach to book reviewing with specific guidelines for the writing of reviews.

FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS AND COMMUNICATION - In Art Appreciation, Carol Mattusch requires a single-page descriptive analysis of formal stylistic elements in a particular painting, sculpture, or building which students study in the original. Students with problems may prepare two or three drafts.

PHILOSOPHY - Daniel Rothbart helps students to become skillful in rational argumentation throughout his Introduction to Philosophy course. Students examine editorials, speeches, and position papers on current issues for the purpose of assessing the arguments. Students thereby become familiar with the accepted structure and goals of a successful position paper. Writing a position paper on a philosophical issue is the synthesizing experience.

CHEMISTRY - In her Chemistry 111-112 Laboratory, Patricia Trzaskoma's students write a brief paragraph in which the purpose of the laboratory and relevant principles are clearly stated. The paragraph must include how the data is collected and used to achieve the purpose. Students thus practice summarizing their readings and understanding the major thrust of the lab experiment. Students present the summary before the experiment is begun.

- Mary Montebello, Dept. of Education

Figure 2. The very first issue of our newsletter from the GMU Faculty Writing Program, Nov. 1980.

The very fact of these new small networks gave people a big incentive to keep going despite the chronic problems with funding of any kind, the ongoing resistance of administrators and faculty, and being told regularly that there could be no future in this writing thing. I could talk on the phone with Barbara Walvoord at Loyola in

Baltimore or Toby Fulwiler and Art Young at Michigan Tech or Janet Emig in New Jersey or Elaine Maimon in Pennsylvania, and they would always be an inspiration.

Another sustainability tactic that emerged—and that we used at George Mason—was to group initiatives that had some goals in common. So the composition program, the small but growing writing center, the WAC workshops, and the Northern Virginia Writing Project, all still young, shared a joint leadership team. In key ways, the successes of each of these ventures depended on the success of them all, and vice versa. To cite one example, when we started WAC workshops for Mason faculty in 1978, we asked high school teacher consultants from the Writing Project to run some of the workshops, since they had greater expertise and on-the-job experience than anyone on our campus. Meanwhile, I was coordinating in-service courses for the Writing Project in local high schools and at the same time directing both the composition courses at Mason and its small writing center, which we first called the writing lab in 1976 and then the writing place later on, because the tutors and I thought it sounded cooler. Please remember, this was before there was a research literature on writing program design and management and years before there were graduate programs in writing studies, not to mention anything like independent writing programs for undergraduates.

This fully collaborative model worked fine to get each of these efforts going and build some credibility, enough to inspire other folks to want to join the teams and take on leadership—and to give the university admin enough confidence to fork over money for release time for the directors. (In 1979, I had one course release total for administering both comp and the writing center). But by 1985, six years in, each of the four entities had separate directors, all minimally compensated for their time, but all dedicated to growing each entity and collaborating with the others.

A third key component of sustainability, and maybe the most important, was the goal of bringing more and more people into leadership roles, whether as steering committee members, consultants, editors, contributing writers, or some other structure.

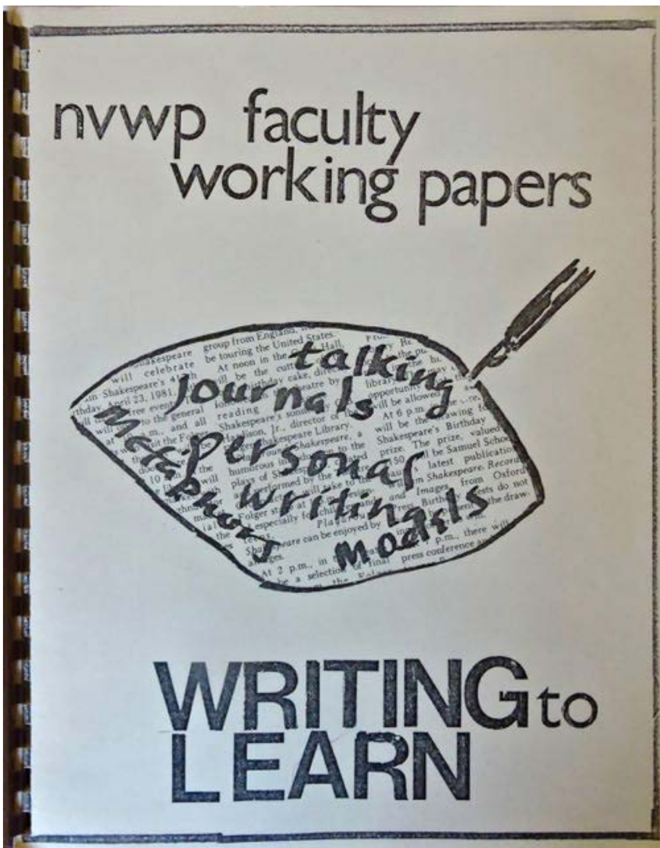


Figure 3. First anthology of in-house papers from the Northern Virginia Writing Project, 1979.

It's not a bad idea for directors to make it known that they'll only do a job for a certain length of time, so others will be thinking about continuity and the role that they might play in it. It also inspires the director to be cultivating successors and to encourage newer members of a team to develop and bring forward their own ideas. The organization is always more important than any one person. I've always thought that administratively it's dangerous to let anyone believe that an individual leader is indispensable. The myth of indispensability can lead directors to see others as rivals not as teammates, and it can lead to the death of the program once the leader, eventually and inevitably, steps aside.

Adaptability

The third principle I'll discuss today is adaptability. I'll put it bluntly: There is no sustainability without adaptability. Times change, leading ideas change, finances change, technologies change, people change, access to opportunities change, climates change, and on and on. Writing has changed utterly from the 1970s to now, and there are departments and degrees and curricular initiatives now that would never have been imagined thirty or twenty or even ten years ago. So, of course, WAC has had to change. Sometimes the changes come quickly, and adaptation has to come quickly. In 1978, we ran the first WAC workshops. In 1980, we got a state grant to set up a Virginia state WAC network. In 1982, the whole Mason writing curriculum changed by dropping the second first-year writing course and adding required WID courses in the junior year, which we had to design. In 1984, first-year students could opt for an entirely cross-disciplinary curriculum, called PAGE—the Plan for Alternative General Education—which had total WAC, with no first-year writing course.

By the late 1980s, ten years into our program at Mason, email—which we could never have imagined in 1976—was everywhere, and even these things called websites, think of it, were beginning to be developed. In 1991, the faculty senate demanded writing intensive courses. And on and on.

In 1978, how silly we'd have been to imagine that we could know what a sustainable program was. Without the will to adapt, WAC, and no program, can keep going. Continually, the people invested in an idea must be alert for change, can even lead change, and must be ready to respond to change. Even just two years ago, who could have imagined how what we mean by writing and what we mean by teaching could have changed so much because of a virus? And even last year at this time, who could have imagined the ways teachers and students would have adapted to, much less foreseen, the social justice, political, and technological changes that have brought about new challenges for adaptation?

Just nine months ago, I was into my fourth year of busy retirement, four years removed from undergrad teaching, and one year removed from advising my last PhD student at UC Davis. Then I was asked to teach again my favorite undergrad course, writing in science, and to do so asynchronously online, for my first time ever, using the learning management system, Canvas, that UC Davis adopted just after I had retired. Fortunately, I could adapt and even love the challenge, but only because the writing program and the entire university had been so quick in adapting to the pandemic challenge and creating help services for "newbies" (so to speak) like me.

And if our teaching and program management have to be ready for change, so must our research. For example, the International WAC/WID Mapping Project, which began in 2005, revised survey-based research that Susan McLeod had begun with Susan Shirley back in 1987, and which she revised in 1997 with Eric Miraglia.

The survey design for US programs that PhD student Tara Porter and I announced in 2006 captured changes in WAC since 1997 that were now relevant in the first decade of the new millennium. But that research has gone on since, based on further changes in design, theory, and objectives. Here at IWAC, my Davis colleague Kendon Kurzer, with Katherine O'Meara, Greer Murphy, and Robyn Russo will be presenting on a new interactive re-envisioning of the mapping project research, which they have named the Writing Sites Project. Then, Michele Zugnoni of Northwestern will present current results of the latest iteration of the US WAC survey, which began in 2015 and which continues to accept survey responses today. These iterations of this research are described on the WAC/WID Mapping Project website, mappingproject.ucdavis.edu.

So, in closing: Those of us who have given years to WAC have to be always thinking what of any paradigm is worth holding onto and what of the new can be adopted and adapted. If we don't adapt, fearlessly and we hope sustainably, we might find ourselves, oh I don't know, denying climate change, and maybe even thinking that retirement means not continuing to work creatively. But if we accept the challenge to adapt, who knows what adventures and new ideas await WAC and its fearless leaders.

Thanks to all of you for being present and for the fearless work you do.

References

Cox, Michelle, Jeffrey Galin, and Dan Melzer (2018). *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs.* National Council of Teachers of English.

Gray, James and Richard Sterling (2005). *Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project.* National Writing Project.

The International WAC/WID Mapping Project. Accessible 2021: http://mappingproject.ucdavis.edu .

McLeod, Susan, and Susan Shirley (1987). "Appendix: National Survey of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs." *Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum.* Susan McLeod, ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

McLeod, Susan and Eric Miraglia (1997). "Whither WAC? Interpreting the Stories/Histories of Mature WAC Programs." *WPA: Writing Program Administration,* 20:3, 46–65.

Thaiss, Chris and Tara Porter (2010). "The State of WAC/WID in 2010: Methods and Results of the U.S. Survey of the International WAC/WID Mapping Project," *College Composition and Communication*, 61:3 (February 2010), 534–70.