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How I Started Using Writing Across the Curriculum and Ended Up Taking Algebra Again: A Review of Useful Works on Writing Across the Curriculum

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(Toby Fulwiler, *The Journal Book*, 1987; Robert P. Parker and Vera Goodkin, *The Consequences of Writing*, 1987; Karen Spear, *Sharing Writing*; Toby Fulwiler, *Writing Across the Curriculum: Research into Practice*, 1986. All published by Boynton-Cook/Heinemann)

As it enters its second decade, Writing Across the Curriculum in the United States is supported by an increasingly sophisticated literature which offers a great deal of hands-on, how-to advice, as well as a solid theoretical basis in linguistic and learning research. Generally, this work is free of jargon, accessible to any interested person, whatever their academic discipline. The four books reviewed here are typical in their blending of the theoretical with the practical; two are more valuable for their discussion of Writing Across the Curriculum theory and for their histories of the movement than as sources for classroom strategy.

Writing Across the Curriculum Theory

The most theoretical of them, Parker's and Goodkin's *The*

Consequences of Writing, both presents an account of Writing Across the Curriculum history and explains the learning and linguistic theories underlying the technique.

The movement began in England in the late 1960s with the work of James Britton and Nancy Martin. They examined educational practice in light of the linguistic theories of Edward Sapir, Suzanne Langer, and Lev Vygotsky. These theorists asserted that, in Sapir's words, "The purely communicative aspect of language has been exaggerated...language is primarily a vocal actualization of the tendency to see realities symbolically." In other words, for Sapir, et. al., language is far more than just a system of signs we manipulate to achieve certain ends. It is the medium with which we construct our symbolic representation of who we are and of the world around us.

Considering the implications of this for learning and teaching, Britton and Martin concluded that we "construct knowledge from experience by transforming that experience symbolically" through language when we learn. In classroom research, Britton and his colleagues found that children in all grades, studying all subjects, learned better when all kinds of language activity, from note-passing and conversation to formal written and oral reports, was the basic instructional vehicle. Informal expression, or expressive writing journals, letters, lists, impromptu poems, were found to be particularly valuable. Expressive writing in the child's everyday language has remained an important part of British pedagogy.

This was the origin of LAC (Language Across the Curriculum), a technique favored in Britain that uses all forms of language activity (reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills) to help students learn subject matter more quickly and effectively. WAC, Writing Across the Curriculum, was but one branch of this larger concern; U. S. educators embraced it at a time when criticism of student writing abilities was more than usually scathing. Unfortu-

nately, we in the United States have often ignored the larger context of LAC and the benefits it can offer. Instead, our general tendency has been to embrace WAC as an alternative way to reinforce the forms and skills of standard English writing instruction.

To remedy this confused application of WAC, Parker and Goodkin devote the second part of their work to a survey of current theory on the connections between thinking and language, especially the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. In Part Three, they draw out the implications for learning theory. Parker and Goodkin believe that much is gained from using the full range of language activity as a means of teaching people the content of disciplines. The final section presents brief case studies of people who use LAC and WAC to teach mathematics, applied psychology, entomology, and clinical nursing.

Indeed, WAC is so widely applicable that it can easily move beyond the English department and may even alter entire institutions. That is the primary message of the Young-Fulwiler collection of essays. The workshop techniques we learned from Fulwiler here at PSC were developed between 1977 and 1984 when he taught at Michigan Technological University. The selections here, all composed by MTU faculty from several departments, demonstrate the many ways a WAC program, if undertaken seriously, can change institutional priorities. While there is some material here that will help in the classroom, the book's chief value is its account of how, despite some difficult faculty politics, MTU created a successful program. Thus it will be useful to those trying to establish a new program of their own. And for us at PSC, it will be helpful now that we are ready to begin documenting and assessing our program.

Members of our WAC Task Force, General Education Committee and Writing Program Assessment Committee will find

reassurance and useful advice in Section II, "Evaluation: Assumptions and Discoveries." Anyone interested in undertaking classroom research on WAC's effects on student learning will rejoice in Margaret E. Gorman's essay, "Mucking Around," which explains that credible and responsible studies can be constructed even by those of us who don't actually remember college algebra and never even thought of taking statistics. (Gorman's advice: if you don't have statistics, you can enlist the help of a faculty statistician or educational measurements expert.)

Theory Into Practice

Every publishing season brings us new, down-to-earth books on how to use WAC in the classroom. Fulwiler's *The Journal Book* is one of the best. The journal has emerged as a mainstay of WAC practice, and Fulwiler's collection offers a fine selection of new ideas. I'd like to hear from colleagues who attempt some of them, such as the ones proposed by Verner Jensen ("Writing in College Physics"); George Meese ("Focused Learning in Chemistry Research: Suzanne's Journal") and Stephen BeMiller ("The Mathematics Workbook").

This is a good book to sample from. Last semester in Composition 120 I adapted a project recommended in Christopher Burnham's "Reinvigorating a Tradition: The Personal Development Journal." The informal, ungraded, expressive writing students did for the personal development journal led many to greater clarity and power when they came to write the more formal, finished language of the personal essay. At the same time my students were keeping their journals, we read about how professional writers use journals, deal with writer's block, develop expressive writings into formal essays, and so on. In time, many students began to think of themselves as writers rather than as captives in Composition 120—a change I deduced from their

behavior in conferences about their work. Instead of asking what I thought of their essays, they would begin by telling me what they thought and by asking my response to specific places in their work that they thought especially difficult or especially good. They became active, took the initiative in shaping their own work, which is how writers (as opposed to captives) behave. *The Journal Book* is rich in suggestions for getting this kind of satisfaction for students and teachers.

The success of last fall's journal experiment has given me the heart to try again—probably for the dozenth time—to incorporate peer response groups into my class. It's the kind of thing that sounds like it should work —it just stands to reason that students should be able to critique one another's writing and learn from the process. But so far, I haven't been able to get it to happen.

This time, however, with the help of Karen Spear's *Sharing Writing*, I may succeed. She admits that peer response groups are usually ineffective. The reason, she says, is that students lack the social and interpersonal skills to make them succeed. As often happens in WAC literature, she spends the first half of her book on theory, relating the peer response problem to students' lack of expertise in discussing, listening, reading, giving or receiving feedback—that full range of language activity encouraged by LAC.

Spear then shows, however, that highly-polished—or, at least, much improved—final drafts will come from groups that work consciously to improve their interpersonal skills. The second half of *Sharing Writing* explains how Spear developed such groups in her freshman composition courses at the University of Utah. Instructors interested in developing peer response in any class— whether in writing or in a content area—will find much here to ponder: many interesting revision checklists (ones that work, ones that don't); strategies for improving reading and listening; ways to

teach groups to monitor their own effectiveness.

I'm planning to try Spear's method, with a few modifications, on my technical writing students in spring semester. Technical Writing is an upper division course populated by juniors and seniors, most of whom have a strong professional orientation. Nearly all writing done in a professional setting these days requires some degree of peer collaboration. So I want my tekkies to learn two things: how to respond constructively to other people's writing and how to use other people's responses to their own work. In setting up the course, I'm borrowing freely from Spear.

Making peer response a priority has substantially altered my usual way of presenting the course—one that has worked pretty well for the last eight years. If it doesn't work, I'm going to ask Karen Spear for a refund. If it does, I'll make some big changes in next fall's Composition 120 sections and some little ones in my literature courses, making peer response central to the writing course and using it to help the literature students in their writing assignments.

And after that—well, maybe I'll attempt some classroom research so I can reliably demonstrate what's been going on in my classes, and why. I'll follow Margaret Gorman's advice and find a statistician to help me design a study. Because I'm embarrassed... all that bragging about last fall's composition students and their wonderful journals is a true **(1997)** of my impression of what happened. But if you want evidence... well, I did save a few papers and some journals, and I ought to save more. I did an attitude survey, but I forgot....

I want to get out of that embarrassing spot, even if teaching writing means I do an algebra review next summer and take a stats course in the fall.

Years ago, when I first began teaching composition, the best research showed that students do not read instructors' comments

Goodbye, Ms. Goodwrench: Using Conversation to Motivate Student Thinking and Writing

on returned papers. Instead, they go straight for the bottom line—that letter grade at the end of the last page—ignoring all other marks and remarks. This discouraged me in literature courses, to the point where I almost stopped commenting on papers at all. And in composition courses, I found it particularly galling, because if a student doesn't learn from feedback on early drafts, the final drafts are likely to be disappointing.

Yet, as far as I know, there is no research on why students don't read instructors' comments. Can they not read the instructors' handwriting? Do they not understand what the comments mean? Are they made so complacent by a satisfactory letter grade that they don't care why they got it or how they might improve next time? Or, conversely, are they so intimidated by the letter grade that they lose any desire to read amplifying comments?

I wondered, and the attempt to develop students' peer editing skills, which I describe in the 1989 article reprinted above, came out of that wondering. What I want to do here is describe my long odyssey from using checklist feedback to initiating feedback conversations instead. Since I began my journey by trying to teach feedback and peer review to my composition students, I'll center on that experience. But I later learned to use a form of conversational feedback in literature courses as well, so I'll comment on what I learned from that also.

Back in 1989, I believed that if students could internalize editing lingo and use it to give each other feedback, just as I gave feedback in class and in my written comments, they would become more proficient editors, for their peers and for themselves. It made sense: I would model the lingo, and from that students would learn to use it during peer feedback and revision.

So I spent a great deal of time devising checklists my students

could use to comment on whether the main idea was clearly stated, whether the opening was interesting and the ending sufficiently final, whether the ideas were adequately developed and supported, what parts of the essay seemed to work best, what parts needed further development. Glowing with hope, I distributed the checklists to my composition students, confident that soon they would not only give one another wise advice but would also actually read my comments and use them to revise intelligently.

This did not happen.

When the students paired up to give each other face-to-face advice, a great hush came over the room, a brief flurry of reading and writing followed, then general chatter about football or skiing or music or even less edifying topics. What was going on here? What wasn't going on?

When I collected the checklists, I found that students did not use them to comment. Instead they filled the checklist with yes/no responses and short answers. Was the main point clear? *Yes.* What was the strongest part of the essay? *Where the writer describes making the lucky interception that brought his team the state football championship.* Clearly the students understood the lingo and even the concepts behind the lingo; they knew a topic sentence from a transitional paragraph, but they still hadn't the slightest notion of how to give useful feedback; they had no sense of how to give advice which would help their writing partner re-think and re-write, which I take to be the primary use of all feedback.

Worse yet, nobody used my comments, either, even though my checklist responses were quite fully detailed. So there matters stood when I took time off from teaching to do a stint in academic administration. I brought much of what I had learned from teach-

ing to my administrative work; when I returned to teaching, I brought back to the classroom much that I had learned in administration. One very valuable thing I learned there had to do with evaluating the job performance of the employees I supervised directly. In the places I worked, performance evaluation always involved checklists, letters, and other written documents, but there was also a requirement that supervisor and employee sit down together and talk about what the supervisor had written. I had found these conversations enormously helpful—for improving my own work as well as my employees'. In evaluating others, I found, I also evaluated myself.

This lesson served me well when I came back to teaching, because I began to listen to the way I talked to and wrote to my students. It came to me that my comments on main points and topic sentences and strong openings were, in a way, irrelevant.

The problem, I decided, was a premature concern for nuts and bolts. I came on as the literary Ms. Goodwrench at a stage in the writing process when students really needed someone to talk to them about content, about the way I was affected by what they had written. Maybe, I thought, that's what's missing: conversation, dialogue, talk about ideas, experiences, fantasies, fears, hopes, regrets—my own as well as my students'.

But how to do this in a reasonably organized way, one that keeps students writing and rewriting until they fully realize what they need to say, and actually say it? I remembered a couple of techniques I had heard of, one from Roy Andrews, director of PSC's College Writing Center, and one from UNH writer and teacher Don Murray. While I began using these response techniques in composition classes, where my students write many drafts, I later adapted them to courses where students write only one draft before the final; I have even found them helpful on brief

in-class writings that I grade Pass/Fail and that are not rewritten. After describing their use in multiple draft situations, usual in a composition course, I explain how I adapted what I learned from Andrews and Murray and how that has enhanced my students' work in other writing situations.

Roy Andrews taught me "first response strategy," something he learned from Peter Elbow, which involves making marginal notes on the first thing you think of as you read the paper through the first time. And that's what I do now—it's all I do—on first drafts. This, I find, opens the conversation I want to have with the student, and this is where I am most likely to write comments that connect to the student personally: I may bring up similar experiences or ideas I have had or read about; I may simply write confirming comments, such as "Yike!" or "You must have felt wonderful," or "That's a neat idea," or "This is really interesting. I'd like to know more about it," or "This reminds me of the time I..." or "One of my favorite poets, William Blake, says..."

With my first response, I want to show students that I'm taking the content of their writing seriously—that what they are thinking about and trying to say is worth articulating more clearly and fully. I want to motivate them to invest lots of time in writing the many, many drafts that we require of our composition students. Of course there is no grade at the bottom of the first draft, but I see my students reading my comments (I always offer to clarify any comments they don't understand) and their second drafts invariably reflect attempts to use my comments.

In the second draft, I switch to Murray's "focus line" strategy, a way of locating what I call the high energy spots in a paper— places that call for further explanation, where there is a mystery to be explored, or a conflict to be examined and worked out. These places I identify rather tersely: "There's some tension here; try

probing it more fully" or " So why do you feel that...? Would it be different if...?" or "This mystery is probably worth further exploration," or, simply, "I want to know more!"

My second draft comments aim at helping students find a center for the paper, a place from which their main point will eventually emerge as we work through subsequent drafts, alternative openings, planning sessions, lists of possible titles, and the like. As we come nearer the final draft, my comments and questions become more focused on development, coherence, and sentence structure. But even at this stage I avoid the writing teacher's lingo that once made up my feedback checklists and use instead content-oriented remarks, such as "I got lost as you moved from this paragraph to the next," or "I still don't understand what you mean here. Can you rephrase somehow?"

Perhaps because conversational commentary gives them more information to go on, my writing students do read my comments, and they seem to be able to use them to advantage. On the final draft, there is a bottom-line grade, and my students do look at it. But by then they know pretty much what they have done (or not) and I usually confine my remarks to a brief end comment.

In my literature and interdisciplinary courses, I adapt the first response and the focus point strategies to suit the occasion. Often in these classes, I ask students to write brief response papers which are meant to prepare them for discussion rather than to provide me a basis for evaluation; I grade them pass/fail. Unless an essay grossly misses the assignment specifications, I never ask for a rewrite. As a way of opening the conversation that we will later continue during class discussion, I use a first response marking strategy. For more formal papers, when I require or at least recommend a first draft, I combine the two marking strategies in whatever way seems appropriate to the paper I'm reading. Once again, I find that students do read my comments, even if the essay

receives only a pass/fail grade, and my opening the conversation on paper seems to help people focus better in small group discussions and volunteer their comments during general discussions.

As for time, that need to get on with it and get on to the next thing in our perpetually over-scheduled lives...I find this way of marking actually takes less time than the old checklist method, perhaps because my comments are very targeted. I have very specific reasons for commenting as I do, and I don't feel compelled to comment on everything at once...I will do the other things later, either through further targeted comments or by referring my students to the appropriate help center on campus—and remember that we have three of them: the English Department Reading and Writing Center (mostly for composition students), the College Writing Center, and PASS, for special needs students.

And my job satisfaction has risen considerably; I no longer feel in danger of crashing and burning, because initiating conversations makes what my students have to say interesting to me—no matter how imperfectly they say it. Furthermore, since conversational commentary seems to improve their writing immediately and markedly, I feel that what I'm doing is worth the effort—another stay against the disaster of burnout.

Whatever happened to peer review? I still do it, though less frequently and less formally than before. It used to be one of the central activities in composition, but since I began teaching writing in a computerized classroom, students spend much more classroom time actually writing and revising. When we do have a peer review, students mimic my marking system; they frequently ask for more information and are more willing than before to admit that they actually got a bit lost in places where transitional or developmental material are weak. But having found the right language for writing comments that students can actually use, I am

less worried about the reinforcement that I had hoped peer feedback might give my remarks.

Certainly I am more comfortable teaching writing than I ever have been. It's less of a struggle for me and my students now, more natural seeming with a conversational basis. In one of my favorite poems, J. V. Cunningham congratulates his student because "you have learned, not what to say, but how the saying should be said." I think moving from checklist to conversation taught me that, and my students, too.