Back to the Future: Instructional Practices and Discourse Values[1]

Anne J. Herrington
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Yesterday afternoon, in the midst of the conference, I set my previously prepared paper aside and began to revise this talk. I had decided my previous version focused too much on problems and not enough on possibilities, the exciting possibilities I had heard so many of you talk of as your current practices. So, I felt I needed to revise—my students would say that's a fate a writing teacher deserves! What follows is a bit of a collage from my previous version and my notes from the conference.

It may be a sign of my aging, but I think it's equally a sign of the times, that when I think of writing-across-the curriculum—especially when asked to look toward the future, I am drawn to looking back to my initial involvement in WAC in the mid-1970's. In his history of writing-across-the- curriculum, David Russell claims that "Cross-curricular programs were almost always a response to a perceived need for greater access, greater equity" (21). That was certainly true of the 1970's. At the time, I was responsible for a developmental reading and writing program at a small state college with an open admissions policy. Many of the students I taught—for reasons of previous education, and beyond that, family background and class—were ill prepared for college. My colleagues and I were drawn to writing-across-the-curriculum out of our commitment to access and WAC's focus on using writing as a way of helping students become more successful learners and writers (Herrington).

When I think of names that influenced me and my colleagues initially, I think of Mina Shaughnessy, articulating a commitment to education for many students previously excluded and linking access to education with "the realizations of a democracy" (294); Janet Emig, arguing persuasively that "writing represents a unique mode of learning". . . active, engaged, personal—more specifically, self-rhythmed—in nature"

(122, 124); James Britton, Nancy Martin, and colleagues making a similar case for language for learning, with Britton stressing informal "expressive" writing. Britton's influence is seen in the stress on journal writing and other informal writing as a medium for learning. Taking a more analytic approach and viewing even more formal writing for an audience as a way of learning, Lee Odell called on teachers to analyze writing tasks and figure out ways to teach students how to do the kind of thinking and writing demanded by those tasks, asking what does it mean to think and write like a biologist, an engineer, a sociologist. Both Britton's and Odell's approaches were about supporting "access" to learning and using writing as one medium for that learning.

It is this early guiding vision that should drive any future WAC efforts, with teachers aiming for instructional practices that 1) prompt students to be more active, personally engaged, reflective knowers, 2) respect students' authoritative knowledge, 3) help them pursue their personal interests and motivating intentions through the means offered by particular disciplinary methods, and 4) foster a relation of students working, as Fulwiler writes, "as partners in dialogue with the teacher." The guiding model should be faculty coming together to discuss teaching practices, reflectively and generously, as we have done here at this conference. The goal should not be eliciting more writing as a good thing in itself, but fostering student learning. Those of us who believe in this goal should insinuate ourselves across our schools, whether through specifically designated WAC meetings or groups focusing on such topics as community service learning, using electronic media, cooperative learning, general education (Walvoord).

We should also be seeking input from our students, both informally in our classrooms and formally through research studies of specific writing activities and students' experiences of them. I am thinking of studies such as one conducted by Gisela Meyer Escoe, Jack Julian, and Philip Way of the University of Cincinnati on the efficacy of specific writing-to-learn activities for students, considering such factors as gender and race. Essentially, their research is asking whom such activities are benefiting and whether those benefits are differentially distributed. Also, at the University of Minnesota, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing makes small research grants available to teachers (Bridwell-Bowles).

The importance of such classroom-based research is underscored by a negative case I want to report, one that highlights the connection between instructional practices and students' writing and learning. It is taken from a research study conducted by me and my colleague Marcia Curtis and involves an experience of an African American student in an Introduction to Sociology class. For one assignment, students were asked

to summarize and compare two views on poverty, one that was implicitly racist, characterizing a "normal" class not in poverty and a "lower class," responsible for their poverty and by contrast with the "normal class," implicitly "abnormal" and not white. Asked to summarize this position in a disinterested way where he was not asked to draw on his own knowledge—knowledge that would have challenged this view, this student not surprisingly had difficulty, difficulty that was as much ideological and deeply personal as linguistic. It is not surprising, then, that he said he could "find no place to fit in." He reported that he was very frustrated trying to write the paper and kept contradicting himself. He received a C for the paper. Contrast his experience in this class with his experience in an Anthropology class where he was asked to reflect on his own experience and position in relation to the topic he was writing about. Further, where instead of being asked solely to summarize a point of view, he was asked to shape his thoughts about something.

WAC is about showing students how to draw on their own authoritative knowledge when relevant and how to link personal knowledge and interests with knowledge from other sources. In some areas, students may have authoritative knowledge that we do not have and that may not be adequately represented, or may even be misrepresented or distorted in the materials we present to them. As another student from our study has explained: "Sometimes the way we experience things in the world isn't exactly how theories explain things or how something you learn in class explains things."

WAC is about connecting students' own interests and values with disciplinary projects. For example, in an Economics course, Gisela Meyer Escoe, Jack Julian, and Philip Way of the University of Cincinnati pose a project to students to advise a congresswoman on whether to support raising the minimum wage; each student decides on how to weight the criteria used to make the policy decision (improving economic growth, efficiency, equity). In this way, they are able to develop an economic policy recommendation on the basis of their own values. In an Econometrics courses, Bob Gillette of the University of Kentucky has students, working in groups, choose their own problems to study for a major project. In their groups, they also provide feedback to drafts of their work in progress. Al Gubanich in biology at the University of Nevada has his students design experiments to test their own hypotheses. In other words, within reasonable parameters set by the teacher and using the disciplinary methodologies they are trying to learn, students pursue their own interests and curiosities.

At other sessions, I've heard teachers talking of other ways of encouraging more active engagement and interaction among students. Karl Smith, a civil engineer at the University of Minnesota, spoke of using

cooperative learning principles with writing to foster more active learning and positive interdependence among students working together in groups. Others spoke of using e-mail and the World Wide Web to foster more active participation. For instance, Virginia and Gary Hardcastle of Virginia Tech use "WebChat," an application that, when run on a World Wide Web server, allows for participants to engage in on-line discussions in real time, analogous to software that allows for asynchronous online discussions among networked computers. The Hardcastles find that Webchat is an effective way to integrate informal writing for thinking and communicating into their philosophy classes. Pat Mower of Washburn University spoke of making her College Algebra course writing-intensive and using writing tasks to foster understandings of why something works, not just how. One kind of writing assignment she uses requires students to post "crib sheets" on the e-mail list, explaining a concept so an absent student could understand it. Stanley Zoltek of George Mason University, also a mathematician, asks students to create sample problems to show their understanding of particular course materials and post their problems on the Web. Both pointed to the additional value of students having an audience—their classmates in Mower's case, and anyone accessing the Web in Zolteck's case, for encouraging students to take extra care in what they post.

Linking writing with community-service learning projects also presents exciting opportunities for more active and reflective learning as well as prompts teachers to explore new pedagogical approaches (Deans). At the conference, Ruth Overman Fisher spoke of a writing-link course at George Mason University where a writing course is linked to both a sociology and a project-based service learning course. At my own university, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, our Junior Year Writing course in Exercise Science includes a community service-based writing project. As our experience has shown, such courses prompt both students and teachers to broaden their notion of the scope of disciplinary work and also to reflect on the kind of disciplinary and professional texts they value.

That's a second key point I want to make: In addition to continuing to focus on instructional practices, WAC should encourage teachers to reflect critically on disciplinary values. To underscore why this is important I want to cite another negative case, one where discourse conventions were taught rigidly and without reflection on them. Through my research, I learned of a psychology research methods class where American Psychological Association style conventions were presented as "rules," quite inflexible rules. Indeed, students were limited even more than the APA style book with students being told they could never use "I," even though in practice the prohibition against using "I" varies from

journal to journal. As the teacher told me, "the more consistent the rules you give them, the easier I think they find the writing." Even when that consistency misrepresents disciplinary practices? Students in the class had questions about this practice, particularly given what they read on their own in research articles, but these questions were not brought out into the open for discussion (Herrington and Moran, "Prospect"). In contrast to the practice in this class, I think of another writing-intensive social science class, where the teacher presented examples from professional discourse that illustrated some of the range of practices in disciplinary writing and where questions about conventions were invited.

In order to introduce students to some of the variation already apparent in disciplinary/professional practices, we need to be attune to it ourselves and follow debates about these practices: What are the assumptions about knowing and representation embedded in our discourse conventions? Linked courses—where a writing course is linked with a course in another discipline—seem like a productive way of helping us recognize some of these assumptions and possible biases. For example, Terri Myers Zawicki of George Mason University spoke of teaching a writing link course with a political science teacher and discovering she and the political science teacher had a different perspective on the acceptability of "I" in texts. Their different perspectives helped the other see a taken-for-granted convention anew and reflect on the rhetorical reasons for the convention. Zawicki stressed that such conversations were possible because each was a co-equal partner in teaching the linked courses. She spoke also of teaching a writing course linked with an anthropology course that brought issues of representation and objectivity to the fore. We should also be open to possible biases in disciplinary language. For example, sexist biases in the language of molecular biology have been criticized by Bonnie Spanier, herself trained in that field. In "Encountering the Biological Sciences: Ideology, Language, and Learning," she links this critique with undergraduate education, arguing that "writing-across-the curriculum projects that address ideology in the discourse and practice of science are potentially transformative" because they can help "promote the development of aware and 'resisting' students who can take their rightful places in science" (193-94).

Such awareness is promoted only when discourse conventions and debates over them are brought into our classes. Underscoring this point, Harriet Malinowitz argues in "A Feminist Critique of Writing-in-the-Disciplines" that it is:

> important to help students examine the extensive, though largely hidden, hybridity of disciplines (a practice which would itself press at the bit of those academic departments

that mask hybridity from their protegees and, often, from themselves). (25-26)

Given the kind of thoughtful reflection I have heard from students when given knowledge about the options they have, it seems to me that we should trust our students enough to bring them into considerations about disciplinary conventions, recognizing these conventions as the rhetorical practices they are.   (See also LaCourt.)

We need to be equally open to reflecting on our disciplinary values regarding epistemology. What ways of knowing are privileged? And what ways are marginalized or even excluded? Having studied the writing of experiences of three students over their four years in college, I have been struck as much by the sameness of the writing tasks they were asked to do as the apparent differences.   Almost all called for detached, analytical thinking.   One of the exceptions, in a Foundations of Human Services course, called for empathic knowing (Belenky et al).   For example, for one project, "a cultural exploration" paper, students were to learn about a group they did not belong to by reading a relevant book and interviewing two people who self-identified with the group, trying to understand their perspectives.   A student who told me of the assignment said it "restructured the way I thought about things."   I'm struck by her choice of the verb "restructured," since she did not use it in talking of other writing projects.   I do not mean to deny the value of analytic thinking—indeed, the project I just mentioned involved analysis and standing back as well as empathic identification.   My broader point is that we should consciously consider the multiplicity and richness of ways of knowing we might introduce students to over their years of college and how writing could be one medium for engaging in that learning. WAC forums—like this conference and ones we can create on our campuses—that bring us together from our diverse departments, are a perfect place to think about the ways of knowing we might want to introduce to students in our courses, in general education curricula, and our majors.   I'm thinking of a session I attended yesterday by Roger Martin of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota, showing the power of visual images and metaphor for landscape architects.   Also, Linda Powers at Virgina Tech spoke of the "Rule of Four" for learning math concepts: investigate a concept symbolically, numerically, graphically, and verbally. As she explained these four, I realized how I, a word person, too often encourage the Rule of One, verbal learning alone although rhetorical concepts certainly lend themselves to symbolic and graphical learning, even dramatic enactment. While these examples may seem ideologically safe, the debate within some of our disciplines over dominant practices also involves issues of

power and representation as Spanier's critique makes clear, issues that come into play in our classrooms as well, as the example of the student writing for the Introduction to Sociology course illustrates.

Well, I best conclude quickly: When I think of the future—websites, online writing courses, proliferation of writing-intensive courses, links with community service learning projects, I feel both excited and a strong pull to reaffirm the core values of Writing across the Curriculum: WAC should reaffirm its commitment to access to education and be about instructional practices that aim to foster success for students as active, personally engaged learners who can make places for themselves within our disciplines. As teachers, we need to be open to new challenges and take reflexive, critically open and flexible stances toward our teaching and disciplinary practices. Finally, and if only to keep ourselves energized, we need to nurture our local community of teaching colleagues and nurture our cross-institutional community at conferences like this one.

I'll close with comments from three students, from three different schools, commenting on writing projects in three different disciplines. They remind me of why we're engaged in this project:

> "[The writing] encouraged me to think, to relate the material, and not merely memorize it."
> "Writing is my way of putting things together. A lot of things I didn't quite understand about distillation. I really put distillation together when I wrote that lab."
> "It restructured the way I think about things."

Works Cited

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Bridwell-Bowles, Lillian. "Historical Contexts for Research into Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Minnesota." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February, 1997.

Britton, James. *Language and Learning*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1970.

Deans, Tom. "Writing Across the Curriculum and Community Service Learning: Correspondences, Cautions, and Futures." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Ed. Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1997. 29-37.

Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 28 (1977): 122-28.

Escoe, Gisela Meyer, Jack Julian, and Philip Way. "The Use of Writing in Evaluating Student Achievement in Introductory Economics." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Fisher, Ruth Overman and Victoria Rader. "Writing Across/Beyond the Curriculum: Connecting Experience with Concept in the Community Service Link." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Fulwiler, "The Quiet and Insistent Revolution: Writing across the Curriculum." *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary.* Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 179-87.

Gillette, J. Robert. "WAC Principles Applied to Group Projects in Econometrics." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Gubanich, Alan, and Mark Waldo. "'All People are Poets, Through Most People are Damned Bad Ones': A Biologist Responds to the Expressive School of Communication." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Hardcastle, Valerie Gray and Gary L. "Promoting Informal Writing with Webchat." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Herrington, Anne J. "Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines." *College English* 43 (April 1981): 379-87.

___ and Charles Moran. "Writing in the Disciplines: A Prospect." *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*. Ed. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran. New York: Modern Language Association, 1992. 231-44.

___ and Marcia Curtis. *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, forthcoming.

LaCourt, Donna. "WAC as Critical Pedagogy: The Third Stage?" *JAC* 16 (January 1996): 389-405.

Malinowitz, Harriet. "A Feminist Critique of Writing-in-the-Disciplines." In *Other Words: Feminism and Composition Studies*. Ed. Susan Jarratt and Lynn Warsham. New York: MLA, in press.

Martin, Nancy. "Language across the Curriculum: Where It Began and What It Promises." Herrington and Moran. 6-21.

___, Pat D'Arcy, Bryan Newton, and Robert Parker. *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum*, 11-16. London: Ward Lock, 1976.

Martin, Roger. "Writing as a Means of Design: A Report on a Study of Experiments on Incorporating Writing into Landscape Architecture

Design Courses." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Mower, Pat. "Fat Men in Pink Leotards and Other Student Writings." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Odell, Lee. "The Process of Writing and the Process of Learning. College *Composition and Communication*. 31 (1980): 42-50.

Powers, Linda, Margaret P. McQuain, and Deborah Smith. "Using Writing and Technology to Promote Thinking Skills." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Russell, David. *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Smith, Karl. "Cooperative Learning: Effective Teamwork for Engineering Courses." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Spanier, Bonnie. "Encountering the Biological Sciences: Ideology, Language, and Learning." Herrington and Moran. 193-212.

Walvoord, Barbara. "The Future of WAC." *College English* 58 (January 1996): 58-79.

Zawicki, Terry Myers. "Re-presenting the 'Other'" Writing Culture in an Anthropology-linked FY Composition Class." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.

Zoltek, Stanley M. "Ten Years of Using Writing to Teach A General Education Mathematics Course." Writing Across the Curriculum, 3rd National Conference. Charleston, SC, February 1997.