WAC in International Contexts: An Introduction

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Writing across the curriculum is an educational reform movement that started in the U.S. more than 30 years ago, in response to a number of social pressures (see Russell, Chapter 9). As is the case with the first-year composition class, we tend to think of WAC programs as an exclusively U.S. phenomenon, or at least a North American phenomenon (see Murhiri et al.). Its success in the United States has inspired faculty and administrators in other countries to try to set up WAC programs in their own institutions. But developing WAC programs that fit universities in other countries is not at easy task; writing across the curriculum at the university level, at least in programmatic terms, is a phenomenon peculiar to the United States.

To understand how WAC programs at the college level developed in the U.S. but not elsewhere, we need to look briefly at the history of two developments unique to this country: the heavy reliance of the educational enterprise on "objective" (multiple-choice, true/false) testing,[1] and the development of freshman composition at the university as a stand-alone writing course, divorced from any disciplinary content and focusing on expository writing. Let us first look at testing. So-called objective tests have been around for some years, but wide-spread acceptance and use of these measures began in earnest in the 1940s, when they were used by the U. S. military during World War II to sort recruits into suitable jobs.[2] The testing industry then took off in the 1950s, when the newly-founded Educational Testing Service promulgated the Scholastic Aptitude Test (originally developed as a way of finding prospective scholarship students for Harvard) as a valid and reliable predictor of student success in college. The original author of the SAT, Charles Campbell Brigham, had op-

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posed the national use of the SAT in such a way, on the grounds that if such a restricted procedure as the objective test ever got a grip on education, English would be taught for reading alone and practice in writing would disappear (see Lemann 29-41). But Brigham's worries were ignored. The adoption of this standardized test at the national level in the 1950s and 60s popularized among teachers the notion of assessment via fill-in-the-bubble tests.[3] The rapid growth of higher education in the 1960s as the baby boom generation came of age and the accompanying lack of qualified faculty to teach them gave rise to substantially larger classes in many institutions, a situation tailor-made for a kind of assessment instrument that could be scored by a machine. In the 1970s, many institutions of higher education began to emphasize research, requiring that teachers who had heretofore focused primarily on their teaching to also make time for writing and publishing (see Folsom). This increased focus on research in most large four-year institutions meant that faculty were more and more inclined to find more time-efficient ways of evaluating student work. All these forces gave rise to the ascendance of the "objective" test in the curriculum at all levels of U.S education in the decades of the 1960s and 70s. Except in small liberal arts colleges, where teacher-student ratios remained small and teaching remained the focus of faculty work, students simply weren't doing a lot of extended writing in or out of class (see Sacks, chapter 4). Brigham's gloomy prediction had been realized.

This situation came to a head (some at the time called it a crisis) during the mid-1970s, during a time of enormous curricular and demographic change in higher education. The social upheavals of the 1960s and 70s (the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women's movement) called into question much of the status quo, universities not excepted; faculty were forced to rethink pedagogy as well as curriculum. The decade of the 1970s was also a period of open admissions; universities were opening their doors to students who up until that time did not have access to higher education. As Mina Shaughnessy vividly describes, professors suddenly found themselves with students whose prose was so out of line with what was expected at the university level that the teachers were bewildered, even dispairing, of being able to help. The situation was such that in 1975 *Newsweek* magazine declared a literacy crisis in a cover story entitled "Why Johnny Can't

Write." Faculty turned to those of us in English departments, sometimes accusingly: why couldn't we teach these students how to write in our freshman English classes?

At this point it is useful to review the history of first-year composition in U.S. higher education. This stand-alone expository writing course, focusing on writing skills in isolation from any disciplinary content, is almost universal in United States universities and colleges. But it has no curricular equivalent in other countries: there is no such entity as Freshman Dutch or Freshman French. Freshman English was born at Harvard University as a remediation effort, a response to an earlier perceived literacy crisis during the period after the Civil War (see Connors; Brereton; Kitzhaber). It was originally conceived of as a temporary measure, but has become over time the most permanent fixture of the curriculum—in some cases, the only course in the university that nearly all students are required to take. Although those of us now in the profession of composition and rhetoric do not perceive the course as remedial, many of our faculty colleagues do. In the 1970s, many of these colleagues asked why our course wasn't working. The students in their classes had taken freshman English and still couldn't write. What was wrong?

One thing that was wrong was the notion that a single course could "fix" a student's writing completely and forever. Those of us involved in early WAC efforts facilitated faculty seminars in which we read Bruner and other learning theorists; we tried to understand along with our colleagues how writing was a developmental process, how students learned over time to write academic prose. We read the work of Britton and his associates, based on their research on students ages 11-17 in British secondary schools, and worked with our faculty colleagues on ways of introducing writing as a mode of learning as well as of testing that learning. Many of us revised the first-year composition course, going from one that stressed developing a student's own "authentic voice" to one that provided an introduction to academic writing in the university. WAC efforts in the U.S. were from the beginning very much tied to explaining, defending, and revising freshman English.

These are the historical reasons for the birth and growth of WAC in U. S. colleges and universities, ones that make WAC a uniquely U.S. phenomenon that is sometimes difficult to explain to our faculty counterparts in other countries. There

are also some cultural and contextual issues in higher education that make it difficult to discuss WAC in the terms we understand it in the U.S. In the 1980s, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement sponsored a project that compared student writing in fourteen different countries; but because of the underlying assumption that writing was a cognitive capacity that could be studied apart from culture, the results of the individual studies were not possible to compare. Alan Purves, the editor of the resulting volume, stated that "the construct that we call written composition must be seen in a cultural context. . . . Even the consensus on goals and aims of writing instruction masks a variation both in ideology of teachers and in institutional practices" (199). Here we hope to avoid the notion that "WAC" is a single construct, but instead make explicit the contexts and cultures in which WAC ideas are used and programs develop. Like David Foster and David Russell in their collection of essays on writing, learning, and the transition from secondary to higher education, we hope to provide different perspectives so that readers might view their own practice in light of others' practices.

The contributors to this volume will present their own contextual issues, but for now, I shall lay out a few that apply to all. The tertiary curriculum in the U.S. is generally divided into what we call "general education" courses—those designed to give the student a sampling of humanities, arts, science, and social science courses— and courses in a student's chosen subject, the "major." (Indeed, we have an entire set of institutions—community colleges—that can provide the general education segment of a student's education before he or she transfers to a four-year institution.) There are no real equivalents to this curricular division in most tertiary institutions outside the U.S.; what we think of as general education is usually covered in the last year or two of secondary education (and in some countries secondary schooling continues beyond age 18). In some countries, students begin working in their disciplinary specialty as soon as they enter the university. Those of us who have served as WAC consultants in other countries have found that our State-side advice about building WAC into ongoing general education programs was meaningless.

The ways a university degree is certified and student learning is accounted for also differ in other countries and provide

challenges for translating WAC programs ideas into other contexts. In the U.S., a degree is certified according to number of credits accumulated in a particular pattern (a certain combination of general education requirements plus major requirements). These credits are earned through individual courses, and the credits are determined by "contact hours" (or "seat time") with the teacher—e.g., how often the course meets per semester (16 weeks) or quarter (10 weeks). The individual teacher of each course evaluates the student's work for that course according to work done in the class during the semester or quarter (papers written, exams taken) and grades that work on a scale from A (4) to F (0). The student's grades are averaged over time; students must have a satisfactory grade point average (usually 2.0, a C) in order to receive a Bachelor's Degree. Institutions in other countries vary widely in how they account for student learning. In one country I visited, a number of teachers give lectures in a certain subject (for example, American Studies); students may attend these lectures or not, as they wish—contact hours with the teacher are not a measure of the degree to be attained or credit hours to be earned. At the end of the year, students take examinations (lasting several weeks) that focus on the subject rather than on achievement in individual classes. These exams are then reviewed by teachers at another university to determine who passes and who does not. Teacher responsibility for evaluation of students in individual classes via papers and tests throughout a semester or quarter, a given when planning WAC faculty development programs in the U.S., is not part of such a system.

Yet the two basic WAC tenets—writing to learn and learning to write disciplinary discourse—are very translatable into other contexts and cultures; indeed, as noted earlier, writing to learn is an idea we borrowed from the British, specifically from Britton. A recent book on writing as a tool for learning has contributions from researchers in a number of European countries as well as from the U.S. (Tynjälä et al.). In spite of the wide differences in cultures and institutional structures, the contributors to the present issue of *LLAD* have found ways of translating those ideas pedagogically and programmatically. By examining how these ideas have been adapted for particular contexts, we may better understand our own.

Notes

1. Other countries (e.g., The Netherlands) do make use of "objective" tests, but not so much in higher education, and not to the extent that large universities did in 1960s and 1970s.
2. The U.S. Army had gotten into the testing business in a small way during World War I, administering IQ tests to its soldiers. But the large-scale testing of students, now so familiar to us, was not possible until IBM developed the technology for machine scoring the tests in the 1930s. See Lemann 37-8.
3. It was also at this time that U.S. education embraced behaviorist theories of learning; these theories focused on learning as behaviors to be reinforced, breaking skills like reading and writing into discrete bits of behavior. This approach was a good fit with the objective test. Behaviorism was not as influential outside the U.S.

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