

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The State of the Art

Editor's Note: Early in December, 1985, The National Endowment for the Humanities asked the Northern Virginia Writing Project for its views of the state of writing instruction in U.S. colleges and universities today, with special emphasis on the progress of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. Chris Thaiss, Associate Director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, wrote the following reply to Kathleen Lesko, Program Officer for Education Programs at NEH. The letter first appeared in the Northern Virginia Writing Project Newsletter.

December 3, 1985

Dr. Kathleen Lesko
Program Officer
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National Endowment for the Humanities
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Dr. Lesko:

Don Gallehr passed your request for information on to me, as one who has directed Writing Project institutes in writing-across-the-curriculum at the college level, as director of composition at George Mason from 1979-84, and as current co-ordinator of the National Network of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs. I am happy to answer your request and hope that my comments prove helpful.

Let me address briefly each of your question categories:

1. *Theoretical Status of Writing*

From talking with program directors, teachers, and comp. directors from all over the country, I hesitate to say that any one theory dominates. Certainly, "writing as a process" is on everyone's lips, but if you look at the bestselling texts for comp. courses and at state and institutional demands for skills development, you'll see that "process" is understood in divergent ways, some of them almost contradictory. As for "writing as a mode of learning," this powerful concept is gaining adherents in all parts of the country, but, to many of the people who come to our open meetings of the Network at the NCTE and CCCC conventions, the concept is still utterly new. Many of the people who are interested in starting up w-a-c programs associate w-a-c with basic skills development rather than with

using writing to improve learning of science, history, math, etc. Where w-a-c has been manifested as "writing intensive courses," for example, the theoretical basis is usually the improvement of students as technical or pre-professional writers, rather than as more versatile, creative thinkers.

2. *Administrative Structures for Writing Instruction Programs*

The English Department is still the locus of writing instruction nationwide. Where there are w-a-c programs, the director is almost always an English Department faculty member, and basic writing instruction is carried out in that department. This is largely speculation on my part, but I'd venture to guess that most of the places where writing is administered by an interdepartmental writing council, or is shared equally by all departments, are smaller colleges which have traditionally not had a required composition course.

3. *Formats and Topics for Summer and Inservice Workshops on Writing Instruction*

Your list of formats and topics about covers usual practice in the workshops I'm familiar with. However, I think it would be fair to say *most* of the schools which are *interested* in w-a-c have not yet reached the stage of putting on a workshop (this only implies that the "movement" is still young and interest is spreading). Where workshops have occurred (I'd estimate roughly 300-400 schools), there has been—and this is my bias—a disappointingly high reliance either on outside consultants to run the workshops or on top-down instruction by English faculty. Emphasis in these workshops tends to be on assignment writing and on evaluation and grading, since these are the immediately pressing concerns of faculty. However, where the emphasis is

on writing to learn, then such techniques as journals, response logs, in-class writing, free writing, and role-playing are taught and discussed. The most successful format I'm familiar with, and therefore one that I like to use, tries to de-center instruction: this format presupposes that each of the participants is the resident expert on his or her discipline and is therefore better able than the English Department person or the outside consultant to describe how learning goes on in that discipline *and* how people learn to write well in that field. The better consultants (people like Toby Fulwiler, Sue McLeod, Barbara Walvoord, and Bernadette Glaze) make the participants responsible for considering and planning how writing-to-learn strategies can be best adapted to their students.

4. *Departmental Follow-up Activities*

These don't happen frequently enough, but seem to me to be the lifeblood of w-a-c or any other faculty development effort. A handful of colleges and universities have published newsletters that disseminate the discoveries of faculty participants; a few have established directorships of w-a-c that extend throughout the school year and thus make follow-up possible. In some of these places, a popular model is to bring workshop participants together fairly regularly, say once a month, to share successes and problems. Another part of this model is to make participants responsible for setting up dissemination meetings in their own departments. What really seems crucial to me for keeping follow-up going is administrative support at the departmental level and higher. Where w-a-c has been consistently successful (e.g., Radford University, Beaver College, Michigan Tech, the California State universities), the deans and provosts have provided funding and release time, thus making it clear to faculty that emphasis on improved teaching merits reward.

5. *Curricular Structures for Campus-Wide Writing Requirements*

The required freshman comp. course (or courses) still predominates overwhelmingly. In more exclusive schools and in small colleges with a tradition of w-a-c (e.g., Hollins), the freshman seminar, with intensive writing and with subject matter from diverse disciplines, is frequent. Some larger universities (e.g., Tulsa, George Mason) are experimenting with curricula that do not include composition courses per se. From my own experience, I can say that such curricula are a great boon to w-a-c, because faculty feel responsible for teaching writing and for using writing to learn when they can't fall back on the old excuse—"students should learn to write in freshman comp."

The writing intensive course is becoming more popular as a way of implementing w-a-c, following

on the St. Mary's and University of Michigan models, but as I said before this notion seems to deny the efficacy of writing as a mode of learning in all courses. The paired course is also occurring in some places, (e.g., MIT, DePaul) but, again, this is not really a w-a-c structure if the responsibility for writing rests with the English half of the pair. Quite a few institutions (e.g., Maryland, George Mason, Virginia Commonwealth) have gone to a freshman/junior required sequence, on the theory that the institution wants the students to know that writing is important throughout college, not only in the freshman year. However, this theory is rather hollow if the student finds that he/she is not required to write in junior/senior courses in the major, as is frequently the case.

6. *Texts on Writing Instruction*

Again, the overwhelming majority of published writing texts presupposes the required freshman comp. sequence. Recently, a number of new texts have something about "writing across the curriculum" in their titles. Most of these are little different from the traditional freshman reader, except that they'll add a few scientists to their authors lists. Others, such as Maimon's *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, are useful for paired courses at the freshman level. But only a very few books (e.g., Barnett's *Writing About Art*) are really usable in content area courses outside the English Department. The best w-a-c materials for students are the handouts that individual teachers prepare that are specifically adapted to their courses.

Better texts are available for teachers, and this is as it should be, because w-a-c should not come out of a textbook for students. Some better ones include Carol Molder and Andrew Moss's (published by the Cal. State system), Bill Griffin's for Jossey-Bass, Toby Fulwiler and Art Young's (for NCTE), and, I'm happy to say, our own at George Mason (for Kendall/Hunt). All these focus on writing-to-learn theory and on specific practices for the classroom.

7. *Evaluation Procedures for Faculty Attitude Change*

There's nothing standard here and relatively little has been done—again, because w-a-c is still so new in most places (it's only ten years old anywhere, except at those few small colleges where they've always done it). Toby Fulwiler is the only person who's published anything extensive on w-a-c evaluation, and he continually disclaims that there is anything systematic about his procedures. However, almost everyone who runs a workshop asks for feedback, and this feedback usually takes the form of specific plans that the participant has for implementing writing-to-learn or for increasing the amount of

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writing. It's also possible to measure faculty attitudes toward their own writing: a workshop should change something in the participant's outlook toward the writing process.

My feeling is that evaluation of faculty attitude change will be occurring more and more, because it's easy to do and because more and more programs will be reaching the stage where it's possible to measure change over a several year span. We're starting to do that at GMU and I know that such other places as UCLA and San Diego State are also in the review process.

8. *Evaluation of Student Progress*

This is very difficult to do and so it is rarely done. No one knows really how to measure significant change through w-a-c, for several reasons: (1) w-a-c rarely affects more than a small percentage of faculty, so students are likely to have only sporadic acquaintance with writing-to-learn over their undergraduate years; (2) few w-a-c programs have been running long enough or on a large enough scale to make student testing feasible; (3) evaluation of w-a-c, like evaluation of writing in general, is made incredibly complex by the number of variables. Nevertheless, evaluation goes on. Here, we have been collecting writing samples for two years on about forty students who've gone through our experimental program, and this spring our students will be tested comparatively with non-w-a-c students via the writing assessment of the ACT "COMP" test. At this point, however, we have no assumptions about the results and no firm idea of "significance."

9. *Correlation between Writing Instruction and Professional Reward Systems*

Freshman comp classes and writing classes in general tend to be much smaller in size than other courses, especially at the lower levels. Rank, tenure, and salary systems relate differently to writing instructors, dependent on the institution's administrative structure. Unfortunately, where required writing programs exist within English Departments, which is the case in the vast majority of institutions, research on the teaching of writing is not considered as deserving of reward as more traditional English Department research. Similarly, departments are much more willing to staff writing courses, at the lower and upper levels, with adjunct faculty than they are literature courses. It is not atypical to find English Departments with a majority of majors in creative writing or technical/professional writing, but with very few full-time faculty in these areas.

Writing across the curriculum programs, as opposed to the usual required writing programs,

tend to be so new that they include no regular faculty positions. A few places include release time in their budgets for w-a-c directors, though I know of no institution where w-a-c directorship per se is more than a half-time appointment. Faculty who participate in w-a-c workshops usually receive stipends, but program directors regularly complain that faculty participants rarely receive any merit consideration for this evidence of concern for teaching.

10. *Dissemination Activities*

There's a tremendous amount of activity here, because the people who are involved in w-a-c are zealous about it. This activity is most visible at the NCTE and CCCC conferences. I also think that NCTE and the state-of-the-art publishers, preeminently Boynton/Cook, have done a good job of getting ideas and practices into print. The NEH-sponsored projects at Beaver College and in the Northwest have also been useful, as have the University of Chicago conferences on Writing and Higher Order Reasoning. Publications have been responsible also for generating a significant amount of consulting for the most prolific writers in this area. And, of course, the National Writing Project has provided the best model for w-a-c workshops, plus the most efficient networking mechanism for getting solid practices from one state to another.

Nevertheless, a real dissemination problem exists between and among disciplines. Writing across the curriculum is by its nature cross-disciplinary, but the dissemination of information is not cross-disciplinary, except at the local level, through faculty workshops. Still relatively few professional journals in math, history, psychology, etc., have published articles on writing-to-learn. Moreover, an equally serious dissemination problem exists within the states. The Network of W-A-C Programs, with small donations from subscribers, publishes a directory of schools and individuals working in w-a-c programs, the primary purpose of this directory being to establish mutual awareness by people in the same states and regions. But it is not uncommon for me to receive letters from teachers in Florida, Iowa, or New Mexico who think that they are the first individuals in their states to have pondered a w-a-c workshop.

11. *Future Use of Federal Funding*

(1) Linking content areas: ASCD is currently organizing panels of reps from each of the discipline associations (NCTE, NCTM, etc.) to study critical thinking and textbooks, critical thinking and testing, etc. I'd like to see something like this going on at the college level in regard to the theory and practice of the teaching of writing. Professional associations

control much publishing in their fields, yet little is known outside comp specialty journals about w-a-c and writing to learn; (2) WAC Projects: funding of dissemination and of evaluation are more critical needs, I think, than funding of individual projects at institutions. There is no national newsletter, and no regional or state newsletters, on w-a-c. Concerning evaluation, I'd like to see funding of a few studies of w-a-c results at diverse institutions; accountability is a big issue, but we just don't have reliable models to use or studies to cite; (3) Articulation: Sure, we need more articulation projects between colleges, high schools, and elementary schools. I'd like to see these organized on the Writing Project model, so that all would teach one another. I also would like to see more articulation occurring among colleges and universities within the states. For two years, the state of Virginia funded w-a-c workshops at four of our colleges. No funds were included for articulation; nevertheless, the consortial arrangement we developed resulted in significant sharing of ideas and techniques; (4) English Departments: it's often assumed that since w-a-c programs and required writing courses usually reside in English Departments, English faculty know all about teaching writing and about writing as a mode of learning. However, literature, like science and math or art, is a content area, and its teachers are inherently no more thoughtful about teaching and about learning theory than any other professoriat. Funding could be well used for projects on writing-to-learn in the literature class or on the relationship between writing theory and the understanding of complex texts.

Let me add one final category of projects to this wish list. NEH has been very concerned with such issues as the commitment of full-time faculty to lower-level courses. I agree that this is a crucial issue, and I urge continued funding of such projects. Nevertheless, I don't think it possible for any number of federal grants to keep universities from using higher and higher proportions of adjunct faculty and gta's in lower-level courses, especially those devoted to writing. These adjuncts have no status in the institution, pitiable rates of pay, and virtually no recognition by full-time faculty. Yet these persons continue to bear most of the responsibility for teaching writing in the university. I must admit that I don't know of NEH projects deliberately devoted to the improvement of morale among adjuncts teaching in the humanities, but there need to be more such projects, and the methods used by these institutions need to be disseminated. Institutions that use sound, humane management practices in this regard need to be cited. Indeed, the entire issue of management of personnel in the humanities needs more attention. For example, while writing process research has

taught us much about the need for students to have mutually constructive peer response groups, humanities departments continue to treat writing by faculty as an individual, survival-of-the-fittest affair, with the result that high percentages of faculty, tenured and untenured, do not write and publish their research. NEM might fund model programs that apply to their faculty management practices what we have learned about the development of writing in the classroom.

I hope you find my remarks useful. I'll be happy to clarify or expand on any of the points I've made.

Sincerely,
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