

# Defining Writing Across the Curriculum

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Writing across the curriculum, unlike many other phrases having to do with writing these days, has a positive ring about it. Administrators and faculty may see student writing skills as abysmal and view basic writing programs with suspicion, but writing across the curriculum is generally seen as a positive response to the student literacy crisis and therefore something to be desired. Administrators have heard of it and generally want to implement it on their campuses, even if they are not entirely sure what "it" is, because it is defined as something that will improve student writing.

But administrators and faculty alike often have only partial definitions of writing across the curriculum in mind; they may know of only one program, or they may have read a general article on the phenomenon. Their half-defined notions of the term lead them to sometimes serious misunderstandings of what WAC is all about. At a recent conference, for example, I talked to a dean who told me that he was thinking about implementing a WAC program in which teaching assistants from all disciplines would teach writing as part of the discussion sections they already led. So far, so good; but the second part of his projected program involved eliminating Freshman Composition from the budget because it would be added to the job description of all TAs, a cost-effective approach that pleased him. And our faculty colleagues, while they may agree that something needs to be done, often interpret writing across the curriculum to mean grammar across the curriculum, and therefore as something that they themselves are not capable of doing.

Such mis-definitions can damage and even destroy our writing programs. As writing program administrators, we need to be sure that we clarify for our colleagues and university administrators, and perhaps for ourselves as well, exactly what we mean when we use the term "writing across the curriculum." What I should like to do here is discuss two aspects of this complex and multi-dimensional term—the philosophical bases for our programs (the "why"), and their various institutional manifestations (the "how").

## Philosophical Bases

There are two philosophical approaches to writing across the curriculum. These approaches are not necessarily opposed to one another and

mutually exclusive, as Lil Brannon implied in a paper given at the 1986 MLA meeting. We should instead think of them on a continuum from (to use James Britton's terms) expressive to transactional writing. The first philosophy, which I would term "cognitive," assumes that writing is a mode of thinking and learning. Janet Emig and James Britton are the philosophical godparents of this approach, which is based on constructivist theories of education. We build our own knowledge structures, the theory goes, changing them as we receive new information. One of the most powerful ways of building and changing these knowledge structures is through writing, through explaining things to ourselves in a conscious way before we explain things to others. The curricular manifestation of this approach is the use of journals and other ungraded writing assignments in all classes, at all levels, to make writing as a tool for learning in the classroom. Toby Fulwiler's very successful program at Michigan Technological University is the most well-known embodiment of this approach to writing across the curriculum; teachers at Michigan Tech. learned to use writing in all disciplines to encourage learning. Their methods are presented in Toby Fulwiler and Art Young's book *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* and the results are discussed in Young and Fulwiler's *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice*.

The second approach, which I would term "rhetorical," acknowledges the importance of writing as a mode of learning, but emphasizes the contextual and social constraints of writing. This philosophy sees writing in a particular discipline as a form of social behavior in that discipline, and sees academic writing as a discourse community into which we must introduce our students, much as we try to make newcomers feel at home in conversations among our friends. Because this approach sees the discourse community as crucial to the understanding of both the writing process and the conventions of the finished products, classes that emphasize the approach make extensive use of collaborative learning and peer revision. The aim is to create a community of learners and writers in the classroom, similar to the knowledge community we call a discipline. The philosophical godparent of this approach is Ken Bruffee, and its most well-known embodiment is the program at Beaver College, established by Elaine Maimon. Her methods are presented in her text, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, and in various articles, especially in "Talking to Strangers." The most common curricular manifestation of this approach is the writing course in a particular discipline ("Writing in the Sciences" or "Writing in History") which are often, but not always, at the upper-division level.

These brief summaries cannot do justice to the philosophical bases for writing across the curriculum programs; I invite interested readers to look at the articles and books mentioned above. Before I leave the issue of

philosophy, however, I would like to emphasize one point: the two philosophical approaches are different only in emphasis, not in kind. Programs which emphasize writing to learn do not necessarily denigrate the importance of writing for audiences other than the self, audiences with specific expectations. Programs which emphasize the importance of the rhetorical expectations in particular discourse communities do not by definition leave out writing to learn. The philosophies are compatible; many flourishing programs are philosophically ambidextrous.

Whatever the controlling philosophy for a WAC program, the actual program structure may differ, depending on the needs of the institution it serves and the situation in which it was born. There are a number of combinations and permutations of elements in each institutional model; what I will do here is list those elements, and explain how they work in a particular context. I base my classification system on how WAC affects students and faculty (for a related classification system see Kinneavy).

## WAC for Students

### The Freshman Composition WAC Course:

This model uses Freshman Composition as an introduction to writing in the university. The WAC course at this level goes beyond the reading and writing of the personal essay (the common 1970's curriculum for Freshman Comp.) to include readings from disciplines across the curriculum and writing about and for those disciplines. The essay, or "freshman theme," is not excluded, but the course no longer assumes that learning to write such an essay gives students thinking and writing skills that will transfer to all other writing tasks. Students also write summaries, critiques, book reviews, research reports, case studies, and lab reports as part of their undergraduate education, and a true WAC composition course would include these kinds of writing as well. In some programs, such as Harvard's Expository Writing Program, there are separate courses for various disciplines; in others, such as the program at Beaver College, the Freshman course is a single course but completely interdisciplinary. In some, like the innovative PAGE Program (Plan for Alternative General Education) at George Mason University, writing has become part of an interdisciplinary undergraduate curriculum which includes such courses as "Reading the Arts" and "Symbols, Codes, and Information."

### The Adjunct Course:

In this model, a writing course (often one or two credits) is attached to a course in a particular discipline, and is taught by an instructor knowledgeable about the teaching of writing. This instructor works closely with the

subject-matter teacher in developing writing assignments, and with the students in the adjunct class in writing those assignments. Such a course makes a good deal of sense in large research institutions with enormous undergraduate lecture sections. The drawback is, of course, that it can separate writing from the course, and that students and faculty see writing itself as a mere adjunct to the "real" curriculum. But as Robert Cullen points out, the adjunct course has been implemented successfully at such schools at UCLA and the University of Washington.

### **Upper-Division Writing Intensive Courses:**

This course introduces students to the writing tasks of their chosen disciplines. Where the freshman WAC course teaches writing about a particular field, this class teaches writing in a particular field—not just writing about history, for example, but writing history. The teachers for this class are usually teachers from a subject-matter discipline, the reason being that such teachers are the best ones to introduce novices to the discourse community of their chosen profession. The focus is not just on forms and formats, but on the critical thinking skills that define the various disciplines.

This model has arisen in many states (California, for example) as a response to legislation aimed at "doing something" about student literacy. The obvious drawbacks to these upper-division writing courses are two-fold: some junior-level students are not yet skilled enough writers to handle advanced writing tasks, and teachers in the subject matter areas are often uneasy about teaching a writing class. The first of these is best handled by a careful screening procedure, such as the Writing Effectiveness Screening Test (WEST) at California State University, Chico, which insures that the students in such classes are capable writers. The second drawback is best handled by a faculty workshop or seminar, discussed below.

## **WAC for Faculty**

### **The Faculty Seminar:**

Most WAC programs, whatever their structure, have a faculty writing workshop or seminar somewhere along the way. Sometimes, at the community college level, these are courses that faculty can take for credit (and therefore salary advancement). Often they are workshops that are led by outside experts such as Toby Fulwiler, Carol Holder, Barbara Walvoord, or Tori Haring-Smith; sometimes they are led by faculty members themselves. All such workshops have a common goal—showing faculty methods of assigning and evaluating student writing, and helping them understand that integrating writing into the

curriculum will help students' thinking and learning processes. There is an important affective element in such workshops as well; almost all programs that evaluate their workshops report a high degree of intellectual excitement at the end, a sort of "revival" experience (see, for example, the article by Weiss and Peich). This excitement is not to be taken lightly; the attitude change brought about by such workshops may be the most important element in bringing about change in the university curriculum.

### **The Writing Helper:**

In some schools, faculty who agree to teach subject matter classes designated as writing classes are rewarded with extra help. This sometimes comes in the form of a Teaching Assistant, as at the University of Michigan, or in the form of a Writing Fellow, an undergraduate who has been trained to respond to student drafts of papers. The danger of using such helpers is that the teacher in charge treats writing as something separate from (and inferior to) the subject matter of the class, something he or she can treat as the helper's responsibility. In the best programs, like the one at Brown University, the Writing Fellows do not fall into the traditional TA role of grader, but coach the process of writing initiated by the subject matter professor, who takes ultimate responsibility for the writing assignment.

### **The Writing Consultant:**

On some campuses there is a resident "writing consultant" who is available to help individual faculty design and sequence writing assignments, and give advice on evaluating writing. The faculty who ask for advice are sometimes graduates of a faculty workshop, sometimes not. The most successful programs using the writing consultant, like the one at La Salle University, are multi-tiered; faculty may make use of some or all of the components (long workshop, short workshop, individual consultation).

## **What It All Really Means**

I said at the beginning that the term "writing across the curriculum" is generally equated with a program which will improve student writing. That holds true as a general definition. But those who have read this article carefully will note that it means much more. Writing across the curriculum also means change—change in the structure of writing programs, change in the university curriculum, change in faculty behavior in the classroom. At its best, WAC means a change in the entire educational process at the university level; students who are writing in all their

classes and sharing their writing with their peers are no longer passive but active learners, junior colleagues who are engaged with their subject matter in a way that emulates the professional discourse community. At its best, a writing across the curriculum program makes the university what it should be—a comprehensive environment of literacy and learning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A directory of WAC programs is available from the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs; contact Christopher Thaiss, PAGE Program, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. For those wishing information about setting up and running WAC programs, the Board of Consultants of the National Network holds sessions at both the NCTE Conference and the Conference on College Composition and Communication every year. The members of the Board of Consultants are: Toby Fulwiler, University of Vermont; Richard Graves, Auburn University; Joyce Magnotto, Prince George Community College; Susan McLeod, Washington State University; Margot Soven, La Salle University; Keith Tandy, Moorhead State University; Christopher Thaiss, George Mason University; Barbara Walvoord, Loyola College.

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