

The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum: The Writing Center

Mark L. Waldo

In a recent issue of *College English*, two writers advance opposing viewpoints concerning where to "house" writing across the curriculum programs. Catherine Blair, described as teaching writing "both in and out of English departments," works in the cross-curricular program at Bucknell. She argues that WAC programs "should be designed, administered, and taught equally by all departments. True writing across the curriculum should be based on dialogue among all the departments, and, in this dialogue, the English department should be only one of the voices" (383). Louise Smith directs Freshman English and the Writing Tutors program at the University of Massachusetts. Unlike Blair, she believes that cross-curricular programs should be located in English departments, "secular and process oriented," housing "WAC by keeping open-house, initiating and sustaining dialogue throughout the curriculum" (391). Each of these writers offers substantive reasons for her position, reasons I want to explore in some detail; however, each ignores what I believe to be the most logical home for writing across the curriculum--the writing center.

Stephen North hints at this role for writing centers in his important *College English* piece, "The Idea of a Writing Center," where he observes: "[Centers] have played central roles in the creation of writing across the curriculum programs" (445). He buries this comment, however, midway in a paragraph with the topic sentence "writing centers have begun to expand their institutional roles." For North, WAC in the writing center seems no more or less important than establishing "resource libraries for writing teachers" or "opening a 'Grammar Hotline' or 'Grammaphone'." But that was 1984, and North did not intend to show writing centers as potential homes for WAC; instead, he wanted to ask colleagues for some respect and understanding, to dispel confusion about what writing center personnel do. At that time, it was important to define a good center's characteristics and to counter the persistent impression of centers as skills labs or grammar garages.

This perhaps remains an important task, given the observations of Valerie Balester in "Revising the 'Statement': On the Work of Writing Centers," included in "Symposium: The Professional Standards Committee 'Progress Report':"

Writing center staff are not seen as professionals, not even among compositionists. Consequently, we are not receiving support in terms of budgets, staffing, salaries, release time, recognition of our scholarship and teaching—in any of the considerations due academic faculty or programs. We are the third-class citizenry in English departments, and nothing is being done to rectify our situation. Rather than describing our place in the profession as a "niche," we might describe it as a "ghetto," mindful of the word's connotations of poverty, isolation, and low prestige. (166)

Lamentably, I believe Balester is mostly right about these attitudes toward writing centers. So many of the nation's hundreds of centers and labs still focus on remediation, testing, and worksheets. So many are subsets of English departments, composition programs, and basic writing classes. So many are directed by untenured and untenurable faculty. Because of these features, too many may be characterized as "ghettos," their residents as "third-class citizenry." Far from writing across the curriculum, these places may barely touch writing at all or may touch it only at the sentence level; it is not the skills lab or "fix-it" shop that I assert would be a good home for the cross-curricular program.

It is instead a new breed of writing center, characterized by several qualities that require serious institutional commitment: 1) independence from any department; 2) a tenured or tenurable director; 3) highly skilled tutors, themselves teachers and students from various departments; and 4) an ambitious writing-across-the-curriculum consultancy, steeped in the literature on critical thinking, assignment making, and writing to learn. Given these qualities, why are writing centers the best "home" for a cross-curricular program?

There are three reasons, primarily. First, centers provide a definable space for expertise, with identifiable goals and services, which the campus will need to initiate and sustain WAC. Second, through their varying services for faculty, they encourage the dialogue between diverse rhetorical communities. Finally, they offer a rhetorically neutral ground on which to carry out the program, perhaps the only such ground on the academic side of campus. Michel Foucault defines the term "discourse" as "the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation"; thus, he "shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse" (107-08). He makes a convincing case that one of the primary goals of education is appropriation of a discourse, "with the knowledge and powers it carries with it" (227). Because writing centers aren't disciplines, with "a single system of forma-

tion," they do not have the rhetorical agenda common to one discourse community; they can thus resist imposing what they value about writing on other departments. Rather than imposing values, they are well-positioned to help students succeed in any discourse endeavor or community.

In short, housing WAC in writing centers unites the best characteristics in the reasoning of Blair and Smith and rejects their less convincing arguments. Blair argues persuasively for removing WAC from English:

Entrusting the writing program to the English department is based on the belief that the English department has a special relationship to language and is, therefore, the department that knows the most about writing—in fact, the department that *owns* writing. But what the basic theory behind writing across the curriculum tells us is that the English department owns only its particular brand of writing that carries its particular context. Each discipline has its own relationship to language; the English department context is not a privileged one. There is no way to decide the primacy of a particular context because no discipline is better than any other. (Blair 384, her emphasis)

An irresistible logic exists in the proposition that each discipline has its own relationship to language, which should be shown through use of writing assignments in a variety of classes. Blair's position on English, that it "owns only its particular brand of writing that carries its particular context," seems largely accurate to me. Writing in English courses is very often different from writing in other disciplines—with its own purposes, audiences, patterns, and values. While not less than other contexts, it is not a "privileged" context either.

I want to observe, however, that Blair's position would find rough footing in English, which is becoming increasingly nervous about giving up ownership of composition. Think of the university-wide dependence that the department loses when a broad range of faculty use writing successfully in their classes. In a worst case scenario, think of the credit hours and full time equivalences lost if the number of composition classes lessens significantly because of WAC. Blair's remarks about the theory behind writing across the curriculum do little to lessen anxiety, not only about where English fits but the composition program itself. She states plainly that "the English department should have no special role in writing across the curriculum—no unique role and no exclusive classes to teach—not even freshman composition." Thus, she lumps composition with English as owning "only its particular brand of writing that carries its particular context."

Cross-curricular programs, however, were not conceived to curtail the power of English departments or composition programs. Quite the contrary. They were designed to broaden responsibility for teaching writing and to generate a larger environment for active learning. They were meant to help, not hurt, English departments, which cannot successfully bear sole responsibility for writing competence on any campus and which cannot be expected to know, let alone to teach, writing in disciplines outside their own. Blair replaces English department control with interdisciplinary dialogue: "Dialogue among equals is the way to make and maintain true writing across the curriculum by ensuring that all linguistic communities are heard from" (386). On an intellectual level, most academics would agree, including those in English, but at some fundamental level, perhaps the level of survival, Blair's proposition becomes threatening: "[The dialogic approach] could irritate the English department and make others on the faculty feel rudderless without English department control" (388). "Could irritate English departments" is probably politic understatement on her part.

Nonetheless, Blair's proposal and Bucknell University's practice of decentering the cross-curricular writing program is very appealing, primarily because the purposes for writing land in the hands of the various disciplines. It seems to me sound policy, for example, for faculty in the economics department to help their students develop writing competence, rather than complain that English is failing to do its job. A broad, shared responsibility for writing further lessens chances for "ghettoizing" composition, sometimes the consequence of designating one or two classes within a department as "writing" classes. Such writing-intensive programs make more possible the dumping of writing on junior faculty and more likely the view of writing as isolated punishment. David Russell writes,

Writing-intensives, sometimes supported by a remedial lab, are perhaps the most common curricular model for WAC. But writing-intensive courses . . . concentrate responsibility for initiating students into the discourse community in a few professors or TAs, while freeing most faculty resources for activities which the community views as more important than initiating new members. As Brown's WAC director Tori Haring-Smith points out, when a few courses are labeled writing-intensive, students object when other courses require writing. (65)

In principle, at least, the dialogic approach supports a widely shared responsibility for using writing assignments in classes, thus contradicting

the writing-intensive model. As Blair remarks, the majority of faculty at Bucknell volunteer "to teach writing courses."

Blair's proposal, therefore, has many attractive features. One of its most positive qualities, however, is also potentially one of its most negative: Being housed everywhere, writing across the curriculum runs the risk of being housed nowhere. There seems to me a danger that such dispersion might lead to diffused focus and confused purpose. Under the dialogic model, do individual teachers turn to the "writing committee" for help with assignment design? With techniques for grading papers? Who initiates the dialogue between disciplines? Because of the prevalent tendency at colleges and universities to resist change, sometimes sorely disappointing WAC enthusiasts, I wonder who sustains that dialogue? Is it the part-time director or the consultants? Where are the consultants housed? If more than 50% of the faculty use writing in courses, students must be looking for a great deal of help. Do students line up at faculty doors, drafts in hand, ready to conference? Do they go to the English department?

Blair does not set out in her article to answer these questions, yet I believe that they call for answers because each question suggests the need to house writing across the curriculum somewhere. Each question suggests that a purely dialogic, cross-curricular program may be impractical and "probably does not exist" (Blair 388). Is the English department, then, the last best place for WAC? Smith offers two reasons favoring English. The first is "our expertise in the study of the construction and reception of texts." Second, she suggests that since we are the experts, we will want to house WAC "so that we can invite--and keep on inviting--the historians and sociologists, the chemists and biologists to join with us in dialogue" (392). I do not deny the expertise in composition theory and pedagogy that often exists in English departments, which use that expert knowledge to develop composition programs and train teachers; their faculty should have much to share in the cross-curricular dialogue.

I note, however, the sense of control that English has in a relationship like the one described by Smith. She argues that English faculty, at least the non-hermetic members, understand and care about the writing process more than other faculty do: "To the extent that they have informed themselves in composition theory, English faculty are more likely to [apply similar assumptions and questions to both professionals' and students' processes of composing] than are faculty in other departments who, however well-intentioned, may see composition theory and pedagogy as even more peripheral to their professional interests than do the English department's most 'hermetic' members" (392-393). Smith is probably right about the deeper concern for process, but she displays an ironically elitist attitude here. Composition theory and pedagogy, clearly important to her,

are peripheral to the professional interests of most faculty in the disciplines. Does this mean that these faculty cannot use writing to very positive effect in their classes? Absolutely not. If they use writing to advance the critical consciousness of their students, they put it to very good use indeed. The English department may attempt to make "English teachers" out of their colleagues, but doing so is unnecessary to the success of WAC and may even work to its detriment.

Smith attacks the two notions that she assumes keep English from its cross-curricular calling: 1) its "supposed devotion to the traditional canon" and 2) the claim that "literary texts are metaphorical and non-literary texts are literal." As she asserts, English departments can show other departments how their writing is "contextualized--though not constrained--by the knowledge of canonical and non-canonical 'intertexts' . . . English faculty can share with other departments' experts in textual theory their mutual insights on how to carry textual studies over into pedagogy" (392-93). Finally, English faculty can share their "relatively expert knowledge of such matters as reader-response theory, error analysis, writing-to-learn, and collaborative composition pedagogies" (394).

There is refreshing optimism in the idea that our expertise will make colleagues eager to converse with us, and there is good-natured generosity in "knowing we're equally interested in their expertise" (391). As positive in tone as her reasoning is, however, Smith does not show why writing across the curriculum belongs in the English department but why English faculty may be consulted, along with other faculty, about features of the program. Offering invitations is not sufficient reason for housing WAC because any discipline with a rhetoric, and every discipline has a rhetoric, can offer such invitations with the same confining consequences. Imposing our expertise on others may have stunting effects on the growth of WAC. For example, I'm not sure that a faculty member in engineering could ever see as important the fact that his or her discourse is contextualized by "intertext." This sounds like more of the same from English departments (although I've never heard anyone in my department speak or write like this). Besides, which departments outside of English and perhaps philosophy have "experts in textual theory"? Which departments could afford to have such experts?

Even the observations perhaps most compelling to content faculty--our expertise in reader response, error analysis, writing-to-learn, collaboration--have a curiously insular sound here. "English faculty," Smith writes, "can show colleagues that errors provide windows into writers' minds as they acquire new modes of discourse." Maybe they can, but why would they want to? Making error a focal point of the cross-curricular program, I believe, would be a serious mistake. On the one hand, some

content teachers avoid writing assignments in class because they fear that they cannot correct the errors; on the other hand, some focus almost exclusively on the errors. In either case, the student loses.

I realize that Smith says repeatedly, "our colleagues have a lot to show us, too." English departments, she tells us, can resist ownership of writing, can avoid colonization of other departments, can initiate and sustain the dialogue; but her argument shows us something different--an agenda that places English in control. More exactly, her position implies an imposed linguistic control by making the English department's relationship to language a privileged one. I find her argument theoretically less attractive than Blair's because it contradicts Blair's most important premise: "There is no way to decide the primacy of a particular context because no discipline is better than any other." Smith's proposal suggests, even openly states, a preferable context: English.

The positions of Blair and Smith are essentially incompatible despite Smith's apology to the contrary. Blair's program encourages the view that all academic rhetorics are equal, that students will learn the language of a major by writing in that major, and that faculty should carry on dialogue about writing. Blair would share responsibility for using writing among all the disciplines. The problem posed by her argument is a practical one: If writing across the curriculum is wholly dialogic, where do faculty and students turn for help? Even as Smith urges equality and dialogue, her proposal argues the need for expertise--a place where faculty and students can turn for help--but she blankets the cross-curricular program with English department values, making English primarily responsible for teaching writing. The problem posed by her argument is philosophic: If we believe that disciplines have different discourses and values for discourse, each equal, what gives English primacy?

Writing centers bridge the gap between these two positions--Blair's homelessness and Smith's cloister. Potentially, centers are in the best position to offer the expert services that the WAC program needs while preserving the rhetorical integrity of the disciplines. They focus not on what separates disciplines but on what they share as a common goal: to increase a student's ability to analyze and synthesize material, see opposing points of view, make arguments, solve problems, and develop hypotheses, given the parameters of the assigned paper. This focus may itself be a rhetoric. If so, however, it is a rhetoric that we at least claim to share across disciplines.

As homes for WAC, writing centers combine two features vital to the campus: consulting for faculty and tutoring for students. The degree of success depends largely on the academic status of the program's leaders, particularly its director, who must be tenure track. Remarking not on

writing centers but on WAC programs generally, Fulwiler and Young point out as one of the "enemies of writing across the curriculum" the temporary and transient status of many of its leaders and administrators:

Often when programs are successful after several years upper administrators find themselves having to turn over the key people who have made their programs successful and who have gained immeasurable experience in doing so. This unstable leadership and lack of community commitment inevitably lead to the decline of once successful programs. (288)

Their comments, like Balester's about writing center personnel, demonstrate an essential point—that lack of tenure leads to lack of respect and stability.

Increasingly, writing center directors may be tenured outside of English, as a recent job advertisement indicates: "Director of the University Writing Center. . . . Qualifications: PhD (discipline open), significant training and experience in writing across the curriculum theory and instruction. . . . The Director will hold rank [associate or full professor] in an academic department, but will report directly to the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 22, 1992, B51). At once, this advertisement seems to recognize how valuable writing centers can be and to imply the need not to emphasize one rhetoric over another; it also understands 1) that directors must be tenure track and 2) they may come from outside English. I believe that the qualifications for university writing center directors will ordinarily place them in English departments, which may also help lessen the angst the department feels as it loses control of writing; but directors need not necessarily come from English. Regardless of their home department, they must be aware of and open to the varying rhetorical communities on campus.

The writing center's consultants will reinforce this openness by focusing on such areas as assignment design, evaluative techniques, and writing to learn, all within the context volunteered by instructors. Consultants will ask a faculty member questions, not give directives, and carry on conversations, not deliver lectures. Aware that different writing assignments encourage different types of learning (Applebee and Langer 130-131), consultants will ask questions that reveal what faculty want to accomplish with writing assignments and what they most value in grading. They will help faculty clarify goals, contexts, and audiences, given the class in which an assignment is used, and sponsor "norming" sessions, turning goals into criteria. Although such features as writing from the self, personal

voice, "energetic," "free" and "non formulaic" writing, "powerful imagery," implied theses, and "contextualized intertext" would not be rejected, this consultancy would not insist on them. I realize how controversial this viewpoint may sound; however, as English teachers, and I am one, we must accept that values for writing exist other than our own. WAC consultants must learn the values held by instructors and help them design and grade assignments out of those values.

The writing center's tutoring program will complement the consultancy by developing appropriate questions and collaborative strategies for drawing students to make improvements on their papers. Why is tutoring essential? Hillocks presents convincing evidence that teacher assessment and intervention during the process of writing a paper has a significant effect for good on the final product, far better than teachers' written comments on final drafts (Chapter 9). Thus, tutoring intervention during the process also helps improve writing. My own experimental research supports this conclusion (13-19). Students write better across the curriculum if they receive good tutoring. Blair's dialogic model probably does produce much student writing, but I object to the model's homelessness mainly because it offers little indication where students turn for help.

Students might turn to their professors. Many times I have heard the argument that professors must be willing to conference with students about writing. "It's part of their job," people say. I would agree with this position if the academy were perfect. But professors will resist using writing, especially in large classes, if they perceive conferencing as an overwhelming consequence. Further, few professors outside of composition will collect, write comments on, and return student drafts before the paper is due. They don't have time. Therefore, offering the university a strong tutoring program, one to which faculty and students can turn with confidence, is crucial to the success of WAC.

This confidence comes from having a tutoring staff experienced and versatile enough to work with students from any class at any level. On the surface, this may seem so commonsensical it doesn't bear comment, but the depth of experience and versatility I'm talking about actually contradicts typical approaches in writing centers. That is, any center housing writing across the curriculum should be staffed primarily with professional tutors, whose minimal qualifications include BA degrees from various disciplines, broad experience with academic writing, and prior teaching or tutoring experience. A comprehensive writing center will include tutors who have these qualifications, but often this group is a small minority, the majority being undergraduate student tutors.

Of course, undergraduates can be good tutors; they might be even more comfortable with question-asking and collaboration than some

teacher/tutors who tend toward the prescriptive in tutoring. Problems arise, however, from the student tutor's lack of experience with upper-division and graduate student writing, problems that become more glaring as tutoring sessions with this population increase. Other difficulties stem from having too many student tutors from one department (English). Students choose a discipline, consciously or not, in large part because they are attracted to its rhetoric. Just becoming immersed in the language themselves, they are likely to adopt the rhetorical values of their teachers. Since these values are not necessarily shared across the curriculum, effort should be made to counter them or any other pervasive influence from one discourse community. The best way to counter this influence is to employ a highly experienced, eclectic staff and fewer students.

Perhaps more practical, however, is to focus tutor training and philosophy on the values shared between disciplines. Training should show tutors how to advance conceptual thinking by creating an atmosphere in which students re-see their papers with regard to the assignment and their response to it. What types of questions will help students to achieve the goals set by an assignment and to write to the audience? In view of the assignment, how can tutors help with a paper's organization and coherence; its details, tone, and syntax; its references? I recognize that not all assignments will include goals or audiences. Some may be as open-ended as "write on a topic of interest to you," making tutoring (and grading) a trying task. Even so, the tutor's responsibility is not to determine the instructor's values or assert his or her own. In this situation, the tutor needs to understand the student's interpretation of the assignment and then work with him or her on purpose, context, and audience for the paper.

As a home for consulting and tutoring, the writing center must be its own program, not a subset of English or any other department. Independence, desirable in itself, is critical in this case because of the varying disciplines with which the center will work. Physics, for example, usually has a purpose different than composition for using writing and measuring its effectiveness. In a composition course, students learn to write by writing, whereas, in a physics course, they learn to solve problems and pass those solutions on by writing. Physics would probably not presume to impose its goal or community on English; why then should English presume to impose its goal or community on physics? The writing center must be versatile enough in practice to handle these differences and broad enough in theory to bridge them.

The center needs a theoretical frame independent of discipline for its practice, a frame that gives tutoring, workshop, and consulting activities research legitimacy. Fulwiler and Young conclude that most institutions base their WAC programs "on a common core of language theorists, most

often including some mix of James Britton, Don Murray, Janet Emig, and Peter Elbow" (2). I'm sure that Fulwiler and Young mean this as quite a positive feature of WAC, and my own teaching and research incline me toward this mix, but it is hardly neutral. Each of these educators draws from an organic rhetorical tradition; together they have heavily influenced the natural-process approach to teaching writing while challenging mechanic perspectives. Their struggle has taken place primarily within English and, more particularly, within the field of composition. Out of that struggle, a process rhetoric has developed.

While the deeper principles of organicism are no doubt applicable across the curriculum, these educators' interpretation of those principles is more specialized and more directly applicable to a type of writing class within an English department. Their theory implies a format for the class, along the lines of the "natural process" approach George Hillocks describes (119) and types of writing assignments (most likely some progression from personal to public). As each of these teachers points out in his or her own work, even within English this approach has had vocal opponents.

Whatever the rightness or wrongness of the paradigm, then, basing WAC programs on this core of language theorists would not pass the Blair neutrality test; to do so lodges WAC in English. It makes more sense to me to go to a less discipline-controlled theoretical base, evolved from the developmental research of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, the psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, the linguistics of Noam Chomsky, William Perry's findings on critical thinking in college-aged students, and research into writing and thinking done by George Hillocks, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer, to name a few. Just one of many possible theoretical frames, this one has an important advantage. It is bound, not by what one discipline values about writing, but by insights into human development and learning, especially with regard to language and thinking.

When the type of writing center I've been describing houses WAC, the number of classes using writing across campus will increase substantially. This increase results in part from the expertise offered to students and faculty through the center's programs; more abstractly, however, it grows out of the center's rhetorically neutral focus on the relationship between writing and learning. Foucault shows how a professional's authority for speaking derives from the appropriation of a discipline's discourse (227). The academy places much value on this appropriation for students. The disciplines themselves insist on it. Little wonder, then, at the friction one discipline generates by attempting to impose its values for discourse on another discipline. Little wonder, too, why writing centers have an advantage in housing WAC. They can build on what we share about

language and thinking even as they help students gain the authority to succeed in their discourse community.

Works Cited

- Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young. *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.
- Balester, Valerie. "Revising the 'Statement': On the Work of Writing Centers." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 154-175.
- Blair, Catherine Pastore. "Only One of the Voices: Dialogic Writing Across the Curriculum." *College English* 50 (1988): 383-389.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- Hillocks, George Jr. *Research on Written Composition*. Urbana: National Conference on Research in English, 1986.
- Langer, Judith A., and Arthur N. Applebee. *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of Teaching and Learning*. NCTE, 1987.
- North, Stephen. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46 (1984): 433-446.
- Russell, David R. "Writing Across the Curriculum in Historical Perspective: Toward a Social Interpretation." *College English* 52 (1990): 52-73.
- Smith, Louise Z. "Why English Departments Should 'House' Writing Across the Curriculum." *College English* 50 (1988): 390-395.
- Waldo, Mark. "More Than 'First Aid': A Report on the Effectiveness of Writing Center Intervention in the Writing Process." *Issues in College Learning Centers* 5 (1988): 13-21.

