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American Origins of the Writing-across-the-Curriculum Movement

by David R. Russell

Writing has been an issue in American secondary and higher education since written papers and examinations came into wide use in the 1870s, eventually driving out formal recitation and oral examination.¹ Significantly, that shift coincided with the rise of academic disciplines and the reorganization of secondary and higher education by disciplines, each with its own text-based discourse conventions to carry on its professional work and select, evaluate, and credential students. But from the first "literacy crisis," in the 1870s—precipitated by the new discipline-specific writing requirements and the entry of students from previously excluded groups into the nascent mass education system—the academic disciplines have taken little direct interest in writing, either by consciously investigating their own conventions of scholarly writing or by teaching their students those conventions in a deliberate, systematic way—despite a century-long tradition of complaints by faculty members and other professionals about the poor writing of students (Daniels; Greenbaum). Given the traditional separation of writing instruction from postelementary pedagogy in the American mass education system, the birth and unprecedented growth of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement in the last decade and a half is surprising. But the WAC movement has deep, though rarely exposed, roots in the recurring debates over approaches to writing and to pedagogy—especially in the American tradition of progressive education.

From its birth in the late nineteenth century, progressive education has wrestled with the conflict within industrial society between pressure to increase specialization of knowledge and of professional work (upholding disciplinary standards) and pressure to integrate more fully an ever-widening number of citizens into intellectually meaningful activity within mass society (promoting social equity). Language, particularly the written language that organized and facilitated the differentiation and rationalization of industrial society, lay at the very center of the conflict between disciplinary standards

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This account draws heavily on my *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*, especially chapters 2 and 9.

and social equity, exclusion and access. But the role written knowledge plays in preparing students for (or excluding them from) disciplinary communities was rarely addressed systematically, either by the disciplines and the professional interests they represented or by progressive education, which itself became professionalized in education departments and public school bureaucracies. Rhetoric departments died out, writing instruction was marginalized, and the issues of student writing remained largely submerged, reappearing only when the conflicts between disciplinary standards and social equity, exclusion and access, became most visible—usually when previously excluded groups pressed for entry into higher education and thus into professional roles.

Faculty members and administrators have long agreed that every teacher should teach writing (a cliché as old as mass education), but since the turn of the century, the American education system has placed the responsibility for teaching writing outside the disciplines, including, to a large extent, the discipline of “English” or literary study (Berlin 32-57; Stewart; Piché). Writing came to be seen not in broad rhetorical terms, as a central function of the emerging disciplines, but in two reductive (and conflicting) ways, neither of which engaged the intellectual activity of disciplines. Writing was thought of, on the one hand, as a set of elementary transcription skills unrelated to disciplinary activity (“talking with the pen instead of the tongue,” as the 1892 Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric put it) or, on the other hand, as a belletristic art, the product of genius or inspiration rather than of the mundane social and professional activity of the disciplines (Russell, “Romantics”). In the great middle lay most of the writing done by students and professionals, academic or “real-world.” But this writing was largely dismissed by the sciences, with their positivist orientation, and by the humanities, with their belletristic orientation, as an arhetorical, unproblematic recording of thought or speech, unworthy of serious intellectual attention, beneath systematic consideration in the inquiry and teaching of the disciplines.

Since the 1870s, writing instruction in America has largely been separate from other instruction and has been relegated to lower levels: to first-year composition courses taught primarily by junior, temporary, or graduate student instructors; to one relatively small component of the secondary English curriculum (composition units); or even to the primary schools. Instead of being an integral part of teaching and learning, writing instruction has gradually been confined to the margins of postelementary mass education, an adjunct to the “real” work of the disciplines and thus of secondary and higher education.² And in the disciplines, the organizing units of post-elementary education, writing was thus able to remain largely transparent,

² On the marginalization of composition in higher education, see, for example, Berlin 31 and Stewart. On composition in secondary schools, see Applebee, *Tradition* 32-34 and Piché.

unexamined. The discursive practices of each academic field are so embedded in the texture of its disciplinary activity that they have not, until very recently, become an object of study or teaching within the disciplines. The American Historical Association, for example, has rarely devoted its attention to the question of how students learn to write (or write to learn) history, apart from occasional mentions in its reports on secondary instruction (e.g., Beard 227). Even the MLA, the professional association representing scholarship in written texts and the discipline most often considered responsible for teaching composition, disbanded its pedagogical section—the section devoted to writing instruction—as early as 1903 and rarely concerned itself with questions of writing instruction (much less of writing instruction in other disciplines) until the 1960s (Stewart; Applebee, *Tradition* 198-204).

Several essays in this volume suggest reasons for this lack of rhetorical self-consciousness within disciplines. As Charles Bazerman says, following Bruno Latour, the “overt teachings of a discipline . . . may ignore or even suppress knowledge of the contexts and forces in which the field operates and that shape the knowledge of the discipline.” And as Judith A. Langer points out, even when faculty members conceive of their discipline’s knowledge as a dynamic social and rhetorical process, they may continue to teach as if that knowledge were static and arhetorical. This transparency of writing has created a central contradiction in the American mass education system: its organizing principle—disciplinary specialization—recognizes no integral role for writing, and in many ways the disciplines have resisted the sharing of responsibility for writing instruction; yet schools and colleges are expected to teach students to write in ways sanctioned by the disciplines.

United States mass education has found ways of living with this contradiction. The 1870s literacy crisis led to the creation of that characteristically American institution, general composition courses, which effectively relieved faculty members outside of English and rhetoric departments of any direct responsibility for teaching writing (Douglas). Around the turn of the century, with yet another influx of students from previously excluded groups, institution-wide speaking and writing requirements were dropped, relieving teachers of the obligation to assign and evaluate extended writing (Wozniack). By the 1940s, American secondary and higher education had almost entirely given up externally graded written examinations, its last institutionally mandated site for writing in the disciplines, in favor of “new type” or “objective” tests (Kandel). As a result, the disciplines were no longer responsible for communally arriving at standards for student writing; the assigning and evaluating of even brief writing was almost entirely at the discretion of individual faculty members, who had few incentives from their institutions or from their disciplines to pursue these tasks.

But even before institution-wide writing requirements and external essay examinations faded, the mass education system had settled into a restrictive conception of school writing that allowed disciplines to live comfortably with the contradiction of writing as the responsibility of every discipline and of no discipline. Instead of viewing writing as a complex and continuously

developing response to a specialized, text-based, discourse community, highly embedded in the differentiated practices of that community, educators came to see it as a set of generalizable, mechanical "skills" independent of disciplinary knowledge, learned once and for all at an early age. Writing skills could be taught separately from content, as a mere adjunct or service to a curriculum (in freshman composition, for example) or to a single course (in a research paper, for example). And because secondary and higher education is organized around specialized content, the generalized skills came to be subordinate. Moreover, this narrow conception of writing and learning fit well with the industrial model American schools adopted. Progress could be measured in the number of errors reduced per dollar invested, and students could be tracked and taught according to their "deficiencies." Thus, writing instruction past the elementary school was viewed as mere remediation of deficiencies in skill rather than as a means of fostering a continuously developing intellectual and social attainment intimately tied to disciplinary learning (Dixon 1-4; Rose; Piché; Russell, "Cooperation").

In the light of these narrow views of writing and learning, it is not surprising that all but a handful of the many cross-curricular efforts to improve student writing launched over the last hundred years merely asked general faculty members to correct students' mechanical and grammatical errors or, more commonly, to refer "deficient" students to a "remedial" program run by composition instructors.³ Nor is it surprising that most efforts to improve student learning in the disciplines had little to say about the role that writing might play in pedagogy. The skills model of writing offered no intellectually interesting reason to connect the process of learning to write with one's students' (or one's own) intellectual or professional development—with the activities of a discipline, in other words.

Progressive Education and Its Discrediting

The few attempts progressive educators made to introduce a developmental model for writing instruction across the curriculum are important, however, for they form the backdrop of the current WAC movement. From the birth of progressive education, in the 1890s, some curricular reformers in that tradition have seen writing and speaking in developmental terms—a "growth," as Dewey's early colleague Fred Newton Scott put it (464)—and railed against the "remedial racket" (Porter G. Perrin's term [382]). Dewey himself considered language central to learning, a means of organizing experience in progressively more sophisticated and meaningful ways. Unlike "child-centered" progressives, such as Hughes Mearns, Dewey argued that

³ At the secondary level, these were called "hospitals" or, later, "labs" (both terms reflect the medical model on which remediation is based). At the college level, the most influential program was Harvard's Committee on the Use of English by Students (1915-50), which policed student writing with the aid of faculty members in the disciplines.

students' use of language must lead systematically from the experience of the individual to the collective experience of the culture as represented by the organized disciplines. Education must begin with the student's experience Dewey argued, but it cannot end there, as many of his child-centered followers assumed. "The next step," Dewey wrote in his most impassioned attack on the excesses of his followers, "is the progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and also more organized form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject matter is presented to the skilled, mature person" (148). New experience must be continually and consciously related to old experience—the individual's personal history, certainly, but also the culture's experience preserved in the organized knowledge of the disciplines. Language plays a central role in this "continuous spiral" of progressively wider and "thicker" engagement with the culture (53). "There must be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas," Dewey insisted, for there to be "connectedness in growth" (50). Thus curriculum and instruction—particularly beyond elementary school—must consciously and carefully weave together the interests of the learner with the structures and activities of the disciplines through increasingly more sophisticated uses of language, balancing in a range of discourse the personal and private experience of the student and the public and impersonal knowledge of the community (or, in the modern world, communities of disciplinary specialists). In this view, progressive education must not be "child-centered" but rather, to borrow James Britton's coinage, "adult- and child-centered," engaging the world of the learner with the world of the discipline the teacher represents (*re-presents*) ("English Teaching" 204-05).

However, neither the disciplines, on the one hand, nor progressive education, on the other hand, explored in any systematic way the role of language in disciplinary learning to achieve such a balance. The disciplines, at the most powerful and influential levels of their activity (in research universities and professional organizations), concerned themselves primarily with specialized, high-level teaching and research, turning their attention to secondary education and introductory courses only in times of crisis.⁴ Progressive reformers in education departments, isolated in their own embattled discipline, championed child-centered teaching and radical curricular change in order to overcome the dominance of the disciplines, not to foster ongoing dialogue with them (Cremin 183-85; for recent developments, see Clifford and Guthrie). Largely ignoring Dewey's insistence on the importance of disciplinary knowledge, progressive reformers attempted to transcend disciplinary traditions through "correlation" of subject matter in core courses organized around student experiences instead of around "fixed-in-advance"

⁴ Academia's reaction to Sputnik is only the most obvious instance. See, for example, the history of university involvement with secondary physics and chemistry courses (Hurd, *New Directions* 80-86).

knowledge (Weeks). Students' writing would grow out of their experience and escape the confines of teacher-made assignments requiring the usual academic conventions. For the most radical of the child-centered progressives, unfettered freedom of expression became an educational end in itself (a doctrine Dewey called "really stupid" [Dewey et al. 37]). Predictably, administrators, parents, and disciplines (including English) rejected "correlation" as unworkable, chaotic, or downright subversive (this despite many successes) (Applebee, *Tradition* 122-23, 144-46; Aikin; Wright; Smith, Tyler, and the Evaluation Staff). Correlation threatened to overthrow the disciplinary structure that organized modern education (and modern knowledge) rather than mediate between that structure and the experience of students.

In the years following World War II, progressive education was thoroughly discredited in the public eye, and experiments in cross-curricular writing instruction returned to the familiar skills model, this time with a new emphasis on practical "communications." At hundreds of institutions, English and speech departments cooperated to train the newest influx of previously excluded students—returning GIs—in the "four skills," listening, reading, speaking, and writing. But the "communications movement," as it was called, rarely involved other departments; indeed, the communications approach offered no intellectually satisfying reason for departments to take an active role in language instruction, because it treated writing as a generalizable skill, unrelated to the specialized intellectual and professional activities of the disciplines (Berlin 92-107; Applebee, *Tradition* 156-60).

However, a handful of institutions actively involved faculty members in the disciplines, most notably the University of California at Berkeley in its Prose Improvement Committee (1947-64). This university-wide committee supervised the training of TAs from about a dozen disciplines in assessing and tutoring the writing assigned in large lecture courses. The committee explicitly rejected the skills model and adopted instead a specifically developmental perspective, which saw writing as central to disciplinary teaching and learning (Russell, "Writing across the Curriculum"). In the committee's final report before it disbanded (for lack of departments willing to use its services), the chair, Ralph Rader, wrote:

When student writing is deficient, then, it is deficient . . . in ways having directly to do with the student's real control of the subject matter of his discipline and not in ways having to do with the special disciplines of English or Speech departments. To raise the level of student writing . . . would be in effect to raise the student's level of intellectual attainment in the subject matter itself. To say this is to indicate . . . the reason for the lack of response to the committee program: faculty are by and large satisfied with the intellectual attainment of their students. The Committee is suggesting, then . . . that the faculty should not be so easily satisfied. (5)

Though such interdisciplinary efforts were rare, the communications movement did spur renewed interest in composition and rhetoric within

English departments and, more important, gave rise to a professional association for writing teachers, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. CCCC provided a forum for discussion and research on issues outside the purview of the MLA (as then organized) and became the seedbed for the WAC movement and research into writing in the discipline (Bird).

The 1960s: Language and Equity

Though the WAC movement did not appear in the United States until the mid-1970s, the fundamental institutional, social, and theoretical shifts that gave rise to the movement took shape in the 1960s. The decade left its greatest legacy for WAC through far-reaching changes in the structure and social role of mass education. Higher education began a vast building project. The number of institutions increased by more than one-fourth in the decade and the number of students more than doubled, from 3.6 million in 1960 to 8 million in 1970 (Bureau 166). The expanded higher education system trained and credentialed students for new roles or roles that had traditionally required no post-secondary training. Institutional and disciplinary differentiation increased apace and, with it, linguistic differentiation. Academics began speaking of *interdisciplinarity* and sought ways of understanding the discipline-specific "discourse communities" that specialization created (King and Brownell; Sherif and Sherif).

Though the expansion in higher education allowed selective institutions to become even more selective and research-oriented (many such institutions dropped or reduced composition requirements), it also brought a host of students into higher education who had previously been excluded (R. Smith). But there were few institutional structures for dealing with the needs of these new students, including the need for writing instruction to help them enter specialized academic discourse communities. Moreover, the ratio of students to regular faculty members increased dramatically, as the system increasingly relied on graduate students or part-time teachers for instruction in composition and other fields (a result of the vastly expanded research mission of higher education under the influence of corporate and state funding) (Jenks and Riesman). Many faculty members felt that standards were declining, that the new students could not do "college-level" writing (presumably the writing that instructors assigned in the disciplines). In turn, many undergraduates felt alienated from the increasingly specialized teaching staff in the new "multiversities." Faculty members and students did not speak (or write) the same language, and there were few opportunities, formal or informal, to learn specialized discourses.

The social turmoil of the 1960s also highlighted the role of language in education. The campuses exploded in a rash of political upheavals. Racial desegregation forced secondary and higher education to address the problem of teaching long-excluded social groups who did not write the dominant form of English. In this highly charged political environment, educators had to

confront volatile issues of language and access, language and learning, that had been largely submerged when higher education placed disciplinary standards over equity and access. The NCTE funded the Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged in 1964, and the federal government funded programs for teaching reading and writing to inner-city youth (Applebee, *Tradition* 225-28). The late 1960s also witnessed a small revival of child-centered progressive thought, which had been central to discussions of writing and pedagogy in the 1920s and 1930s. Writing teachers in the child-centered progressive tradition, such as Ken Macrorie (*Uptought*) and Peter Elbow (*Writing without Teachers*), sought to overturn the skills model of composition, just as the broader "open classroom" movement and other late 1960s progressive reform efforts sought to overturn the industrial model of specialized education (see Kohl; Postman and Weingartner). However, progressive reformers in the 1960s, like their predecessors, did not systematically address the issue of writing pedagogy and disciplinarity.

In the wake of Sputnik, federal funds were appropriated for curricular reform along disciplinary lines. Disciplines, including English, again turned their attention to pedagogy and found in the theories of Jerome Bruner a rationale for discipline-centered secondary and undergraduate teaching. Bruner's emphasis on the structure of the disciplines was in one sense a corrective to the progressives' insistence on the experience of the student. But Bruner, no less than Dewey, conceived of education in developmental and transactional terms, though he relied more heavily on Continental theorists, mainly Piaget, rather than on the American progressive tradition. And like Dewey, Bruner emphasized inductive teaching (the "discovery" method), affective and intuitive factors in learning, and, significantly, the role of language in ordering experience (M. J. Smith). Unfortunately, pedagogical reformers in the disciplines focused on Bruner's notion of a "spiral curriculum," which would teach the central concepts of a discipline "in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development," and paid less heed to his insights into the role of language and of inductive teaching in formulating such curricula (Bruner 13). The curriculum materials produced by research-oriented university instructors in the federally funded projects of the late 1950s and early 1960s were concerned primarily with *what* to teach and *when*, rather than *how* to teach it and *why*. The sciences, where funding was most generous, paid little attention to laboratory writing, though in some cases the typical "cookbook" lab manuals were expanded to include more white space for students to write (Hurd, *New Directions* 30). In English, which in 1964 belatedly received federal funding, a national curriculum research effort, Project English, developed traditional skills-oriented composition curricula that lacked an integral relation not only to other disciplines but also to the other two parts of the English disciplinary "tripod": literature and language (though the student-oriented process approach of Wallace W. Douglas at the Northwestern University site and the materials for "disadvantaged" students at the Hunter College site were important exceptions) (Shugrue).

In 1966, just as the federally funded English projects were drawing to close, the American English profession's confidence in its traditional pedagogy and disciplinary focus was deeply shaken by a month-long encounter with British colleagues at the Dartmouth Seminar, a meeting of some fifty educators jointly sponsored by the MLA, the NCTE, and the young British professional association the National Association for the Teaching of English. As one participant put it, the two delegations found they had "passed each other in mid-Atlantic" (Dixon 72). While American education since World War II had generally been moving away from the progressive tradition toward a pedagogy centered on disciplinary rigor, standard curricula, and standard "objective" evaluation, the British school reformers had been moving in the opposite direction, toward pedagogy centered on informal classroom talk, dramatics, and expressive writing. Echoing American progressives of the 1920s and 1930s, the British pedagogy stressed not structured disciplinary knowledge but experience-centered "awareness" leading to personal development, and adherents attacked standard examinations (in their tradition, as in earlier American practice, primarily essay tests) and hierarchical imposition of curriculum by disciplines (Dixon 81-83).

In a working paper, British researcher Harold Rosen raised the central question of what relation informal, personal writing bore to the more formal and impersonal writing required in the disciplines, a question Britain's Schools Council was just beginning to investigate (Dixon 87; Muller 106). But the Dartmouth Seminar did not take up the question of writing in the disciplines (indeed, none of its many working groups was specifically concerned with composition, though several groups dealt with it peripherally (Muller 98). Discussions of "practical" writing in the disciplines went against the grain of the conference, with its concern for liberating students from "the System, the Machine" (160). A few participants felt that the conference overemphasized individual experience and personal development at the expense of public and disciplinary claims. As Herbert J. Muller wrote in his report on the seminar, "I think John Dewey, now much maligned in America, took a more comprehensive, balanced view of education, with a clearer eye to both practical and intellectual interests, and to individuality as something that can be fully developed only in and through community" (176). But even the conference's critics agreed that Dartmouth had effectively reopened the crucial theoretical and policy issues that the American antiprogressive emphasis had stifled, and several of the conference participants—James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen, and James Moffett, among others—would, in the coming decade, create and shape the WAC movement.

First Stirrings of WAC

During the 1960s, the interest in writing instruction evident in the 1950s communications movement coalesced into a revival of rhetoric as an academic discipline, giving institutions recognized experts who would design and implement curricular reforms in writing instruction (Berlin 120-28). Re-

searchers in composition embraced native theorists such as Bruner and began to discover Continental and British theorists who would be central to WAC initiatives in the 1970s. Composition research acquired a new disciplinary rigor and produced studies of the rhetorical, cognitive, and social dimensions of writing, studies that in the mid-1970s would provide an intellectual basis for WAC (Berlin, ch. 7).

Though composition was still marginalized in English departments and in the wider institutions, the late 1960s stress on increased access invigorated efforts in the progressive tradition to initiate students into academic communities through language instruction. The City University of New York, for example, found it politically necessary to begin its open admissions policy five years ahead of schedule. At CUNY Mina Shaughnessy became interested in writing and access; she eventually rose to a deanship and pioneered the study of "basic writing," a highly influential developmental approach to teaching academic writing to students from previously excluded groups. Shaughnessy's research and curriculum reform brought respectability to an area that had been regarded as intellectually uninteresting and reshaped the remedial writing lab tradition along developmental lines (Lyons).

Across the river at Brooklyn College, Kenneth A. Bruffee began, in 1972, a program of undergraduate peer tutoring for students in all courses, through a writing lab staffed by undergraduates from many disciplines (Bruffee, "Brooklyn"). And across the continent in that same year, at California State at Dominguez Hills, a similar program was initiated to train undergraduate writing tutors assigned to particular courses in the disciplines (Sutton). Research conducted in the 1960s had shown that American college students suffered from "an indifference to ideas, and the irrelevance of their education to their associations and relationships with other students" (Clark and Trow 67, qtd. in Bruffee, "Brooklyn" 449). These peer tutoring programs and the continuing research by Bruffee and others explored the potential for using writing to link students' experience with their learning in a collaborative environment—an important theme of the future WAC movement.

Also in the early 1970s, in a few small private liberal arts colleges with selective admissions (Carleton, Central, Grinnell), writing programs sprang up that encouraged faculty from disciplines outside English to use writing in their courses. In the previous decade, selective colleges had been able to raise admissions standards and reduce or even eliminate composition courses, as the new or expanded institutions with lower standards enrolled the less well prepared students (Wilcox 94-102). But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as pressure for widening access increased, private colleges began rethinking their admissions policies—and their writing programs. Again the "skills" orientation prevailed, with remedial labs a common model. But a few colleges organized cross-curricular programs to deal with rising enrollment of students whose writing the faculty considered inadequate. After its enrollment doubled within a few years, Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota, began a "college writing proficiency requirement" to show "formal recognition of the fact that teachers in departments other than English may assume

the responsibility of judging a student's ability to read and write well (Larsen 8). Students could satisfy the proficiency requirement by writing for courses in departments other than English. In 1974, under the leadership of Harriet W. Sheridan, Carleton offered faculty members a two-week conference on evaluating and using writing in their pedagogy. And instead of the usual remedial lab, Sheridan began a "writing fellows" program, which trained undergraduates to tutor their peers on writing assignments from courses in the disciplines.

At Central College in Pella, Iowa, a group of faculty members led by Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord began meeting in a week-long seminar, held once each semester, to discuss student writing. In 1975, Central received federal funding under a grant from HEW for "special services for economically disadvantaged students" to hire a full-time coordinator for a college-wide reading and writing program (which later included a peer tutoring program funded by Exxon). As at Carleton, the heart of the program was departmental responsibility for certifying majors as competent in reading, writing, and (in Central's case) oral communications, supported by workshop to help instructors in the disciplines foster and evaluate student writing (Walvoord; "Development").

The most important predecessor of the American WAC movement—certainly at the secondary level—was the Bay Area Writing Project (later the California and National Writing projects). In 1971, seven years after the demise of the Prose Improvement Committee, the University of California at Berkeley began another developmental program to improve college students' writing, this time by focusing on writing instruction in secondary schools. But instead of using the "top-down" approach of the federally sponsored curriculum reforms of the 1960s, with their prescribed "teacher-proof" material and content-centered disciplinary emphasis, Berkeley adopted a collegial interdisciplinary, "bottom-up" approach reminiscent of the Prose Improvement Committee, organized around workshops in which secondary teachers shared experiences, presented successful methods, and together investigated the role writing could play in their classrooms, all the while writing a good deal themselves. The BAWP staff—usually from English, not education departments—found opportunities to expose participants to writing research and theory without claiming to have definitive answers. The first workshop began in 1974 and were so popular that two years later the California Department of Education (with help from a federal grant for compensatory education) made the BAWP approach its statewide staff development mode (causing some friction with education departments) (Clifford and Guthrie 317-18). Writing projects proliferated nationwide, with some sixteen sites in California and sixty-eight in other states by 1979 ("Bay Area").

Most of the participants were English teachers, though teachers from other disciplines also attended the workshops. But the project's developmental approach to writing as an integral part of learning (not a separate skill) transcended disciplinary boundaries. And more important, its collegial workshop environment, with faculty members discussing writing and learning

(while writing themselves), helped free composition from the remedial stigma—and would become a hallmark of the WAC movement.

The Newest Literacy Crisis: A Movement Coalesces

These and other similar programs might have remained scattered experiments but for yet another national literacy crisis—this one in the mid-1970s—that produced the most dramatic institutional demand for writing instruction since the mass education system founded composition courses a century before. The public outcry was precipitated by alarmist press reports of declining writing ability, based (tenuously) on the results of the 1974 National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP test of student writing, administered every five years, seemed to show that student writing had declined since the first administration in 1969. In fact, the results were inconclusive. The 1979 administration produced higher results than those from either 1969 or 1974 in many areas, and NAEP officials called for “caution in making global statements about writing.” But in 1974, caution was the first casualty in a war on “illiteracy,” laxness, and waste in schools and colleges. A *Newsweek* cover story, “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” concluded that, “willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates” (58). Academics joined the chorus. NEH chair Ronald Berman saw in the NAEP evidence of “a massive regression toward the intellectually invertebrate” (qtd. in Daniels 138). The immediate target of the attacks was the supposed permissiveness of schools in the wake of the late 1960s reforms. But like similar literacy crises in the 1870s, 1910s, and late 1940s, the mid-1970s crisis coincided with widening access to previously excluded groups. And like its predecessors, the mid-1970s uproar led to a renewed emphasis on mechanical correctness and “skills”—now dubbed “back to the basics”—accompanied by the usual remedial drill that is America’s almost reflexive response to a perceived lack of writing competence.

However, unlike the previous literacy crises, this one drew a more considered response in some quarters. America now had a corps of writing specialists to provide leadership, a resurgence of interdisciplinary interest in rhetoric, a growing body of research on writing, sources of public and private funding to support experiments, and a theoretical basis to allow for more than the usual remedial and cosmetic changes in response to the public outcry.

The British tradition of teaching, research, and curricular reform in language instruction, which had so challenged American English educators in 1966, proved to be the catalyst for the American WAC movement almost a decade later. American reformers borrowed the term “writing across the curriculum” from the British Schools Council research effort to map the ways language is used for learning, a project begun about the time of the Dartmouth Seminar and drawing to a close in 1975. But more important, Americans drew heavily on the British theoretical and research models rather than go directly to their own progressive tradition of language instruction (though of course there was much cross-fertilization). American reformers

quickly adopted and adapted Britton’s classification of discourse into transactional, expressive, and poetic functions, particularly his valorization of expressive discourse in pedagogy (echoing the American child-centered progressives’ earlier emphasis on “creative expression”), and they borrowed British methods of qualitative research: a descriptive inquiry more philosophical than quantitative, attentive to the discourse of students and teachers, broadly humanistic, and free of the “educationist” perspective so suspect in American higher education.

The report of the Schools Council project, entitled *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, was published just as America was in the throes of its latest literacy crisis (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen). A few influential secondary school reformers attempted to spread the theory and concept of WAC as a developmental alternative to the remedial skills orientation. But the main thrust of American reform was in higher education, unlike in Britain, where WAC reforms were (and largely are) at the secondary level. There were CCCC convention sessions on WAC in 1976 and 1977, led by program organizers such as Walvoord and Sheridan. Robert Parker and others organized an NEH summer institute at Rutgers in 1977 to bring the new theories and classroom practices to fifty college faculty members. Future leaders of the WAC movement such as Toby Fulwiler were exposed to the new British writing research. Perhaps more important, they saw illustrated in the teaching of Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami, and other institute instructors the collegial workshop method that was the hallmark of the Bay Area Writing Project faculty development model and of British research methods (a National Writing Project workshop was meeting down the hall from the NEH seminar).

That same year, Janet Emig, a Rutgers education professor whose work on the development of secondary students’ writing was heavily influenced by the British approach, published a seminal essay, “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” that wove together the British research, the Continental theories of Vygotsky, Luria, and Piaget, and American theorists such as Dewey, Bruner, and George Kelly. Emig’s essay announced the central themes of the emerging WAC movement: that writing has “unique value for learning,” not only in English but in all disciplines, and that it is “a central academic process” (127-28).

The Movement Gains Momentum

In the highly charged political atmosphere of the new literacy crisis, Elaine Maimon and Toby Fulwiler began widely influential programs at Beaver College (a small liberal arts college of eight hundred students) and Michigan Technological University (a public regional university of six thousand). Both were junior English faculty members with training in literature, not composition, who, in the long tradition of the marginalization of composition, had just been named composition directors.

Maimon’s dean called her in, confronted her with the *Newsweek* exposé,

and charged her with the task of improving student writing. Inspired by the research and experimentation going on elsewhere (particularly the Carleton program), she began working with colleagues in other disciplines who were interested in improving pedagogy through writing—biologist Gail Hearn, for example, was working on an NSF-sponsored project to study ways to improve students' laboratory observations. They began collaborative teaching and research experiments and read widely in the new literature on writing and learning. Maimon and her colleagues eventually convinced the college's Educational Policy Committee to adopt a developmental strategy involving many faculty members instead of a marginalized remedial approach. With an NEH grant, in 1977 she launched the first of many faculty workshops on writing. These workshops treated writing (and teaching) as a serious intellectual and scholarly activity intimately related to disciplinary interests, not as a generalizable elementary skill (the first workshop was led by Sheridan, using Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as its central text). "The teaching of writing," as Maimon put it, "is scholarly not scullery" (5).

At a very different kind of institution, Michigan Tech, Fulwiler and his department chair, Art Young, responded to faculty calls for a junior-year examination on grammar and mechanics by creating a WAC program to involve technical and scientific, as well as humanities, faculty members in writing instruction. With a General Motors grant (ordinarily given to improve technical instruction), they conducted the first of their influential writing retreats for fifteen volunteer faculty members at a mountain lodge in northern Michigan. Fulwiler used Britton's theoretical formulation and the BAWP's workshop style to emphasize the uses of expressive language—often in journals or "learning logs." Young called the response to the first retreat "heartwarming if not epidemical" (5). And future retreats led by Michigan Tech faculty members at other institutions around the country made this "consciousness-raising" model of WAC one of the most prominent.

WAC soon spread to the new open admissions colleges and community colleges, to the expanding regional universities, and to major state universities and consortia of colleges and secondary schools. The national interest in literacy made WAC programs frequent beneficiaries of corporate and government funding. And WAC became popular among administrators in higher education, not only as a means of responding to the public demand for better student writing but also as a faculty development program and, in broader terms, as a means of encouraging a sense of academic community.

However, the widespread ferment in discussions of writing and learning did not produce a single movement with an overarching philosophy or organizational structure. As WAC programs proliferated in secondary schools, colleges, and universities around the country, they reflected the enormous structural variety of American postelementary education. Some programs were merely general composition courses that taught belletristic essays on subjects treated in other disciplines (e.g., Stephen Jay Gould and Loren Eiseley); others were tutoring programs or expanded writing labs; still others were organized around an institution-wide writing examination or a writing

requirement satisfied by taking certain "writing-intensive" courses offered by several departments.

But the WAC programs had certain similarities. Though they were almost always organized by composition instructors from English departments, not by those from other disciplines, they were usually supervised by an interdisciplinary committee. WAC initiatives were (and largely are still) outside the regular departmental structure of academia—and therefore subject to the vagaries of personnel, funding, and priorities. They depended for their success on the individual commitment of faculty members (and individual administrators) in a grassroots pedagogical reform movement—not on the support of departments and disciplines (McLeod, *Strengthening*; Fulwiler and Young). As Fredrick Rudolph, a leading historian of American college curriculum, has said of interdisciplinary programs, "Unless handsomely funded and courageously defended, efforts to launch courses and programs outside the departmental structure [have] generally failed" (251). Yet by the early 1980s scattered theories and experiments had become a national movement, with publications, conferences, and a growing number of programs. As with previous literacy crises, the one in the mid-1970s faded when pressures for widening access abated in the 1980s. Other movements across the curriculum took the spotlight—"core curriculum," "cultural literacy," "ethics across the curriculum," and so on. But unlike the ephemeral responses to various literacy crises of the past, the WAC movement carried on its slow work of reform despite cuts in outside funding, competition from other educational movements, and reduced emphasis on expanding access to higher education. Indeed, a 1988 survey of all 2,735 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada found that, of the 1,113 that replied, 427 (38 percent) had some WAC program, and 235 of these programs had been in existence for three years or more (McLeod, "Writing").

Progressive Pedagogy and the Disciplines

The rapid growth of WAC in higher education was in the deepest sense a response to the demands for writing instruction created by increasing enrollment, particularly of previously excluded groups, but those demands were not new and do not in themselves explain the unique structures American higher education evolved in the WAC movement or the movement's comparative longevity. Significantly, the late 1970s and early 1980s responses to the newest literacy crisis often went beyond the usual remedial correctives or administrative measures that had characterized WAC's many antecedents. The reasons for WAC's success are complex. The movement's strength and longevity (in comparison with earlier efforts to involve faculty members in improving students' writing) is the result, in part, of the fact that reformers found a new way to revive progressive alternatives to traditional pedagogy. They were able to face the issues of writing and specialization, which had lain submerged for a century, and evolve a broader version of progressive pedagogy, one that recognized the importance of disciplinary knowledge and

structure for effecting reforms. Though WAC did not entirely change the ground of the argument over writing from “skills” to “development,” it certainly staked out another, higher ground for discussions of writing, one that linked writing not only to learning and student development but also to the intellectual interests of specialists. Today it is possible to discuss writing in the disciplines as more than a favor to the English department or as a means of evaluating students’ content knowledge. Unlike its predecessors, WAC (in its most common forms) did not attempt to substitute some overarching educational or philosophical program or a millennial hope of doing away with disciplinary boundaries and enshrining some version of “plain English,” as reformers from both the left and the right had advocated for almost a century. Instead, WAC acknowledged differences among disciplines and tried to understand them, without trying to dismiss or transcend them.

Student-centered progressive education had in the 1960s reemerged as an option for faculty members outside education departments, but in the late 1970s the old battles between student-centered and discipline-centered teaching were broadened to consider the nature of education in a society organized by specialization—and by specialized written discourse. (Maimon called Dewey “the presiding ghost” in Beaver College’s efforts to make writing an issue in the whole curriculum.) For Maimon, Fulwiler, and many other WAC proponents, the emphasis was not on writing improvement as an end in itself, or even (at least initially) as a means of improving communication. Rather, they stressed the power of writing to produce active, student- and teacher-centered learning. WAC was a tool for faculty development, for reforming pedagogy, though of course improved writing was an important benefit. For many college faculty members—unlike secondary teachers, who take education courses and attend faculty development meetings—WAC workshops provided their first opportunity to discuss pedagogy (much less writing) in an institutionally sponsored forum. And because the discussions centered on writing, an activity embedded in every disciplinary matrix, faculty members could bring to bear their resources as specialists, addressing the unique curricular and pedagogical problems of their disciplines. WAC programs produced a collegial environment out of which fruitful research as well as pedagogical and curricular reform grew. For example, the first book on WAC, C. Williams Griffin’s *Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*, included essays by a physicist, F. D. Lee, and a finance professor, Dean Drenk.

The WAC movement of the 1970s, unlike its predecessors, was also able to draw on an emerging discipline of rhetoric and composition for its organizational and theoretical base, outside education departments and traditional literary study. In the 1970s, graduate study in rhetoric and composition began within English departments (some forty PhD programs existed by 1987); scholarly books, journals, and conferences proliferated (Chapman and Tate). After a century of marginalization, the study of writing could be viewed as a serious intellectual activity. The whole WAC enterprise was thus able to treat rhetoric and composition as a research area, a field

worthy of serious intellectual activity, intimately related to disciplinary inquiry—an important source of credibility in American higher education, where research is often valued over teaching. There were conflicts, of course—over “jargon,” “turf,” pedagogical approach, and other issues. But for the faculty members participating in WAC programs, at least, writing could not so easily remain transparent, either in their pedagogy or in their own research (Fulwiler, “How Well”; Maimon).

WAC programs gave rise to research projects on rhetoric and argument in many disciplines and to cross-disciplinary comparative studies. And from the late 1970s, the WAC movement drew strength from research, in several disciplines, into the social and rhetorical nature of disciplinary inquiry and discourse, research carried on in such diverse fields as history, anthropology, and the sociology of science, as well as in linguistics, cognitive psychology, and literary theory (see McCloskey; Myers, “Social”; Broadhead and Freed; J. B. White; H. White; Yates; Fleck; Latour). By recognizing the disciplinary organization of knowledge (and thus of postelementary education), WAC has been able to appeal to faculty members from many departments, whose primary loyalty and interest lay in a discipline, not in a particular educational philosophy or institution. And by carrying on cooperative research with faculty members in many disciplines, progressive reformers today, unlike their forebears, at last have the means to explore the ways students and teachers can create that balance between the individual student’s experience and the collective experience that a discipline and its teachers represent. Since the late 1970s in America, such cooperative research has sought to find those language experiences that engage students with disciplinary communities (see Jolliffe; McCarthy and Walvoord; see also Kaufer and Geisler; Herrington; Anderson et al.; Anson, “Classroom”; Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman).

These were great accomplishments: to reopen issues of pedagogy that had been largely unexplored for decades and to make visible those issues of writing and learning that had been largely transparent in the disciplines. But WAC thus far has only begun to explore those issues that lie behind its basic assumption: that language, learning, and teaching are inextricably linked. To understand the ways students (and teachers) learn through writing will be an unending project, for to arrive at such understanding means negotiating—and continually renegotiating—the relations between the many interests that have a stake in the ways language is used in education: students and faculty members, with their diverse backgrounds and goals; institutions on a huge spectrum and hierarchy; disciplines with various and sometimes competing professional interests; and, of course, social organizations of many kinds, which depend on postelementary institutions to educate (and often select) their members.

The WAC movement, like the tradition of progressive education it is ultimately a part of, was born out of a desire to make the mass education system more equitable and inclusive but, at the same time, more rational in its pursuit of disciplinary excellence and the differentiation of knowledge and work that drives modern (and postmodern) society. Thus the WAC movement,

like its progressive antecedents, must negotiate the claims of both equity and disciplinary standards, social unity and social specialization. Through these negotiations it may be possible to realize the vision of Dewey: that curricula would be arrived at by means of open communication and rational engagement, not by fiat; that new institutional structures would be created, new pedagogical traditions evolved, continually to balance the experience of the learner with the demands of the disciplines through discourse—of students, teachers, disciplines, and the wider culture.

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Effective Ways of Securing Co-operation of All Departments in the Teaching of English Composition

by James Fleming Hosc

The opportunity of discussing co-operation in the teaching of English composition before the Secondary Department as a whole is most welcome. For the subject is comparatively new, it is tremendously important, and one which English teachers cannot profitably discuss by themselves: saying that the subject is new I do not mean to imply that no experiments have been tried or that there is no record of them. On the contrary, there are several documents which the seeker after educational experience may consult. But as compared with the question of electives or vocational guidance the field is virgin soil.

I speak of the subject as tremendously important. So I believe it to be. I doubt all present share that opinion—or will do so on a moment's reflection. For we are here concerned with habits almost if not quite the most significant which any individual possesses, namely, language habits. No one will deny that the mastery of the vernacular is the supreme achievement of sensible beings, and probably no one will deny either that there is no other mastery so difficult, requiring as it does adjustments finer and more complicated than those demanded by any other aspect of human behavior. Moreover, these adjustments begin in early infancy, are operative during every waking hour, and have fairly established themselves by the time a child enters the school. If now the pupil speaks and writes and reads well, it is necessary that the new environment foster a growth well begun, not hinder it or destroy it. If, however, the entering student has made small progress in language, has accumulated a stock of bad practices, to save him will require the united efforts of all the teachers he may meet. How profoundly true this is appears in the doctrine, now widely accepted, that language habits are special, general; that proficiency in a given situation gives no positive assurance we shall find it in another. To illustrate from our common experience: Pupils often express themselves well in the English classroom, and very badly