

DEFINING WAC: WRITING TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO WRITE

[excerpted from Susan H. McLeod, "Writing Across the Curriculum: An Introduction"]

[Writing Across the Curriculum is a term that] often means different things to different people (see McLeod "Defining"). Recently, for example, I was accosted by an administrator from a small liberal arts institution who told me that the history of WAC programs needed to be rewritten, since his school had WAC before anyone else did: Faculty had been assigning term papers in every class for the last 25 years. Most WAC directors would argue with his notion of what defines a writing across the curriculum program. WAC does involve writing in all disciplines, but it certainly does not mean simply assigning a term paper in every class. Nor does it mean (as some faculty in the disciplines fear) teaching grammar across the curriculum. WAC programs are not additive, but transformative—they aim not at adding more papers and tests of writing ability, but at changing the way both teachers and students use writing in the curriculum.

To understand the changes WAC programs aim to make, it is useful to look at the theoretical bases for these programs. There are two approaches to WAC, approaches that are not mutually exclusive but complementary, as two of the main proponents of WAC have pointed out (Maimon, "Writing"; Fulwiler, "Friends"). We might think of them as being along a continuum in terms of the kinds of writing they advocate: in James Britton's terms, *expressive* (to the self as audience) to *transactional* (to another audience, usually the teacher, for a grade). The first approach, sometimes referred to as *cognitive*, involves using writing to learn. This approach assumes that writing is not only a way of showing what one has learned but is itself a mode of learning—that writing can be used as a tool for, as well as a test of, learning. The work of James Britton and of Janet Emig undergird this approach, which is based on constructivist theories of education. Knowledge is not passively received, the theory goes, but is actively constructed by each individual learner; these constructions change as our knowledge changes and grows. One of the most powerful ways of helping students build and change their knowledge structures is to have them write for themselves as audience—to explain things to themselves before they have to explain them to someone else. In the curriculum, this approach advocates write-to-learn assignments such as journals and other ungraded writing assignments aimed at helping students think on paper (for examples of such assignments, see Fulwiler's *Journal Book*). The best-known program using this approach to WAC was developed by Toby Fulwiler at Michigan Technological University; it is described in Fulwiler and Young's book *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*.

It is important in discussing writing-to-learn assignments with faculty that we clarify what we mean by *learning*. One of the first questions a WAC director hears from colleagues is this: "What empirical evidence do you have that writing aids learning?" If one defines *learning* as simple recall of facts, the answer to that question is that we have little such evidence (Ackerman). In fact, if we are interested in having students only remember information, we would be better off instituting other kinds of assignments—memorization of mnemonic devices to aid recall, for example. But most of those involved in WAC efforts use the term *learning* as synonymous with *discovery*, as a way of objectifying thought, of helping separate the knower from the known; as a little girl once put it, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Wallas 106). We might think of writing to learn as a "knowledge-transforming" rather than a "knowledge-telling" task (see Bereiter and Scardemalia). For those interested in this question of how writing aids knowledge transformation, a recent article discusses how we might go about

measuring such learning (Schumacher and Nash).

The second approach to WAC, sometimes termed *rhetorical*, involves learning to write in particular disciplines, or in what researchers have begun to think of as *discourse communities*. Although this approach does not exclude writing-to-learn assignments, it emphasizes more formal assignments, teaching writing as a form of social behavior in the academic community. The work of theorists on the social construction of knowledge, summarized by Kenneth Bruffee, underlies this approach. Knowledge in a discipline is seen not as discovered, but as agreed upon—as socially justified belief, created through the ongoing “conversation” (written as well as oral) of those in the field (see Maimon et al.).

Our task in WAC programs is to help introduce students to the conventions of academic discourse in general and to the discourse conventions of particular disciplines—much as we would try to introduce newcomers into an ongoing conversation. (An example may clarify the notion of discourse communities. In writing about literature, we can use the present tense when quoting literary figures from the past—“Shakespeare says”—because for us the poet's words are not of an age but for all time. In writing about history, however one uses the past tense: “Gibbon said.” The words of those who write history are not taken by historians to be ageless, but must be considered in the context of the time in which they wrote.) Because this approach to WAC sees the discourse community as central to the process of writing as well as to the form of the finished product, it emphasizes collaborative learning and group work—attempting to model in the classroom the collaborative nature of the creation of knowledge. In the curriculum, this approach manifests itself in two ways: the freshman writing course that aims at introducing students to the general features of academic discourse and the writing-in-the-major (or writing intensive) course that emphasizes the lines of reasoning and methods of proof for a particular discourse community. The best-known program taking this approach was established by Elaine Maimon at Beaver College, and is described in *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* and in “Talking to Strangers.”

Writing across the curriculum may be defined, then, as a comprehensive program that transforms the curriculum, encouraging writing to learn and learning to write in all disciplines. Before discussing the possible components of such programs, it is worth reemphasizing the basic assumptions of WAC: that writing and thinking are closely allied, that learning to write well involves learning particular discourse conventions, and that, therefore, writing belongs in the entire curriculum, not just in a course offered by the English department. There is also an implicit assumption that WAC is a faculty-driven phenomenon, involving changes in teaching methods; WAC assumes that students learn better in an active rather than a passive (lecture) mode, that learning is not only solitary but also a collaborative social phenomenon, that writing improves when critiqued by peers and then rewritten. Faculty must see these as important and useful ways of teaching before they will institute them in their own classrooms; they will never be convinced by having WAC imposed on them in fact, experience suggests that they will usually do their best to resist it. A WAC program needs strong administrative support, but it also has to be a bottom-up phenomenon, usually starting with a few committed faculty members and growing as others see how successful these faculty have been. Profound curricular and pedagogical change can come about as a result of a WAC program, but such change will not take place unless it comes from the faculty themselves. And change takes time. Successful WAC programs start slowly, phasing in various components over a period of years as a consensus develops that the program is useful.