The Future of WAC - Plenary Address, Ninth International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, May 2008 (Austin, Texas)

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Abstract: In this Plenary Address given at the 9th IWAC Conference in 2008, Susan McLeod (who started her first WAC program in 1982) speculates about the future of the WAC movement. She focuses on four issues: The changing nature of communication and the cultural lag in assignment design, the question of who is in charge of the program, the ascendancy of assessment in education, and finally, the democratization and internationalization of higher education outside of the United States.

The title of my talk is borrowed from an earlier piece by Barbara Walvoord that appeared in *College English* in January 1996, commemorating the 25th anniversary of WAC. (For those of you who may not know this, the beginnings of WAC in the United States can be traced to Central College in Pella Iowa; it started in 1970 when Barbara's Chaucer seminar did not make and she persuaded the dean to let her gather faculty together to talk about student writing as a substitute for her class.) So WAC started in faculty conversations about writing, teaching, and learning. I thought this might be a useful occasion to reflect on some of the issues that Barbara raised in that 1996 piece, as well as one other issue that was not on the radar at that time, to think about the future of the movement we have come to call WAC. As Niels Bohr is supposed to have said, "It's hard to predict, especially the future." But most of the issues Barbara mentioned in her article are with us today, if perhaps in somewhat different form than one could envision them in 1996. There are four issues I want to discuss: The changing nature of communication and the cultural lag in assignment design (a pedagogical issue), the question of who is in charge of the program (an administrative issue), the ascendancy of assessment in education (a political issue), and finally, the democratization and internationalization of higher education in other parts of the world (an international issue, the one that was not in Barbara's article). So I'll start at the level of the individual classroom and work outward.

The Changing Nature of Communication and the Cultural Lag in Assignment Design

The changing nature of communication is a common topic; in fact, the way we communicate is changing so fast that sometimes it's hard for many of us to keep up with what is happening. (My kids, both of whom are 30-something, tell me that email is so 20th century—they rely entirely on text messaging to communicate with their friends.) One could say a lot about what effect, if any, such

communication has on student writing, but that's not what I want to talk about. Instead, I'd like to focus on how electronic media have changed the way that scholars themselves do their research and write. In an opinion piece entitled "Rethinking Scholarly Communication," the authors sum up this change nicely (and I quote):

> The manner in which scholarly research is conducted is changing rapidly. This is most evident in Science and Engineering . . . but similar revolutionary trends are becoming apparent across disciplines. Improvements in computing and network technologies, digital data capture techniques, and powerful data mining techniques enable research practices that are highly collaborative, network-based, and data-intensive. (Van de Sompel et al. 2004)

The piece itself demonstrates the very phenomenon it discusses, since it's authored by five people from Cornell, Hewlett-Packard, and the research library at Los Alamos National Laboratory and is published on-line. My own research, and perhaps yours as well, is highly collaborative, and that collaboration has intensified as it has gotten easier and easier to exchange ideas and drafts electronically with my co-authors. The authors of this piece I just quoted from are most concerned about how the dissemination of scholarly knowledge (with print journals still being the gold standard) has not kept pace with the changes in the way that knowledge is created, but what they say also has implications for pedagogy. You are perhaps familiar with the phenomenon of cultural lag, which I first learned about in Sociology 101. Cultural lag may be defined as slowness in the rate of change of one part of a culture in relation to another part, resulting in a maladjustment within some part of society (and by the way, I went to Google to find that definition). I did a survey of faculty some time ago at my previous institution to try to find out what the most common writing assignments were across the curriculum; the answer was not a surprise: it was the research paper. A later survey at my present institution found the same thing, and I'll be willing to bet it's the same at many of your institutions. Why the research paper? Well, it's in some sense a baby journal article, just like the PhD dissertation is a baby book—it's an attempt to get students to enter into the scholarly conversation, and in that sense it's an introduction into the discourse of the discipline. But here's an assignment from political science that is an excellent example of cultural lag: "A research paper is due at the end of the term. It should be 20 pages, with references. Do not use the Internet; do your own work." This faculty member who himself is involved in highly collaborative projects that make use of electronic sources is forbidding his students from doing the same. (The admonition to not use the Internet seems aimed at preventing plagiarism, but of course these days it's impossible not to use the Internet if you use a library.) So the pedagogical issue is a faculty development issue: we need to find ways of working with faculty in the disciplines to give their students a notion of how professionals in the field actually do their research and write it up, ways that are undergoing tremendous changes. In my own experience, faculty are eager to try alternatives such as assigning shorter research papers over the term rather than one long one at the end; where the sticking point comes is the issue of collaboration and how to grade students in collaborative efforts. So we need also need to work with faculty to develop innovative approaches to grading. These exist, it's just that individual teachers don't know about them.

Who Is in Charge?

The second issue, the administrative issue, is a particularly important one. Who is in charge matters. I'm reminded of the joke about the difference between heaven and hell being simply a distribution of functions. In heaven, the English are the police, the Germans are the mechanics, the Swiss are the administrators, the Italians are the cooks, and the French are the lovers. But in hell the Germans are

the police, the French are the mechanics, the Italians are the administrators, the English are the cooks, and the Swiss are the lovers. Some 20 years ago, there was a public debate published in *College English* between Catherine Blair and Louise Smith about where WAC programs belonged, with Catherine arguing that English departments should have no special role in WAC and Louise arguing that English departments should in fact house WAC programs (1988). For a while it seemed to me that Louise's argument was dead, since a lot of English departments had little interest in WAC programs. But the situation is somewhat different now, two decades later. English as a discipline, and I say this as a former chair of an English department, is in a free fall. As David Laurence (Director of the Association of Departments of English) noted in a recent (2007) *ADE*essay, the number of English majors has been in a steady decline, even while the number of majors in other areas in the humanities (like history and religious studies) is growing. And as you probably know, when the numbers of your majors decrease, your dean will not be interested in replacing faculty members as they leave or retire: many English departments are greatly reduced in terms of the numbers of literature faculty compared to 20 years ago. There are a lot of theories as to why this decline has occurred. My own sense is that English as a discipline is in the midst of an identity crisis. *College English* devoted an entire issue of the journal to the question "What Should College English Be?" (November 2006), but no one seems to be able to answer the question. The old canon, whatever its faults, at least gave English an historical frame on which to hang its departmental offerings in some sort of order—you knew you had finished your major when you had done Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. But if you look at the courses that make up most English majors today, you can't see much in the way of commonalities. Many majors look like a random collection of courses. In the midst of declining faculty numbers and budget woes, I worry that some English department chairs will look to WAC as a way to bolster the departmental profile and budget and try to find ways to take it over. It has happened, in fact.

On the other hand, the writing major is in the ascendancy. The committee on the major in composition and rhetoric has begun keeping track of writing majors that are separate from English majors; the number grows every year. A parallel and very interesting development is the fact that many writing programs have split off from English (the one at my own institution included). About half of the writing majors tracked by the CCCC committee are offered in units outside the English department. Here my worry is that some enterprising dean will look at a department called "writing" and decide that WAC should be the responsibility of that department by virtue of the similarity of the title. My own sense as a long-time administrator is that WAC needs to be entirely outside any departmental structure, housed in a separate entity like a Writing Center or a Center for Teaching and Learning; putting it in a department—any department—puts the wrong people in charge. Departments will always be concerned first with their majors, not with their responsibilities campus-wide; our general education courses prove that fact. In a recent survey of WAC programs conducted by Chris Thaiss and Tara Porter (reported on at this conference), 15% of their respondents indicated that their reporting lines were at the department level. I'd be happier if that percentage was zero. I think we need to continue to be vigilant about the issue of who is running the show.

The Ascendancy of Assessment (The Political Issue)

Assessment—and by this I mean program assessment—has been part of the WAC conversation from the beginning. Many WAC programs, my own first program included, started with grant money and had to have an assessment component to show the granting agency that we did what we said we would do. Let me state up front that I am for assessment; when I began consulting at other institutions that wanted to start WAC programs, I always included assessment as part of what I recommended they should do, a feedback loop into the program that would let them know what they were doing well and where they needed to improve. I recommended, and still recommend, gathering data of all

sorts—numbers of students and faculty involved, specific changes made to assignments and syllabi, documents produced by faculty to explain the writing conventions of that discipline (like those at Oregon State and George Mason University), evaluations of faculty workshops, and so on. Sometimes I recommended an outside evaluation from the Council of Writing Program Administrators, so that experts would tell administrators the same thing the WAC director had been telling them (but because the experts were being paid, they would be believed). We need assessment so that we can prove as empirically as possible that what we are doing is effective and also so that we can find the holes in our program that need to be plugged.

What has changed in the past eight years is that assessment has become politicized by our federal government. Assessment went from appraisal to accountability in the 1990s; now in the first decade of the 21st century we see assessment as punishment. Nowhere is this issue more clear than in the large-scale assessment package so ironically titled "No Child Left Behind." One of my sisters is an elementary school principal, so I'm privy to a lot of the discussion of NCLB at that level; she is convinced that the program is a not so thinly veiled attempt by the religious right to destroy public education in the United States. (I might add that this sister is a registered Republican.) If you are not aware of how NCLB works, the major issue for those of us interested in assessment is that this large-scale testing program rests on the false assumption that test scores equal educational excellence, and that schools that fail to meet the set standards should be sanctioned and have their resources taken away (one would think that such schools would need more resources, but that's not the mindset behind NCLB). The testing has had a washback effect on the curriculum: with so much riding on the test results, the teachers naturally teach to the test. It's a reductive and pernicious cycle. Lest we think that WAC, as a higher education initiative, is immune from this new wave of assessment, all we need to do is look at the work of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The chair of that committee, an investor named Charles Miller, is pushing for standardized testing for universities as well. A *New York Times* article published in 2006 quotes him as follows: "What is clearly lacking [in higher education] is a nationwide system for comparative performance purposes, using standard formats" ("Panel"). Try to imagine for a moment what a standardized test for writing would look like. Wait, we already have one in the so-called "new" SAT. So try to imagine how that might be implemented as a nation-wide test of student writing ability. It's our worst nightmare—we'd be teaching students the five-paragraph theme, and making sure they knew that the longer the essay, the higher the score, and it didn't matter if they made factual errors so long as they used big words. The policies of the present administration in the area of education, as elsewhere, have not been overwhelmingly popular; indeed, the recent resignation of Diane Auer Jones, the Assistant Secretary for Higher Education (the top Higher Education official) just nine months after being confirmed shows that there is dissention within the Department of Education. We can only hope that the new team coming in January, whether Democrat or Republican, will be more informed about the relationships among instruction, assessment, and accountability.

But the issue of assessment is not going to go away, and we need to be smart about how we address it in our WAC programs. Many directors of WAC programs, myself included, have degrees in the humanities (mine, like most folks my vintage, is in literature, but even most of the shiny new PhDs in composition and rhetoric still come out of English departments). For many of us, numbers are not our friends—at best, numbers are our in-laws. We don't have training in statistics, we never learned how to do pie charts and bar graphs. When we think of assessment, the ethnographic approach, with its emphasis on narrative, seems to fit both us and the process of learning to write. Unfortunately, narrative is not always persuasive to people who are looking at a business model for universities (as the Spellings Commission certainly is). If we are to counter the onslaught of mindless standardized testing, we need to do it with numbers, with data, with empirical evidence. My advice to all WAC

directors is to either learn statistics yourself, or (perhaps more realistically), make friends with your campus psychomatrician and work up a plan to produce the sort of data that administrators and legislators will understand. It can be done. For a wonderful example, see Rich Haswell's article "Documenting Improvement in College Writing: A Longitudinal Approach." For those of you already doing interesting things with WAC assessment, I call your attention to the call for papers by Kathi Yancey and her colleagues for a special issue of *Across the Disciplines* on WAC and assessment.

The Democratization and Internationalization of Higher Education Abroad

The final issue I want to discuss is an international one, involving two phenomena: the internationalization of higher education abroad, in part as a result of the Bologna Agreement, and the parallel process of what some of my European colleagues have termed the "massification" of higher education, but what I tend to think of in my peculiarly North American way as the democratization of higher education, with its attendant increase in student diversity. Let me as a side note just clarify one thing, which most of you probably already know as a result of the presentations of our international colleagues here: WAC programs as they exist in the United States do not exist and could not exist in countries that have very different systems of tertiary education (which is most of the world). But the two major principles upon which WAC programs rest—that is, using writing as a tool for learning (writing to learn), and helping students understand the various discourses, both disciplinary and otherwise, that they will need in order to write in various rhetorical situations (learning to write, often shorthanded as WID or writing in the disciplines)—both of these are translatable into most institutional settings. It is those two principles that I have in mind as I discuss this last issue in terms of the future of WAC broadly defined. Let me also add one disclaimer, and that is the fact that this final issue is one for which I am only an interested observer and not a participant—so I invite our international colleagues to correct any misstatements I might make here.

First, the "massification" issue. Higher education outside the U.S., especially in Europe, is facing some of the issues that this country faced at three different times in our history, our greatest periods of increasing enrollments in a very short period of time, enrollments that included very different sorts of students than those who had attended before: first, after the social upheaval of the Civil war in the late 19th century; second just after the Second World War as a result of the GI Bill; and finally in the 1970s, during the social unrest accompanying the Viet Nam War, the period of open admissions. During each of these periods there were different responses. In the late 1800s, just after the Civil War, the response to this large new group of students—no longer exclusively the sons of gentlemen— was to invent first year composition to address their supposed deficiencies in writing. (We also created a completely new kind of institution, the Land Grant college; the Morrill Act establishing these schools specified that they were for the "sons and daughters of the industrial classes"). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, one response to the increasing numbers of students was, unfortunately, objective testing. In the 1970s, the response was the WAC movement. (David Russell will disapprove of this cavalier summary—it's far too simplistic, but it gives you the general idea.) What will the responses be in other parts of the world? One thing I have noticed is the prevalence of faculty seminars, which I see as the heart of WAC: faculty conversations about writing, teaching, and learning, where WAC started.

The other international issue has to do with the Bologna Agreement and the fact that many formerly "national" universities in the countries involved in the process (mostly EU countries) are becoming international universities, welcoming transnational students from different countries and as a result offering some degrees, especially graduate degrees, in English. This means that there will be—in fact,

already is—a huge increase in the use of English as a lingua franca (if we may call it that) in the world, and an accompanying increase in the teaching of academic English as a second, sometimes a third or fourth language. Of course, students from other countries will bring with them not only linguistic but also cultural differences. What sort of institutional structures will be put in place to support these students and their teachers? How can our WAC experience in North America be helpful, and how can we learn from our international colleagues' experience? Here I think one of our greatest challenges is simply communication, since some of our terminology is similar enough to be confusing; the words "tutor," "course," and "faculty" mean very different things in international settings than they do in American universities.

A Final Word on the Future of WAC (My Peroration)

In 1989 I conducted a survey of WAC programs in the United States; I sent the surveys (paper and pencil at that time) to 2,735 institutions and got back 1112 responses. Among other things, I found that of those responding, 418 (38% of the total) had WAC programs in place. Chris Thais and Tara Porter, as I mentioned earlier, are in the process of conducting a much more sophisticated survey, this time with an international component; so far they have found a significant increase in the number of WAC programs in this country and Canada: 628, to be exact, almost half; 215 respondents to the survey said they had plans to begin a WAC program. What these figures indicate to me, as a long-time observer of the WAC scene, is that WAC has become part of the institutional landscape in this country, much like our general education programs (in many cases an embedded part of general education). So in spite of the various issues I have mentioned here, I remain optimistic about it as a force for educational change. Writing Across the Curriculum has survived and is thriving 35 years after it began. I look forward with intense interest to following future developments; many of you here will be helping to create that future, and I wish you well.

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