

Writing Fellows as WAC Change Agents: Changing What? Changing Whom? Changing How?

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Abstract: To be effective sites for enacting WAC change, writing fellows programs, like WAC itself, must be attuned to institutional realities, adapting goals and practices accordingly. To illustrate what being "attuned" has meant to the program she directs, the author describes five writing fellow placements, each motivated by the sometimes competing goals of securing broad-based institutional support for the university WAC mission while also addressing the diverse needs of individual faculty assigned to teach upper-division writing-intensive courses. Drawing extensively on narratives written by the fellows in these placements, she argues that the less-than-successful placements that are the focus of the article give us important insights into teachers' practices and the delivery of writing instruction across the curriculum. These insights, in turn, suggest directions for both faculty and program development. Every writing fellow placement, she concludes, even those most fraught with struggle between the teacher and the fellow over appropriate strategies for working with student writers, become part of a network for change, thereby helping to build and sustain a culture of writing at the institution.

The central underlying goal of writing fellows programs is that fellows will act as change agents in writing courses across the curriculum, a vision articulated most notably by Tori Haring-Smith (1992) in her description of the goals for the program she built at Brown University, one of the first in the country. Haring-Smith's goal of changing faculty and students' attitudes towards writing is echoed in the programs described on the Writing Fellows page of the WAC Clearinghouse, most of which describe the role of the fellow (also called "mentors" or "curriculum-based peer tutors") as two-fold—helping students improve their writing while also assisting faculty in teaching effectively with writing. Beyond these basic similarities, the programs are remarkably diverse in size, structure, and curricular focus. This is not surprising given that programs, and likewise goals for the changes fellows will help to enact, are shaped as much by their local environments as by their pedagogical ideals. Such has been the case with WAC itself. While early WAC leaders set out with an almost missionary zeal to change faculty members' teaching-with-writing practices, change, as Barbara Walvoord (1996) notes in "The Future of WAC," always "bumps up against" other institutional realities (p. 63). Similarly, in "Translating Enthusiasm into Curricular Change," Susan McLeod (1998) begins by endorsing a view of WAC directors as "change agents," but, she asks, what kinds of change are we after? Yes, she argues, ultimately we may be "out to change the world" but, given most of academia's resistance to change,

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we have to be pragmatic about the goals we can accomplish and, at the same time, build relationships that will help us accomplish these goals. For McLeod, this means that, in addition to concentrating our efforts on areas where change is most likely to occur (e.g. composition, general education, writing-intensive courses), we have to adopt a more "Machiavellian" approach of studying the power structures at our individual institutions—"power and who wields it, turf and who owns it, change and who wants it" (p. 11)—with the aim of creating networks that will allow us to sustain and build our programs. To achieve broader WAC goals, McLeod and Walvoord both argue, we cannot depend solely upon the commitment of individual faculty; we must align with others throughout the institution, adapting our goals to their needs and programmatic structures.

The parallels between WAC programs and writing fellows programs are clear; to be effective sites for enacting WAC change and to compete for resources and faculty support, fellows programs must be similarly attuned to institutional realities with goals and practices adapted accordingly. In this article, I describe what "being attuned" has meant for the writing fellows program I direct, the institutional realities to which it responds, and the kinds of change I hope to achieve when I place fellows with faculty in courses across the curriculum. This description provides a context for a larger argument about what change claims we can realistically make for our programs given the many variables present in any placement, including, for example, the priorities I've privileged in making the placement, the faculty member's understanding of the role of writing and a writing fellow in the course, and the fellow's ability to negotiate both in response to the teacher's and students' expectations. While I'll begin by describing a fellow placement motivated by my overtly Machiavellian-like goal of securing high-level support for the program, this article is most interested in the complexity of the faculty/fellow relationship and how the fellow makes sense—or not—of what the teacher wants in order to help the students meet the writing expectations for the course. Drawing on narratives written by four former writing fellows, I discuss the variables that helped or hindered each fellow in her efforts to influence the way her faculty mentor taught with writing; the insights that the less-than-successful placements give us into teachers' practices and the delivery of writing instruction in courses across the curriculum; and how these insights can be used to shape and change our own programs.[1]

But first some program background: As director of both WAC and the university writing center, I am in the enviable position of being able to develop initiatives which will carry out the goals of both programs, such as, for example, the Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines course I created in 1999 to give undergraduates from majors across the university the opportunity to tutor in our predominantly graduate-staffed writing center. It was from this pool of experienced peer tutors that I drew when I began piloting the Writing Fellows program in 2002, which was intended, as I state on the program pages, to "play an integral role in advancing and reinforcing the goals of Writing Across the Curriculum" by placing tutors with faculty in courses across disciplines. And, while there is no course for writing fellows comparable to the peer tutoring course,[2] I work with each fellow and his/her faculty mentor prior to the start of the semester to develop a plan for the fellow's work over the semester that will help to develop and/or reinforce good teaching-with-writing practices in the course. In that meeting and in subsequent meetings throughout the semester on an as-needed basis, the faculty member, fellow, and I review the fellow's role, his/her contributions to the course, and the teacher's involvement with and expectations for the fellow. I also monitor the fellow's progress through regular email updates and, at the end of the semester, ask the fellow, the faculty mentor, and the students in the course to fill out questionnaires assessing their satisfaction with the following arrangement, the perceived effectiveness of the fellow's work with student writers, and changes that may have occurred in a teacher's practice.

To achieve WAC goals, I try to place fellows almost exclusively in the upper-division writing-intensive (WI) courses every Mason student is required to take in his/her major. As spelled out by the Faculty Senate, students in WI courses are expected to write a minimum of 3500 graded words and to be given the opportunity to revise their work with feedback from the instructor. Implicit in the WI requirement is the belief that students need instruction in writing throughout their academic careers; that faculty across the curriculum are responsible for this instruction; that writing promotes learning; and that it is chiefly by writing in their disciplines that students will learn the conventions necessary to be successful writers in their chosen fields. Because of this emphasis on the teacher's responsibility for the writing of students in the major, the fellows I place in WI courses are expected not only to help students improve as writers but also to play an important role in helping faculty to teach effectively with writing; indeed, this is the first responsibility I list on our site under the heading "What Do Writing Fellows Do?"

That said, I sometimes have compelling programmatic reasons for placing fellows in non-WI courses/courses, such as a placement I made early on with the provost in the introductory history course he routinely teaches. I knew I needed to secure funding for the fledgling program, which I'd been piloting with no resources, and I also wanted to signal to faculty that the program—and, by extension, WAC—enjoyed high-level institutional support. I'm sure the provost recognized my motives for the placement and also understood that the placement would provide visible evidence of the value he places on having students write in courses across the curriculum. (He himself assigns at least three papers in every course he teaches.) Shortly after this placement, he allocated permanent funding in the WAC budget to support a small number of fellows and, the following year, he mentored a second fellow. The fellows I have placed with him—extraordinarily successful students—have enjoyed the experience (the provost is an excellent and caring teacher) and end up with a wonderful resume item. But, given their own goals and expectations for the placement, they have also felt some disappointment about their inability to influence the way writing is handled in his class. While the provost assigns a good deal of writing and gives students a revision option if they request it, he follows the standard guidelines for faculty working with fellows; he doesn't, for example, believe in requiring students to submit drafts—to him or to a fellow—and he allows revisions with or without his or the fellow's input. Moreover, he doesn't believe in using class time for discussions of writing and certainly not for in-class workshops focused on writing issues, although he is happy to recommend that his students attend the workshops the fellows hold outside of class in the writing center. Finally, he is far too busy to meet regularly with the fellow to talk about writing activities in or outside of the class. The addition of a fellow to his class changes little, then, in his approach to teaching with writing; however, I have been able to achieve other important program-building goals, i.e. visible administrative support and funding to pay stipends to fellows.

While I've started here with a success story, at least in terms of administrative and institutional support for the program, the placements that are the focus of the rest of this article offer a much more mixed picture of what goals a writing fellow can realistically achieve when it comes to changing the teaching-with-writing practices of faculty across the curriculum, even with the best intentions on everyone's part. In each of the placements I discuss next, I describe my goals for the placement and the variables—some anticipated, some not—that affected the fellow's ability to carry out those goals. One significant variable is related to the faculty member's and students' understanding of the role of the fellow, which relates, in turn, to whether fellows are more effective when placed in courses in their majors rather than outside of their majors. Given my efforts to place fellows in WI courses, the question of which is a better fit—the "specialist" writing fellow (in the major) vs. "generalist" (outside the major)—is particularly relevant. It is also a matter of some debate in the writing fellows literature. In "Curriculum-based Tutors and WAC," Margot Soven (2001) likens the issue to writing

center debates around the effectiveness of specialist vs. generalist tutors. In her review of the research on this question, she acknowledges that both kinds of placements have their merits; however, based on her experience with the LaSalle program she built and currently directs, she has "come to believe that the knowledgeable tutor—that is the tutor who is familiar with the subject matter of the course—more effectively communicates the various understandings about WAC than the generalist tutor, the tutor who is unacquainted with the course content" (p. 212). Others, notably Joan Mullin and Susan Schorn, as well as Jill Gladstein (in this issue), agree with Soven. I take up this question throughout the article in describing the extent to which the "specialist" fellows I placed were better able than "generalist" fellows to translate the nuances of teachers' expectations for writing to the students in the course. Whether specialist or generalist, the fellows whose placements I describe next each found that there were significant differences in their and their faculty mentor's approaches to working with student writers.

(Mis)Understanding the Role of the Writing Fellow

The two placements I describe in this section concern WI faculty who were open to modifying their teaching-with-writing practices when I asked if they would like to work with a fellow for that purpose. Each case illustrates, however, the difficulties of effecting change when a teacher is not fully invested in the WI aspects of the course and/or has deeply ingrained ideas about "good" writing and appropriate goals for student writers. In the first case, the teacher trusted the writing "expert" to tell him how to change his assignments, thereby, in some ways, avoiding harder questions about how his assignments fit with his learning and writing outcomes for the course. In the second case, the teacher avoided the teaching-with-writing issues that arose for the fellow by prioritizing the fellow's disciplinary expertise over her tutoring-writing expertise. Both cases reveal interesting tensions in the generalist/specialist debate.

Changing Assignment Practices

I discovered quite by chance, when I was leading a writing-assessment workshop for a department in our college of visual and performing arts, that one of the faculty members who regularly teaches the WI course in the major was recommending a five-paragraph essay structure for all of his papers. I suspected that this teacher's assignments were modeled on assignments he may have been given when he was a student and/or he thought that the structure would be useful for helping students writing tightly organized papers. I've encountered both of these reasons for the five-paragraph essay assignment when I work with faculty across the university. Whatever the reasons were for this teacher, his department colleagues were finding it difficult to assess papers from his class because of the uneven and excessively long paragraphs. After the workshop, I asked the teacher if he would be interested in working with a writing fellow, an offer he accepted eagerly. I arranged for him to work with Alex, an experienced tutor with strong interpersonal skills, and let her know that I was hoping she would, among other things, help him revise his assignments to reflect a more thoughtful approach to structure and organization. She was delighted to do so. In her reflective narrative on the experience, Alex wrote,

I had taken an elective course with this professor two years before, and I recalled a handout in which he explained this expectation: "This is the transition sentence from your first paragraph and thesis. This sentence is your main point for the first paragraph, this for your second paragraph, and this for your third." When I saw the same assignment prompt when I was working with him as a writing fellow, I recalled the struggles I had faced with the assignment, which was to write a first-person narrative imagining that you

were one of the characters in a play. In an essay that required creativity, I had felt stifled as a writer (and thinker) within an organization that left little to the imagination. As a WF, I was experienced enough to realize what had troubled me when I was his student: I hadn't understood how he could expect free thought in writing in such a structured format; I didn't know what his criteria were for good writing; and I certainly didn't have the confidence at that time to question his expectations.

As I discovered, the professor assumed his students understood that the five-paragraph format he prescribed was only a suggestion to help them organize but not stifle their ideas. However, he hadn't conveyed this expectation well to his students, who thought five paragraphs were a rigid requirement. Because they were confused about what they were being asked to produce—the five-paragraph structure being only one of the sources of confusion—the students were resistant to writing, especially in the beginning of the term. Over the course of the semester, I worked with the professor to rewrite his assignments. He and I sat with two copies of his assignment and talked about what worked and what didn't and what might be misinterpreted by the students. Because students had some writing due every class, with new writing also being assigned in each class, the professor also began to set aside time in class to fully discuss the assignments and student concerns. Once the students better understood his expectations, they felt encouraged to move beyond the five-paragraph format. They also realized their power to negotiate the terms of the assignment and seemed to rely little on me as a writing mediator.

While the assignment revision process seemed to have turned out happily enough for the teacher and the students, when I asked Alex about her perception of the teacher's commitment to the writing-intensive goals of the course, she replied,

The professor seemed to have learning goals set out for each assignment in the course, but I wondered how engaged he was with the prompts. He'd taught the course for over a decade, and my encountering the same exact assignments given years apart made me think he might have been distanced from the writing requirements. He was asking students to think critically, but I am unsure whether he himself was thoughtfully engaged. But this wasn't a conversation I could have with him as his writing fellow.

Overall, Alex said, she felt that she was able to effect a positive change in this teacher's practice and that she had performed a valuable role as "an intermediary between the students and the professor." While her success may have been largely due to her level of comfort with the teacher and the course content, her experience with a variety of teachers' assignments as a tutor in the writing center no doubt helped her to diagnose the causes of the students' confusion and to know what changes to suggest to the teacher. In this case, the confusion arose from the conflict students experienced between the imaginative analysis they were being asked to do, in a discipline that values imagination and risk taking, and the teacher's sense of an appropriate structure for "good" analytical writing.

In being mostly unaware of his assumptions and the contexts from which his assignment practices derived, this teacher is not unlike those whom my co-author Chris Thaiss and I interviewed as part of our research for *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life* (2006). Based on our research with faculty across disciplines and our experiences leading departmental assessment workshops, we suggest that teachers' assignments and their responses to student writing derive from five contexts:

- their sense of generalized standards and rules for academic writing, often based on the way they were taught;
- the conventions of their disciplines
- the conventions of their sub-disciplines, often undifferentiated from the larger discipline when they work with students;
- institutional and departmental cultures and policies;
- and their personal goals for writers and idiosyncratic likes and dislikes. (p. 95)

While Thaiss and I were able to identify these contexts based on what our faculty informants told us, they themselves, for the most part, tended to assume that their expectations for student writers matched those of their colleagues across the disciplines, that good writing, in other words, is good writing across the curriculum. When Alex encountered her faculty mentor's problematic assignment, she was able to figure out the reasons for the students' resistance to the assignment but not the teacher's motives for recommending a five-paragraph structure. The change she effected, in other words, occurred at the surface level; she didn't have the experience or level of understanding, as an undergraduate writing fellow, to engage the teacher in more complex discussions of his assignment expectations and desired writing outcomes for his students.

Resisting the Writing Fellow's Writing Expertise

The next placement I describe reveals a conflict between the teacher and the fellow over his assignment practices but also over their different goals for working with student writers and writing. I had placed Alex with this faculty member at his request; he knew her as a student in the major and also knew that she was already an experienced writing fellow. He wanted to work with a fellow because he felt he was spending too much time on students' drafts and not seeing any significant improvement in their final papers. For Alex, this seemed to be "the ideal reciprocal arrangement, in that the professor and the students would benefit from both my experience as a writing tutor and my familiarity with the subject matter. And I would gain from sitting in on a class with coursework very close to my independent research." To her surprise, however, Alex's role was challenged from the outset by the professor:

The initial miscommunication was in the students' confusion over the professor's expectations, as in my first placement. In contrast to my first mentor, who appeared to have rigid requirements for the papers, this professor wanted his students to be completely free and original as they used writing to think about different concepts in the course, which they did in five-page response essays. But, in giving his students complete freedom to respond to each week's readings without any guidelines or advice, the professor actually served to hinder his students' ability to think and write originally. I could see from his comments on the first few drafts that the professor seemed to be valuing scholarly critique alongside personal reactions, a balance that was difficult for many of the students to achieve, especially since he hadn't told them that that's what he wanted to see.

With no guidance for the assignment, they were frightened and came to me for clarification. When the students came to see me, I immediately played the role of the voice in the middle, as I had been trained to do, and tried to interpret the professor's expectations for the students, until I realized I may not have had the best grasp of his demands myself. Because of my writing center experience, I could see, in the professor's

vague—yet at the same time specific—comments what the students could not. I say "vague" because his higher order comments (HOCs) usually consisted of "Why?" or just circles and question marks, and "specific" because his comments on lower-order concerns (LOCs) were overwhelmingly spelled out.

The professor's assessment of student writing seemed unbalanced, from essay to essay, and in some cases paragraph to paragraph. Was he encouraging self-expression here, or scholarly analysis? Was it more important to have clean syntax or a thoughtfully original, even if poorly written, idea? I didn't know how to help the students, because I myself couldn't assess his expectations. In one word, his markings seemed unpredictable. The students were frustrated in interpreting his comments, and often just wanted to focus in their revisions on what was most easily fixed, the LOCs.

The confusion over assignments was further complicated by the students' realization of my familiarity with the course material. During tutoring sessions when students appealed to me, confused not only by his comments but also by some of the content of the course, I had trouble separating my writing tutor role from my interest in helping my peers appreciate our shared discipline. I struggled to refrain from commenting on content when students were looking to me for instruction in coursework outside of class. The professor, too, seemed to expect that I would impart disciplinary knowledge to the students if they came to me for tutoring. I'm still not sure how a writing fellow who's knowledgeable about the major is supposed to balance that tutorial role.

Alex's observations about her second following experience bring up several issues that bear some discussion. The first is the professor's belief that his open-ended assignment will allow his students to be more original. This is an opinion I've heard expressed in nearly every assignment-design workshop I've held where one or more faculty venture the opinion that giving students too many guidelines will only encourage them to parrot back just what they think the teacher wants to hear. For students, however, as Thaiss and I learned in the student focus groups we conducted, the expectation of "originality" is particularly fraught; as one student explained, while the others nodded in agreement, "I'd like to be original, but I have no idea what my teachers' ideas of originality are" (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p.116). Further, Thaiss and I found that, when students are given few guidelines, they tended to rely on a variety of other cues, e.g. how "nit-picky" a teacher is about the syllabus (p. 122), what they could intuit about the teacher's interests—"One of my teachers is a big environmental freak, so if I write with a big environmental spin, I know he'll be happy" (p. 123)—and stereotypes about the value teachers in different majors place on writing well and correctly.

As Alex discovered, one cue the students readily picked up on was this teacher's close attention to correct prose, an expectation that was easier for them to satisfy than his more confusing higher-order expectations, particularly since he edited the prose for them.

The higher-order concerns that I've been trained to recognize and deal with were neglected for commentary on syntax, grammar, and word choice. The students' essays were overwhelmed with red ink, with entire passages rewritten. This only served to make students more fearful in writing the response essays, and, I thought, stifled their writing process. In tutoring sessions with me, then, students mainly wanted to focus only on his markings, which, in the end, would still not produce the coherent arguments the professor seemed to desire.

His commenting practices were especially puzzling to me because we had met before hand to review essays together. I was relieved that we seemed to agree on the higher-order concerns that needed to be addressed in the essays, though he felt more often than not that sentence level issues were impeding students' meaning, and so he prioritized correct syntax when he responded to their papers. For the students who received more syntax critique than analytical critique on the papers he returned, it appeared that he valued syntax above original reflections expressed in an organized manner.

I think the main issue was not that the professor and I disagreed over what constituted higher order concerns when assessing student writing, but rather that he felt extremely capable of commenting on sentence-level errors but not as comfortable suggesting alternative thesis development, themes, or organization. Despite our differences in what needed to be pointed out to the students, I ultimately accepted that he had the final say, no matter how ambiguous that say might be. And, while I felt that my focusing mostly on lower order concerns went against my tutor training, I also realized that I needed to respect the professor's expectations in order to help students improve as writers.

In this passage, Alex make two discoveries about how contradictory teachers can be in their response and evaluation practices. She suggests first that the professor prioritized sentence-level errors when he corrected the students' papers because he saw these as interfering with the reader's ability to make meaning from the text. For many faculty, errors, no matter how minor, make it difficult to take a student's words seriously, and they are not easily dissuaded from this view, even when they see that their colleagues may have a higher tolerance for error than they do. I was not surprised, then, that Alex had trouble influencing this teacher's practice. Moreover, when teachers rewrite students' prose to make it more acceptable to readers, they typically believe that they are modeling for students *the* correct way to phrase their sentences rather than, as WID and genre research indicates, a disciplinary way of knowing and writing.[3] While experienced and well trained writing fellows can explain these things to their faculty mentors, a teacher's willingness to change his/her practices is dependent upon many variables, including the degree to which s/he trusts the fellow's observations and insights when it comes to effective approaches to teaching with writing. As Alex notes, she had to accept, finally, that he was not going to change his approach and that she had to find a way to negotiate his practices with her own sense of how best to help students.

In her narrative, Alex also suggests that the teacher may not have known how to explain higher-order concerns to the writer, at least without expending a lot more of his time on the papers. Her observation echoes one of Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's conclusions in the now classic 1988 study of teachers' error marking patterns, "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." Connors and Lunsford found that teachers' ideas about what constitutes serious error vary widely as do their decisions about which errors to mark. They attribute this to two main factors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be and how difficult it is to mark or explain (pp. 403-404). It's the latter point that I want to note here because it confirms what I see in the teacher-edited drafts students bring to the writing center and what teachers tell me in the workshops I conduct on responding to student writing. Making detailed explanatory comments on higher-order concerns, compared to copy editing the students' text, takes a great deal more time and concentration on the task. Then, too, there's the rationale that, because they aren't English teachers, they lack the expertise to diagnose and explain the errors they see in students' papers. In this latter opinion, they seem to confirm for students the very stereotypes that writing-in-the-disciplines courses are intended to dispel, e.g., that it's the job of the English teacher to comment on how a paper is written, not their teachers in other disciplines. While writing fellows

can play an important role in disabusing students of these stereotypes and in helping faculty understand the kinds of feedback that writing research indicates is most effective in shaping writing and writers, the fellow and the teacher must share the same goals for change. And, even with shared goals and the best intentions, as I'll show in the next section, the scene of student writing is always complicated by the unarticulated (even to themselves) preferences and attitudes teachers bring to their reading and evaluation of students' texts.

Working from the Same Page but Reading the Text Differently

Amaris's placement promised to fit the ideal we describe in our program literature—she would be working with a mentoring teacher who was avowedly collaborative in her approach to teaching and committed to making writing and the fellow's role in the process an integral part of the class. Although the WI course was outside of Amaris's major, she knew the teacher from the Women's Studies (WMST) program and, as a feminist herself, this connection was important to her. It was also important to me, as I had been interested in making an explicit connection between feminist collaborative practice and the collaborative values that I believe should be central to the writing fellows experience^[4] (even though these may not always be carried out, as Alex's second experience shows). I had known this teacher for a number of years through my own work in the WMST program and felt confident that she would be a good mentor and also that she was dedicated to working with her student writers. While both of these proved to be the case, neither ensured that she and Amaris would share the same goals for these writers.

Because Amaris was unfamiliar with the discipline and course material, she made it a point to attend every class, listening carefully to the questions the students asked (or did not ask), so that she could be more attuned to what might concern them in their papers. "Being in class," she writes, "allowed me to hear first-hand the way the professor framed the discussion, what material was emphasized in importance and what wasn't, which students were actively engaged in the work and which were not, and to see first-hand the work that would be reflected in the student papers." As had been agreed, the professor and Amaris read ten student papers together so that she could understand the professor's expectations and grading criteria. The students were required to submit two drafts of the first paper, and Amaris and the teacher both made comments which were returned to the students who turned these in with the final version of the paper. For subsequent papers, students were encouraged but not required to work with Amaris. Additionally, the class before papers were due was devoted to a writing workshop. Despite attending every class and working "extensively" with the teacher on drafts, however, Amaris still experienced a "steep learning curve on the first set of papers" and found herself spending over an hour per paper. "Commenting on those first drafts felt a little like trying to hike after sundown," she writes. "I was really afraid of making a wrong step. I frequently wrote, erased, and rewrote comments, trying to find what I thought was the appropriate voice for my position."

While she began to feel more confident by the second set of papers, Amaris discovered that there were other important differences in hers and the teacher's response practices:

I noticed this difference early in the semester. I don't say that in judgment but rather in acknowledgement that the two perspectives are sufficiently different that I feel a brief discussion here is important. For example, she suggested that one of my comments on a particular paper was perhaps too picky because she understood the direction the student was headed. It took me a while to understand and articulate our different perspectives—in my comments, I was addressing issues which I felt were part of a larger constellation of

writing practices, whereas she felt that there was no problem, within the context of that particular paper.

Amaris began to see, she said, that, while the teacher's "stated goal was to improve her students' writing, what that really meant in practical terms was to improve their writing *in her class*." With this insight came another about the role contextual knowledge plays when teachers evaluate students' work.

By this I mean that [the professor] would sometimes mentally "fill in the gaps" in a student's writing as she went along — from past experience, she would know where a student was headed with a particular argument, even if the student's writing was not completely coherent. One of the most striking examples of this happened on the third paper of the semester. She had written a comment like "Very nice" beside a student sentence which was, grammatically, almost completely incoherent. She had filled in the gaps in the student's language and complimented his grasp of the material. I suggested to her that the student, given her comment, might not realize that she was commenting on his *argument* and thus would completely overlook the writing problem.

This particular issue is almost the complete opposite of what Alex had experienced in her second placement with the teacher who could not seem to overlook the LOCs in order to see the HOCs. While Alex felt the students were being overwhelmed by the teacher's heavy marking of LOCs, Amaris was worried that the students were not being sufficiently instructed in how to write their ideas clearly and coherently. Both Amaris's and Alex's experiences reveal the complexity of understanding—and interpreting for students—the motives and contexts for teachers' response practices, especially when teachers themselves seem largely unaware that they may be reading students' texts much differently than their colleagues are. Students, however, are very aware of these differences, and most, as Thaiss and I (2006) show, tend to believe as a result that teachers are unpredictable and idiosyncratic in their expectations and how they grade (108-09).

Given these variables and varied expectations, such as those Alex and Amaris encountered, writing fellows, whether specialists or generalists, must be particularly astute to negotiate the complex middle ground between teachers and students. Perhaps equally complex is figuring out their own role as WAC change agents: When are a teacher's expectations and response practices misguided and/or unclear? How much error correction is too much or too little? What is the right balance between responding to writers and writing? What is, as Amaris asked, the "appropriate voice for my position?"

Ceding Authority for Writing and Teaching to the Writing Fellow

The question of an appropriate voice for her position was never resolved for Katy, a writing fellow I placed with a professor who had little understanding of WAC goals and no experience teaching a WI course. The ongoing conflicts between Katy and the mentoring teacher, as I'll explain, reveal deep mis/understandings about the role writing plays in a student's acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, based, in this case, on the non-native instructor's having come from an educational system where writing is not seen as instrumental to learning.

I agreed to place a writing fellow with this faculty member after she had attended my regular series of workshops on teaching with writing but explained to me that she still lacked confidence, as a non-native writer, in her ability to teach with writing. She had read the guidelines and expectations for working with a writing fellow in the handbook on the WAC website and was eager to do what was

expected if her students would benefit. In my initial meeting with Katy and the teacher, we made a plan for Katy's participation in the course, which would include Katy's reading a set of drafts together with the teacher to develop assignment criteria and guide response, giving two in-class workshops on writing from sources, and tutoring students who requested or were required to meet with her. Even with this carefully laid plan, however, the teacher/fellow relationship quickly deteriorated with the teacher far too willing to turn over all responsibility for the students' writing to Katy, including "translating" her assignment goals and expectations to students and developing the grading rubrics. Although I intervened at several points throughout the semester to clarify which tasks were appropriate for the fellow and which for the teacher in collaboration with the fellow, as Katy's narrative will show, the teacher continued to put Katy in difficult authority positions.

From the outset, Katy said, she could see that the teacher "was not altogether clear on what her assignment objectives should be for student writers."

I knew that one of the reasons I'd been placed in the course was to help her to construct clear assignments and also model ways to give effective feedback to writers, an expectation that we'd all agreed on when we met with Dr. Z. prior to the beginning of the semester. But the professor soon began to rely on me more and more to help with the syllabus, planning and preparing due dates for the class so that she could form reading schedules around them. The assignment directions were almost non-existent and, even when we discussed them, seemed ambiguous to me, so responding to students' drafts was difficult. When she asked me to come up with grading rubrics on my own, I asked Dr. Z. to meet with us again on the ground rules.

In that second meeting, I explained to the teacher that she had to develop her own grading rubric, based on her learning goals for the assignment, although she could discuss these with Katy to get her feedback. The following week the teacher left Katy in charge of the class while she went to a conference, as Katy reported to me in tears. That the teacher would not be present to support Katy's goals for the workshop she was scheduled to give was a particular source of anxiety for her, as was the teacher's expectation that she would lead the peer review session by herself when she was uncertain about what the evaluation criteria were. The rubric that Katy had helped to create, after refusing to write it by herself, presented another "struggle," Katy said, because the teacher "had listed only very basic standards for a college paper (introduction, critical thesis, detailed body, effective conclusion, and editing, proofing, and polishing.)"

Katy was also disappointed when, for their first paper, students showed little interest in meeting with her to talk about their drafts. For the second paper, students were required to meet with Katy, according to the plans we had made prior to the start of the semester. While most of the students met this requirement, Katy's work was undercut when the teacher told all of the students who had met with her that they would receive an A on the assignment. "It seemed," Katy wrote, that

students across the board, those who put in effort and those who did not, were to be rewarded if they showed up for the required meeting. In these conferences, the questions they asked most often concerned the teacher's expectations for the assignment: What is this paper supposed to be about? How can I relate it to what we've talked about in class? What does the teacher want? I didn't know myself, and I don't think the teacher did either.

Perhaps, as Katy noted at one point in her narrative, she would have felt more confident answering these questions had she better understood the disciplinary content and conventions for the course.

Perhaps too the teacher would have been better served by working with a writing fellow in the major who may have more equipped to interpret her expectations for the students. A more knowledgeable fellow, however, may also have felt even more responsible for providing writing instruction in the course since the teacher seemed unable or unwilling to participate in the process of guiding and evaluating student writers.

As the other fellows' narratives show, tensions in the teacher/fellow relationship, whether articulated or not, are to be expected when one goal of the placement is for the fellow to act as a WAC change agent. When a teacher has been educated in an academic environment that's quite different from the U.S. in its attitudes about the role of writing in student learning, collisions like those Katy experienced may be inevitable. In spite of the conflicts, the teacher and students, in their evaluations of the effectiveness of the writing fellow arrangement, were generally positive about the results, with the teacher indicating that she had learned to write clearer assignments and to be more explicit about what she wanted to see in her students' writing, lessons she planned to put into practice the next time she taught the WI course.

Small Steps in Building Programs, Networks, Institutional Writing Cultures

In an earlier draft of this article, I included excerpts from a narrative Theresa wrote about her ideal placement in a team-taught learning community course where the students were highly motivated, and the teachers nurturing and inclusive in their desire to have Theresa be seen as a "fellow" teacher:

Fully embracing the various ways that a WF could be utilized in a intense classroom setting, they wanted the students to see me not as just a peer, but as a teacher in my own right; someone with authority who would not only work with individual students, but comment on writing assignments, lead class seminars on writing, design rubrics, and advise the professors themselves on how the presentation of their assignments could be better designed to help the students succeed while keeping the bar of achievement high. They wanted their students to discover that writing was not an afterthought to learning, but the tool that would allow them to learn to their fullest. And they wanted the WF to be seen not as a source of remediation but as a positive tool to be actively utilized in the learning community.

For a program director, this is a thrilling testament to the positive role a fellow can play when teachers already see writing as a central mode for learning in the course. Yet all of this good news, I find, does not give me as many insights into how writing instruction is delivered across the curriculum as do the less than successful placements that have been the focus of this article. From Alex's, Amaris's, and Katy's experiences, I gain, for example, insight into teachers' diverse and divided attitudes about what constitutes "good" student writing, about the complicated attitudes and motives that underlie their assignment and response practices, and about the difficulties some non-native instructors face in understanding the goals of writing to learn the concepts and content of the course. These insights suggest directions for my faculty development efforts and allow me to broaden our program's reach and visibility. And, while I may sound pessimistic here about the possibility of fellows' ability to influence or change faculty practice, given the examples I've described, I prefer to think of myself as a pragmatist in the McLeod (1998) mold; I can't "change the world," but, with the help of my able writing fellows, I can build the kinds of relationships that will, little by little, help me accomplish WAC goals. Each placement plays a vital role in building those relationships, just as each fellow's experience with his/her placement, whether mostly positive or mostly negative, gives me another perspective on how to develop a program that prepares both faculty and fellows for the

challenges of working together productively and harmoniously even when each may have very different views of what is best for the student writers in the course.

"In the end," Alex wrote in her narrative,

both of my fellowing experiences made me see that the power to change students' attitudes towards writing lies ultimately with each and every instructor. As an experienced fellow, I can see how much flexibility is required on the part of the instructor, on the part of the students who must navigate the course dynamic with this unfamiliar new party, and on the part of the fellow who must align his/her individual goals with those of the teacher, the students, and the program.

To Alex's note, I would add that understanding the need for flexibility is, in itself, a valuable lesson to be learned about writing, teaching writing, and tutoring writers. If we want our students to learn to be rhetorically flexible writers across the curriculum, we need to help faculty become more flexible in their teaching-with-writing practices. And here's where my optimism comes in: I believe that the negotiations around assignment and response practices that occur between teachers and their writing fellows ultimately lead to a better understanding of overall learning and writing goals for student writers. In that way, every writing fellow placement, even those that are less than successful, becomes part of a network for change, thereby helping us to build and sustain the rich culture of writing at our institution.

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Notes

[1] To protect the privacy of the faculty members I mention in the article, I have not included their names, departments, or the names of the WI courses they teach.

[2] Fellows may elect to take a three-credit "faculty-student research apprenticeship" under the auspices of the Undergraduate Student Apprentice Program (<http://cos.gmu.edu/current/undergraduate/apprentice>).

[3] See, for example, David Russell's (2003) discussion of the "myth of transparency" in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History* and Russell and Arturo Yanez's (2003) "'Big Picture People Rarely Become Historians': Genre Systems and the Contradictions of General Education."

[4] In spite of the masculinist "fellows" name, which many program directors have rejected, most writing fellows programs are, I think, based on a feminist model for collaboration, negotiation, and mediation across unequal power relationships.

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