

Not Just for Writing Anymore: What WAC Can Teach Us About Reading to Learn

Mary Lou Odom, Kennesaw State University

Abstract: The writing across the curriculum movement has rightfully gained recognition as a transformative force in how teachers conceive of, use, and assign writing in their classes throughout various disciplines. Drawing on data from the first three years of an ongoing study of faculty "WAC fellows" at a large, comprehensive state university, this article takes the view that, at its best, writing across the curriculum involves students deeply in writing as a social practice and that similarly applying WAC principles to student reading—and how teachers assign reading—is our best hope to address the problematic nature of how students do or do not read for school.

As a writing center director and English professor, I hear my share of complaints about the state of student literacy. I know there is a very real possibility that at some point colleagues across campus, friends, neighbors, or anyone who knows that I teach writing may look me urgently in the eye and alert me to the sad state of how students write today. I hear concerns over spelling, formality, and organization. I listen to worries that students do not write often or enough. But what few of these well-intentioned individuals mention in their complaints is any reference to how this situation is influenced by how, what, or the extent to which students *read*.

Do not misunderstand: no one sings the praises of the current state of reading while bemoaning writing. But it has been my experience that when we talk about student literacy struggles and practices in higher education, writing is talked about more frequently, more specifically, and with greater urgency than reading. There are legitimate reasons for this discrepancy, and those reasons speak directly to how we think of and treat literacy in the university. In an opinion essay for *Pedagogy*, Robert Scholes (2002) discussed the importance of improving student reading while acknowledging significant differences in how it is approached:

We normally acknowledge, however grudgingly, that writing must be taught and continue to be taught from high school to college and perhaps beyond. We accept it, I believe, because we can see writing, and we know that much of the writing we see is not good enough. But we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading. (p. 166)

Across the Disciplines

A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2013.10.4.16>

wac.colostate.edu/atd

ISSN 554-8244

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by [Colorado State University](#) and [Georgia Southern University](#). Articles are published under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license](#) (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2017 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

Certainly the nature of the relationship between reading and writing is an easy one to take for granted, a fact driven home for me recently by an experience with, of all people, my son's orthodontist.

The Reading-Writing Relationship

At the conclusion of each young person's multi-year treatment with his office, Dr. X asks the individual to write his or her parents a note of thanks, acknowledging the sacrifices of time and money made on behalf of their child's new smile. Upon discovering that I was a writing teacher, Dr. X was quick to share his dismay about these young writers: "You wouldn't believe it," he confided, shaking his head. "They don't even know how to *format* a letter. They don't know where to put the date or how to start it with 'dear.' It's really discouraging." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "You know, no one sends letters anymore."

I was struck by how close Dr. X came to making the reading-writing connection that was at least in part the source of his consternation, and I suggested politely to him that perhaps part of his patients' struggle with letter writing was the very fact that no one does send letters. If no one sends them, no one reads them, I pointed out. Without that experience on which to base their own writing, students certainly would be challenged when it comes to creating letters that looked and sounded as he thought they should. He stared back, a bit puzzled. "Well, we give them an example," he offered weakly. "But still, they're just terrible." In many ways, and just as unintentionally, there is a tendency among faculty in higher education to have a similar lack of awareness of the interdependence between reading and writing.

But all is not lost. Historically, writing instruction has been reshaped many times: by attention to basic writers, an emergent awareness of process, the advent of digital technologies, and countless other issues. So too then can faculty views of and approaches to teaching reading be revised. Looking at movements geared toward writing reform can suggest avenues for how we might expand our understanding of why and what our students read while at the same time improving *the ways* they read. It is my goal here to draw on data from my work with my university's writing across the curriculum program and articulate a plan for how we can learn from the WAC movement in order to improve student reading and learning. Ultimately such progress would allow us all to reap the benefits of better readers and writers who in turn become more informed and engaged citizens in a society that increasingly privileges complex and highly diverse forms of literacy.

Where Did Reading Go?

In many ways, we have created a curious dichotomy between reading and writing in higher education. Young children are taught both skills together: they learn to form letters as they learn to identify them. Could we really imagine early literacy instruction being done any other way? At some point, however, it seems we begin to place reading in a sort of "accomplished" column; it is checked off and thought little of again. Even the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010), which claim to promote "the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews," devote attention to the process and practice of reading (referred to by CCSS as "Foundational Skills") only through fifth grade. Beyond that, the Standards focus largely on the actual texts themselves, ignoring literacy scholar Deborah Brandt's (1994) contention that "what motivates and brings meaning to acts of reading or writing may not always be texts" (p. 460). Ultimately, such an approach results in what Thomas Newkirk (2013) has referred to as "a sterile view of reading" (p. 2).

Indeed, assuming students do not demonstrate signs of serious reading difficulty (whether difficulty means reading below grade level or a condition such as dyslexia), they generally receive little additional instruction in reading once they have mastered the skills taught at elementary school levels. In his reflection on the state of reading in higher education, Scholes (2002) claimed as much when he noted, "The natural reciprocal of writing—which, of course, is reading—had somehow disappeared, apparently subsumed under the topic of literature" (p. 166). But it is not just students' progression to more advanced aspects of the language arts curriculum that causes reading to become less and less of a focus in school. Reading instruction can be, particularly for faculty who want to move on and teach other content, unintentionally yet easily ignored.

In reality, of course, reading remains no less a key part of students' education. Few and far between are the classes that do not incorporate or depend on reading, although reading skills cease to be taught or assessed. Joliffe and Harl (2008) described "careful reading" as having "become a smaller blip on the higher educational radar screen," if not having "dropped off it altogether" (p. 600). Consider the stark differences in how reading and writing are assigned and assessed throughout middle school, high school, and college: students' writing abilities often are considered alongside their grasp of course content. A history teacher, for example, will not hesitate to grade and comment on a student's writing about history, but that same teacher likely never tells the student that his or her *reading* of history is an "A," "B," or "C." While the two processes may seem so innately conjoined that a comment on one could be seen as an implicit comment on the other, students may not make this connection, and, indeed, faculty concerns about student learning indicate that they do recognize patterns of performance that are particular to reading.

In her characterization of teachers' perceptions of student reading, Alice Horning (2007) unpacked a number of concerns and, in so doing, demonstrated how complex and highly nuanced student reading (and thus student struggles with reading) are:

[M]any college teachers will say, if asked, that students are "illiterate." What they seem to mean by this claim is both that they *can't* read and that they *don't* read. That is, first, they lack the ability to read in the critically literate sense of being able to go beyond summary of main ideas to analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In addition, though, they are uneducated in reading, lacking experience working with extended texts and the world of ideas from which they arise. In this way, they mean that students are uneducated in ways that derive from reading a wide variety of materials and seeing varied points of view, research, and information relating to ideas or issues.

Students lacking experience and instruction in the more complex ways of reading that Horning describes thus find that the reading they do know how to do—the reading they learned early in their school careers—may no longer be sufficient for success as they advance in school and beyond. As a result, many students become less and less likely to read at all, and their "*can't*" and "*don't*" behaviors become a self-perpetuating cycle that is difficult to break.

Such a cycle is all the more problematic when it is not apparent to faculty or to students themselves. Reading has in many ways become an invisible component of academic literacy; it suffers, in other words, from the same burden of "transparency" that David R. Russell (1991) has attributed to writing. Russell pointed out that because learning to write in a particular discipline is a gradual process, faculty rarely possess any real awareness of how they themselves learned to write in the ways they now expect of students (p. 14). While Russell did not address reading directly in his critique, the connection is not difficult to make. The ways faculty read—and learned to read—disciplinary texts are similarly transparent; thus, it is not surprising that we often neglect to instruct

our students about the key role that understanding the conventions of a subject plays in understanding its texts.

The academic literacy picture for learners of all ages is an intricate one, shaped both by the consumption and production of texts of all kinds as well as by the contexts, mindsets, and expectations of faculty. Brandt (1994) has noted that "much of learning to read and write involves learning the possible attitudes that can be taken toward these two activities—which are often more separate and competing than we may sometimes want to admit" (p. 460). That faculty do not realize the critical roles played by the contexts of and attitudes toward reading has little to do with their intentions; rather, these oversights reaffirm Russell's notion of transparency and show us that our approaches to student reading need to be better informed. Writing across the curriculum as a pedagogical approach has been successful in allowing faculty to reconsider the uses and value of writing, and we owe it to our students and ourselves to explore its possibilities for helping us re-envision the way we consider reading as well.

Why WAC?

In her 2007 argument in this journal for a movement of "Reading Across the Curriculum," Horning maintained that "[d]eveloping students' writing skills requires developing their reading skills. If they haven't read and worked with nonfiction prose models in the genres of their major discipline, it will be much harder for them to produce such prose." Much like the orthodontist's patients who possess little sense of the genre of letter writing, students attempting to write in the discourses of academe will struggle without "the 'din' of the prose style of their disciplines in their heads." However, in college, reading often tends to be an assumed ability, the way writing once was in the days before open admissions and the subsequent work of Mina Shaughnessy (1979) and others revealed there is much about student writing to which teachers need to attend.

In studies of student reading habits at their own universities, Joliffe and Harl (2008), as well as Starcher and Proffitt (2011), have provided extensive summaries of previous research on the stark disparity between faculty expectations for student reading and actual student reading behaviors and experiences. I will not reiterate all of their reviews in detail here, but I will point out, as Joliffe and Harl have, a 2006 study by Alvin Sanoff that found only one-tenth of college faculty describing beginning freshman as "'very well prepared' to read and understand difficult materials" (as cited in Joliffe & Harl, 2008, p. 601-2). Similarly, it is critical to note Starcher and Proffitt's (2011) accounts of faculty across disciplines chronicling disappointing student reading behaviors (p. 396).

These behaviors, of course, do not just "happen." Linda Nilson's (2010) examination of why students do not read not only notes the sharp decrease in student reading compliance over the past several decades but also considers what role teaching strategies may play in this trend. It would seem that the cross-disciplinary nature of the concern over student reading makes it an issue primed for the cross-disciplinary approach to teaching that WAC provides. Indeed perhaps the best reason efforts to rethink student reading should look to writing across the curriculum strategies is the WAC movement's broad goal of improving not just student writing but student learning. Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia (2001) identified a source of WAC's success and longevity as its attention to "writing as an essential component of critical thinking and problem solving, key elements in a liberal education" (p. 3). We should aim for no less lofty aspirations when we consider how to address our concerns about student reading.

In sum, the issue of student reading is more than just complex; it is characterized by a transparency that renders it too easily and too often overlooked. Explicit reading instruction tapers off precipitously after elementary school, and students, teachers, and testing then tend to focus on the

texts being read rather than the strategies used to read them. Just as texts alone do not provide meaning in isolation, the act of assigning texts alone does not guarantee that students will read. It is no surprise, therefore, that faculty dissatisfaction with student reading is vocal and widespread across disciplines. When looking for ways to address this challenge, WAC, already proven to be a transformative force for teachers when it comes to writing, is a natural place to turn. Just as writing across the curriculum encourages faculty to consider the ways they ask students to write, efforts at improving student reading must begin with a conscious awareness that we ask and expect students to read in particular ways that may not always be familiar to them.

Faculty Perceptions of Student Reading in One College

Writing across the curriculum, then, provides a valuable lens through which we can examine student reading. Because much of what faculty want from good student reading mirrors their goals for good student writing—engagement, critical thinking, depth of understanding—WAC programs can serve as uniquely appropriate sites to investigate faculty issues with student reading more deeply. This article draws on data from the first three years of an ongoing study of faculty "WAC fellows" at a large, comprehensive state university. The study's purpose is to investigate any aspect of faculty attitudes and actions regarding student engagement with course material. The university's Institutional Review Board determined that this study qualified for exempt status under DHHS (OHRP) Title 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(4). WAC fellows come from the university's largest college, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and participate in a daylong workshop on WAC. Fellows then dedicate a subsequent semester to implementing WAC principles in one current course. At the conclusion of their fellowship semester, all fellows submit a reflective report on their experiences along with survey data from students in their WAC-focused courses. Each group of fellows tailors survey questions based on their particular approaches and interests, but six core questions are asked each semester. Of these six, one directly addresses reading.

Reading initially had not been a specific focus of either the WAC program or the study. The initial impetus for collecting this data was to assess how effective the WAC strategies were for student learning and to ascertain any significant impact on faculty teaching. As faculty concern about student reading became a consistent refrain in both monthly WAC fellow meetings and in the faculty narratives, a new look at the data was warranted—this time with attention to the impact of writing across the curriculum strategies on student reading.

Like many faculty, participants in the WAC program generally expressed concern over students' reading abilities in their courses. In addition to distress at students' failure to read course material, comments from the WAC fellows also name more specific complaints about the ways students do read. A psychology professor is frustrated by her students' lack of "in-depth" reading of assigned texts, while a political scientist reports watching students "struggle" to carry out any "critical assessment" of course readings or texts they research. Similarly, a history professor notes students' tendency to look at documents with little more than "a cursory glance." Difficulties with student reading extend beyond homework readings or professional texts as well. One anthropologist noted that many students struggled with peer review primarily because they lacked "the ability to read a paper critically." And lest we assume that faculty who detect problems with student reading predominate in any one discipline, consider the words of two English faculty members: one noted a lack of "critical reflection" on course readings while another lamented the many students she found "unprepared to discuss the literature" they had read.

Analysis of student data compiled throughout the study indicates that students generally find the writing in their courses facilitates their understanding of course readings. Of the 587 students

surveyed, 66% agreed or strongly agreed that the writing assigned by their professor in the WAC-focused course "helped me understand the reading assignments." Only 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. However, narrative analysis and coding of the faculty reflections reveal telling differences in faculty expectations and perceptions of reading and writing in their courses and in their pedagogical approaches to student reading and writing, particularly as they play a role in meeting their goals for students.

What Doesn't Work

While teachers who participate in the WAC fellows program report considerable success with their efforts at rethinking how and what they ask students to write, many also remained disappointed in their students' reading efforts. Tellingly, those faculty most likely to report little or no productive change in student reading behaviors (or work dependent on student reading) were those faculty who did little to reconsider the role and purpose of the reading they assigned in their classes. They may have changed writing assignments, and they may have become more creative with delivery or prompts of reading-based writing, but those who remained frustrated at student interaction with text did little to reconsider the reading or writing beyond that superficial level. In other words, these teachers may have attempted to effect some change in student reading behaviors, yet their methods did not bring about significant improvement in student effort toward, comprehension of, or engagement with reading materials.

What is perhaps most instructive about the frustrations experienced by these teachers is the emergence of clear patterns in their unsuccessful efforts at addressing their goals for student reading. Based on the plans laid out at the beginning of their WAC semesters, many of these faculty members appeared to subscribe to a rather uncomplicated view of how writing and reading might work together, and they thus operated with two general assumptions in mind: 1) Requiring students to write about readings would insure more students read more of the reading more carefully; 2) Writing about the readings would automatically help students engage with the reading in more critical and meaningful ways.

Unfortunately, as these faculty members discovered, the requirement to write on its own does not necessarily provide sufficient motivation for students to read—or at least not to read in the ways faculty may desire. A faculty member teaching an upper-level psychology class hoped to use online discussion postings to encourage students to engage more thoroughly with their readings, particularly their textbooks, in order to improve their comprehension of material that would appear on their exams. No doubt this focus on a forthcoming assessment was likely clear to her students. While the professor used the word "prompts," it was clear her discussions provided students with lists of very specific questions. Furthermore, the professor had selected these particular areas of study for students to "discuss" because this material had proven the most difficult for students in previous semesters.

In her end-of-semester narrative, the professor reported that while "students' discussion posts were generally thorough, they did not necessarily address in detail the evidence underlying our existing knowledge of selected discussion topics." Student comments on her end-of-semester WAC survey indicated little interest in the readings and presented a picture of student engagement with course texts in line with the findings of Joliffe and Harl: "students were reading, but they were not reading studiously, either in terms of the texts they were engaging with or the manner in which they read them" (p. 611). Although the questions were straightforward and offered little room for variance in answers (for example, "How do brain imaging studies provide evidence for distribution of activity?"),

the professor had imagined that students would write more extensively and thoughtfully than they did simply because of the discussion format she had assigned.

The psychology professor's reflection acknowledged that "I had hoped the discussion prompts would promote more in-depth reading of relating material (leading to greater clarification of concepts) than they actually did." She went on to note, "were I to use these discussions in future courses, I would interject comments and questions into student discussions [with the purpose of directing students back to specific areas of their text]." She expected students to see these questions as starting points for exploration of complex issues; students simply saw direct questions that required short answers found in their textbooks. Such conflict in a goal and its accompanying approach do little to achieve what WAC urges for student writing and what would seem to work well for student reading—activities such as those Art Young (2006) has urged in which "students need to be actively involved in thinking and solving problems, in developing knowledge and applications of it" (p. 47).

The most popular of the WAC strategies that ultimately proved unproductive for fellows hoping to improve student reading involved the use of some form of writing simply to compel students to complete their assigned course reading. One English professor described her use of in-class reading responses (using blogs) by explaining, "I use responses to reading in place of quizzes, as a way of seeing who is keeping up with the reading." She went on to reflect on the student responses to her specific questions and prompts by noting "most students do very well, and the ones with low grades in the assignment were the ones who were not doing the reading, or were not paying attention—so I believe it is an equitable way of rewarding students who keep up with the reading in a class that does not have a final exam." Even this faculty member's choice of words, such as "rewarding," "seeing who is keeping up," "quizzes," and her reference to the lack of a "final exam," conjure up notions of assessment at every turn. And while there is no harm in using writing to assess reading and learning (as a WAC administrator, I would encourage it), such an approach seems somewhat at cross-purposes when faculty express a desire for more *engagement* with and commitment to reading course texts.

The following excerpt from the narrative of a political science WAC fellow is also representative of a number of faculty who used this approach. Her honest and detailed recounting of one of her strategies demonstrates both the appeal and the very complicated process of using writing to influence student reading: "One of the primary ways I incorporated writing was by having students write during class. These in-class writing assignments took many forms, including brief summaries of the reading (or reading quizzes) ... intended to encourage students to do the readings before class." She elaborates on this strategy a bit later in her narrative:

On occasion, students would be asked to write about the reading for the day; such writings served as a sort of "reading quiz" and were intended to encourage students to come to class prepared. I found that these assignments were the least successful [of all the WAC efforts she implemented during the semester]. Students usually did poorly on these assignments, particularly if they covered the reading from the textbook, and I found myself discouraged from using them. I believe that if I had been more diligent in using these assignments, they would have been much more effective. Since these assignments were only used sporadically, they did not serve as enough of an incentive to encourage students to do the readings and be prepared for class.

Fortunately for this teacher, not all of the writing she introduced into her class took the "testing" perspective, and she experienced considerable success with other writing-based assignments in her course (discussed in the next section).

Yet there is much to consider in this professor's reflection on her failed attempt to use writing to compel students to read, comprehend, or engage with course readings. By her own admission, she uses writing to test whether or not students have read; despite her characterization of this effort, she is not using writing as a "sort of" quiz; it is still very much a quiz regardless of whether or not its format was altered slightly from previous semesters. While the professor imagines this sort of writing about their reading to serve as an "incentive" for students to read, she finds that this method produces a response no different than that of a traditional reading quiz.

Given this fact and her own negative reaction to the exercise, it is surprising that the teacher's response is to double down on the strategy by being more "diligent" in assigning such writing in the future. She concludes her report by noting that she will adapt her use of WAC strategies in her future courses:

I will be a bit more consistent in using in-class writing to "quiz" students over the readings. I really believe that these types of assignments will encourage students to be more prepared for class and will, thus, lead to better classroom discussions. This tactic may also be a bit more helpful in upper division courses where the readings are not always from a "textbook."

It is important to examine why the quiz/coercion approach failed this teacher. Some research into the role of quizzes to encourage student reading compliance actually shows a positive correlation (Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002; Berry, Hill, & Stevens, 2011). Yet, Nilson has argued persuasively that the lack of a "perceived need" or a "perceived payoff" significantly reduces student motivation to read (p. 212-3). Indeed, nowhere in her extensive discussion of strategies to improve student reading compliance does Nilson cite research that test or quiz-like exercises prove useful for this goal.

Clearly, there is a great deal to understand about what strategies can best be used to improve student reading, and often we need look no further than our students to find some of these answers. Like many of her colleagues, a professor teaching a graduate course in public administration embarked on her WAC semester by seeking to use writing as a tool to increase reading compliance:

[This course] was a perfect class for me to incorporate the WAC strategy. It requires lots of readings and I thought that the writing would force students to complete their reading assignments; not only complete their readings, but also to critically assess and evaluate what they have read.

At the start of each class, this professor required students to complete brief freewrites in answer to questions she had posed regarding their homework reading. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the results shared by other faculty, this professor was disappointed by what the writing assignments showed her about student reading:

The writing assignments ... showed that many students did not do their reading assignments as their responses were very shallow and general. Only a handful of students provided insightful and reflective thoughts – and strategies on how to get students to read remain a challenge for me.

The discouragement felt by this professor is palpable, yet she is far from alone. Her comments echo the two recurring problems about student reading that faculty repeatedly express: students who do not read and students who do not read critically or reflectively.

When seeking more feedback from her students on the new writing assignments, however, the public administration professor was surprised at—and enlightened by—her students' perceptions of the reading-based writing she asked of them:

I realized, based on the comments received, that students thought that the writing assignment was a quiz, and that made them nervous. I realized that I had not made it clear at the beginning of the semester of the purpose of the writing assignment; I had mentioned to the students that the assignment would not be graded, but somehow the students took it as a weekly quiz.

Given the fact that her students believed themselves to be answering reading quiz questions, is it any wonder that their answers were of the superficial "see, I read this" variety? Many, if not most, students have become used to being tested in this way; therefore, when presented with reading-based tasks they interpret as similar to those completed in the past, they will follow the strategies they have used in the past as well.

There are ways to remedy this situation, however, and this faculty member resolved to change her approach in subsequent semesters, noting that she would "explain clearly at the beginning of the semester the purpose of the writing assignment, how it will/will not impact their grade, how it will improve students' writing, how it will help students engage with the material and how it will strengthen students' understanding of the material." This impetus to create greater clarity for students about her goals for their reading assignments is a good one. Horning (2007) makes a similar point; in discussing the goals inherent in the complex types of reading students need to do in college and beyond, she notes, "It is also difficult for students to read well enough to achieve these goals if they are not stated explicitly, taught directly, and required in students' work" (Defining Reading section, para. 3). Helping students see writing as a tool designed to help them understand and make meaning from what they read is an idea many students would no doubt find revelatory—particularly when their previous experiences with writing about reading seemed designed primarily to test reading compliance.

The flaws in these teachers' strategies makes their stories no less instructive, particularly for how clearly they illuminate the ways in which our choices as teachers have very real consequences regarding how or if students read. The next section will present several WAC strategies that were successful in promoting engaged, effective student reading.

What Works

Attend a writing across the curriculum workshop or meeting and you are likely to hear considerable discussion about designing effective writing assignments. An assignment's purpose, goals, and guidelines (even length and tone or style) as well as the teacher's expectations are all issues faculty who participate in WAC programs learn to consider. Doing so helps to create writing assignments that students can complete successfully and, in the words of Young (2006) "are embedded in the unique goals of each course and are integral to the building of knowledge in that course" (p. 5). Yet while faculty often rewrite essay assignments, reconsidering elements from phrasing to assessment criteria, and while they often will go over such assignments with students in class, many of us would struggle to name the last time we labored equally over the instructions we provide when assigning reading.

But there is much good news to be found in the stories of faculty who used writing across the curriculum to enhance student reading. When faculty made changes not just in how they assessed

student reading compliance but rather in how they asked students to approach their reading, they found real improvement in students' comprehension of material and their abilities to use what they read to their advantage throughout the course. Not surprisingly, understanding the differences between strategies that produced this sort of improvement begins with how teachers stated their goals.

Faculty who were willing to rethink not only writing but also reading in their courses tended to have goals for student reading and learning that went beyond the simple evaluation of whether or not students had read what had been assigned for homework. For example, in contrast to the English faculty member who focused on blogs to answer the "did they or didn't they" question of her students' reading, another WAC fellow from the same department set out to use blogging with very different goals in mind.

This English professor implemented blogs into her curriculum to address several of her concerns about *how* her students had read in the past. In particular, she wanted her blog assignment to increase student preparation for in-class discussions of the literature they read for homework; she also hoped that by blogging about their readings in a particular way, students would feel less apprehension about sharing these thoughts in class. With these goals in mind, she set up a blog assignment very different from that of her colleague:

I wanted students to feel they could reflect on any part(s) of the reading that appealed to them most. In order to ensure this, I did not ask students to respond to a question or series of questions. Students were expected to reflect on the first reading of each text in a casual nature. I did specify that students were not to summarize the reading but to work through their reactions to the text.

What is notable about this professor's approach to student reading is her lack of attention to "checking" on who had or had not done the reading for class. She did assign a point value for each blog entry, but the value of this assignment went well beyond that for both students and teacher. The professor reflected positively on her strategy, noting the following:

[T]he blogs facilitated better class discussions. Students were more prepared since they had already posted their initial reactions to the blog and were able to better articulate what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about the reading... The blogs also made for a class that appeared to be more intimate.

A key part of the success experienced by this faculty member is likely the fact that students perceived some connection to the texts they were reading (they were asked, in their blogs, to discuss their feelings and reactions about the texts). But such authentic connections do not have to privilege personal feeling at the expense of critical thought.

Much as expressivists have argued that students become more engaged with writing when they begin with a topic or idea that is familiar and personal, so too does it appear that students who connect on a personal level with what they read can engage more deeply with the text. Ideally and with guidance from their faculty, students then will be able to transform that initial engagement on the level of feeling to higher order processes such as analysis or focused research. Indeed, this English professor went on to note that, in addition to better class discussions, the quality of the students' critical essays was higher than in previous semesters.

Clearly, that guidance by faculty is critical. A professor in the university's graduate program in conflict management also asked students to find a personal connection to their coursework. He then

adopted John Bean's well-known RAFT (Role-Audience-Format-Task) heuristic in order to revise a standing assignment—a reflective essay that "facilitated the students' application of abstract principles to concrete experiences"—in order to "push students to recognize and record those lessons on paper, and thus (hopefully) internalize them more deeply." In asking students to write this "Memo to Self," the instructor asked students to "revisit and critique a negotiation in which you were a primary party" closing with "recommendations to yourself, specifically meant to improve your handling of any similar negotiation." A task of this nature requires that students pay careful, focused attention to what they read. The material they draw on from their course readings needs to fulfill a particular role in terms of their thinking and writing, making their interaction with the text far more genuine and purposeful than many reading assignments may appear to be.

It is this type of purposeful exercise Young (2006) encouraged when he made the following appeal: "One ongoing task, which I hope you will share with me, is to develop writing-to-communicate assignments and classroom practices that encourage sincere and authentic communication" (p. 49). The results of this authentic communication for the conflict management professor were truly positive. Not only was he pleased with the work produced by the students, he also was gratified by student responses on end-of-semester evaluations: "The memo to self helped me learn how to apply the readings to real life situations."

Attempting to connect the work of their courses to the "real world" is a thread that runs visibly through many of the most successful reading and writing across the curriculum intersections experienced by the WAC fellows in this program. For example, a sociology professor who was "looking for a way to make social problems come alive" for her class decided to engage students in identifying readings relevant to the course. Using what she had learned from her WAC workshop about crafting assignments and making tasks seem genuine to students, she established clear guidelines for students to find, read, and analyze recent articles about contemporary social problems. Not only was the professor thrilled with the quality of the texts students selected, but 96% of her students stated they found the assignment beneficial. For this teacher and others like her, blurring the lines between writing to learn and reading to learn by connecting to the world outside the classroom proved a successful approach for reluctant student readers.

Like most faculty, WAC fellows find that their experiences with student reading can vary widely among different classes and even among different tasks in the same class. What we can learn from these differences is how to apply various approaches strategically whenever we can to promote student learning. To be sure, there is material contained in textbooks that students need to know, but using strategies that extend that textbook reading can prove highly effective. Indeed, the political science professor so wedded to the notion of her "quiz-like" reading responses noted impressive results when she embarked on another kind of in-class writing activity. In marked contrast to her other WAC strategy, she this time asked students to consider concepts from their course readings in light of current events. Her description of that experience differs considerably from her reflection on the "quiz-like" in-class writing discussed in the previous section:

Students seemed much more likely to have completed the required current events readings and seemed to enjoy using these events to help explore the course concepts in greater detail. Students tended to do very well on these assignments, sometimes applying concepts in ways that I had not even considered. I think that these assignments were particularly successful because they were able to utilize something that students were more interested in (current events) and thus students were a bit more excited about doing them. From my perspective, they were quite successful in that they really forced students to think about the course concepts and theories in an analytical way and helped

them build the skills to use these concepts in their future international affairs courses and in their lives.

While this professor still uses language such as "forced" to describe her efforts at motivating students to read, it is clear she has found a much more successful strategy in asking students to link their readings with actual events.

It is just this sort of linkage that Joliffe and Harl (2008) have suggested faculty pursue. In arguing that "faculty members need to teach students explicitly how to draw the kinds of connections that lead to engaged reading," they note that of particular value are "text-to-world and text-to-text connections" (p. 613). Indeed, of the students Joliffe and Harl studied, they found students did read—and often read enthusiastically. But rather than reading assigned school texts, they read for reasons such as "values clarification, personal enrichment, and career preparation" (p. 600). Surely these are motivators that higher education reading could and should encompass. Rather than coercion or forced compliance, it is meaningful reading of that sort that will be key to any viable solutions to the problems of student reading.

The experiences of these faculty members by no means represent the complete range of WAC strategies that can productively change the way we assign, teach, and assess reading in higher education. What we can draw from these examples, however, are several key principles that will support and encourage student reading far more than faculty across the disciplines tend to do now. First and foremost, faculty must see that they have a role—beyond simply assigning texts—to play in student reading behavior. Second, at the heart of this role must be a clear sense of the goals faculty have for student reading as well as a willingness to share those goals with students. Third, faculty must be willing to provide guidance for students reading complex, discipline-specific texts. Such guidance may come in the form of explicit conversation about disciplinary conventions and practices, but more often than not it can be conveyed in thoughtful, authentic assignments that students can connect to on either a personal or "real world" level. Adherence to these principles will not solve all the challenges of student reading; they can, however, begin conversations and initiate practices about reading that are long overdue.

Looking Ahead

In an article seeking to answer the question "How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?" Toby Fulwiler (1984) provided the following context about the beginnings of the WAC movement: "We believed that to improve student writing we had to influence the entire academic community in which writing takes place, to make the faculty sensitive to the role of writing in learning as well as to the relationship of writing to other communication skills—reading, speaking, and listening" (p.113). While it was Fulwiler's purpose to focus on writing, it is clear that reading, among other critical aspects of literacy, was always meant to be a part of the WAC movement. This more complete picture of WAC is good news for faculty seeking to use WAC strategies to address student reading. But broadening our view of WAC serves another important function as well: reminding us to be open to broader views of literacy, including reading, throughout higher education.

Consider once more the 66% of students in this study who noted that writing improved their understanding of course readings. That result is promising, to be sure; however, it is the lowest agreement rate of all questions assessing the impact of writing on student learning of course material. For example, 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "[t]he writing in this class helped me learn the course material," while 77% agreed or strongly agreed that "[th]e writing in this class got me engaged with the course material." These results lead to several questions that get to the heart

of what our students understand as the goal or purpose of their reading. Surely some, if not a great deal, of the "course material" they reference can be found in their readings. But do the readings stand on their own as "course material" in the minds of students? Or is student opinion of and reaction to course textbooks so negative (as noted by Joliffe and Harl, 2008) that students simply do not consider them as seriously as they may other elements of their course?

Whatever the case, the experiences with reading by both faculty and students in this study and in the work of Joliffe and Harl make it clear that open, explicit work on how to read for and in college needs to be undertaken. Just as McLeod and Miraglia (2001) urged that "it is an error to see writing to learn and writing to communicate as somehow in conflict with each other," it is an error to see reading and writing as entirely separate and thus not able to benefit from similar pedagogical approaches. Using strategies gained in their endeavors in this writing across the curriculum program, many faculty found successful ways to begin to make meaningful connections with reading possible for their students. This kind of success using writing across the curriculum should come as no surprise; McLeod and Miraglia have reasoned that WAC is unique in its effectiveness and its intent to change the way we teach:

WAC, more than any other recent educational reform movement, has aimed at transforming pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching (the "delivery of information" model) to a model of active student engagement with the materials and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes across the university. (p. 5)

Could we ask for a better model as we strive to improve student reading and make it an active and integral aspect of student learning in higher education?

This discussion hopefully will prove a first step in bringing reading and its role in the work of the university to the forefront and in making writing across the curriculum a useful vehicle to help all faculty make such a shift happen. Russell (1990) has suggested that WAC encourages us to consider who plays what role in determining what and how we teach, and he has argued that "WAC ultimately asks: In what ways will graduates of our university use language and how shall we teach them to use it in those ways?" (p. 70).

In essence, Russell's question urges us to pursue a broader view of literacy throughout higher education, a goal already inherent in much WAC work. Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt (2000) have extended this pursuit and called for a much more explicitly comprehensive approach and spirit within the WAC movement:

The argument is not that WAC needs to abandon its traditional support for writing in the disciplines, but that we should imagine our project as one that combines discipline-based instruction with a range of other literacy experiences that will help students and faculty see writing and reading in a wider social and intellectual context than the college curriculum. (p. 585-6)

As is evidenced by the WAC faculty narratives I examined here, reading is rarely far from the minds of teachers who want to encourage student learning. Making reading a more overt element in our pedagogies and better articulated in our expectations can only serve to reduce teacher anxiety and frustration and improve students' performances with regard to reading. Aligning this effort with a tested, and in many universities, already established paradigm for encouraging faculty to revise their pedagogies seems a productive and practical way to move toward this goal.

The ramifications of an education that does not recognize reading as a critical and evolving skill are sobering. Scholes (2002) argued that reading, by its very nature, is both essential and challenging: "The basis of an education for the citizens of a democracy lies in that apparently simple but actually difficult act of reading so as to grasp and evaluate the thoughts and feelings of that mysterious other person: the writer" (p. 171). Although Scholes went on to state that "[t]he primary pedagogical responsibility of English teachers is to help students develop those [reading] skills" (p. 171), reading, like writing, is experienced differently across disciplines and cannot be the exclusive domain of one field alone. Thus, helping our students become better readers will require the rethinking of existing approaches to literacy and pedagogy by educators in all disciplines. Such is the practice—and promise—of WAC.

References

- Bean, John. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Berry, Thomas, Cook, Lori, Hill, Nancy, & Stevens, Kevin. (2011). An exploratory analysis of textbook usage and study habits: Misperceptions and barriers to success. *College Teaching*, 59(1), 31-39.
- Brandt, Deborah. (1994). Remembering writing, remembering reading. *College Composition and Communication*, 45(4), 459-479.
- Carter, M. (2007). Ways of knowing, doing, and writing in the disciplines. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(3), 385-418.
- Fulwiler, T. (1984, February.). How well does writing across the curriculum work? *College English*, 46(2) 113-125.
- Horning, Alice S. (2007). Reading across the curriculum as the key to student success. *Across the Disciplines*, 4. Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/horning2007.cfm>
- Joliffe, David A., & Harl, Allison. (2008). Studying the reading transition from high school to college: What are our students reading and why? *College English*, 70(6), 599-617.
- McLeod, Susan H., & Miraglia, Eric. (2001). Writing across the curriculum in a time of change. In McLeod, Susan H., Miraglia, Eric, Soven, Margaret, & Thaiss, Chris (Eds), *WAC for the new millennium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs* (pp. 1-26). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards (English Language Arts Standards)*. Washington D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Newkirk, Thomas. (2013). Speaking back to the common core. In (postscript to) *Holding on to good ideas in a time of bad ones: Six literacy practices worth fighting for* (2009). (p. 1-7).
- Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Retrieved from <http://heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources%5CE02123%5CNewkirk Speaking Back to the Common Core.pdf>
- Nilson, Linda B. (2010). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Parks, Steve, & Goldblatt, Eli. (2000). Writing beyond the curriculum: Fostering new collaborations in literacy. *College English*, 62(5), 584-606.
- Russell, David R. (1990). Writing across the curriculum in historical perspective: Toward a social interpretation. *College English*, 52(1), 52-73.
- Russell, David R. (1991). *Writing in the academic disciplines, 1870-1990: A curricular history*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sappington, John, Kinsey, Kimberly, & Munsayac, Kirk. (2002). Two studies of reading compliance among college students. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(4), 272-274.

- Shaugnessy, Mina. (1979). *Errors and expectations*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Scholes, Robert J. (2002). The transition to college reading. *Pedagogy*, 2(2), 165-172.
- Starcher, Keith, & Proffitt, Dennis. (2011). Encouraging students to read: What professors are (and aren't) doing about it. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(3), 396-407.
- Young, Art. (2006). *Teaching writing across the curriculum* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Contact Information

Mary Lou Odom
Associate Professor of English
Director, KSU Writing Center
Associate Director, CHSS Writing Across the Curriculum
Coordinator, M.A. in Professional Writing TA Program
Kennesaw State University
1000 Chastain Road, MD2701
Kennesaw, GA 30144
Email: modom3@kennesaw.edu
Phone: (770) 423-6795

Complete APA Citation

Odom, Mary Lou. (2013, December 11). Not just for writing anymore: What WAC can teach us about reading to learn. *Across the Disciplines*, 10(4). Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/reading/odom.pdf>