

A Review of Next Steps: New Directions for/in Writing about Writing

By Barbara Bird, Doug Downs, I. Moriah McCracken, and Jan Rieman, 2019. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1607328414. 293 pgs. \$27.95 USD (paperback).]

Reviewed by Alissa Winn
University of South Carolina, Columbia

In this collection, editors Barbara Bird, Doug Downs, I. Moriah McCracken, and Jan Rieman assemble remarkably disparate classroom experiences into a thorough reflection on the current state of Writing about Writing (WAW) pedagogy. The text understands WAW as an instructional approach that values three foundational principles: (1) “making writing itself the object of study in the writing classroom,” (2) viewing students “as writers, not *student* writers,” and (3) “advanc[ing] writing knowledge *with* students” (pp. 3-4; original emphasis). These principles draw upon Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’s foundational work on WAW in their 2014 *Writing about Writing: A College Reader* and 2007 article in CCC “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies.’” By gathering approaches to WAW instruction into a single volume and introducing new voices to the conversation Wardle and Downs began, the editors succeed in crafting a touchstone for an alternative pedagogy that might otherwise be practiced ad hoc and in isolation. Recent Writing about Writing scholarship offers glimpses of Wardle and Downs’s pedagogy in practice that are unfortunately distanced by the specific contexts in which the authors situate WAW. Friedman and Miller’s project on WAW’s transfer to information literacy (2018) and Hayes et. al.’s study on WAW pedagogy implementation (2018) both contribute exciting insights to the field, but appear somewhat fragmented when pieced together. Benedict’s fascinating piece on WAW in prisons (2018) lies further, still, from the above articles housed in the same Writing Program Administration journal. Whereas Writing about Writing often appears as a

complement (WAW *and* prison, WAW *and* information literacy), *Next Steps* situates the discipline as a common ground that brings current approaches into dialogue.

The text challenges composition studies' status as "the only discipline in the entire academy that has been built on self-effacement of its own expertise" (p. 275). In a field where it can feel like effective teaching requires smuggling content in through other subjects that are deemed more engaging for students than writing alone, this collection urges us to do away with the Trojan horse pedagogies and claim composition studies as a content field that needs no apology. This project affirms WAW as a burgeoning field in composition studies, one that refuses to disguise its expertise in secondary content. This impressive conceptual work is accomplished through practical vignettes, resulting in what might best be described as an interactive textbook for teachers.

Next Steps is divided into three parts that reflect the most common outcomes of WAW practices: sharpened writerly identities (*Identity*), extended writing processes (*Process*), and deeper writer engagement (*Engagement*). Each section contains a collage of instructor research, student voices, and classroom vignettes that capture instances of WAW instruction at work. Part 1, *Identity*, proposes that shifting students' conception of composition "from *doing* writing to *being* a writer" (p. 5) is crucial in preparing them to navigate any given writing context. Part 2, *Process*, complicates a traditional account of the writing process to uncover space for incorporating the writer's identity developed in Part 1. The final section, *Engagement*, explores how to promote a deep engagement with writing by viewing students as legitimate stakeholders in their writing instruction: "students are invited to give their perspectives on the content, are treated as writers above and beyond being students, and are co-learners with the instructors" (p. 10). Co-learning emerges as a guiding ethos of the collection; it coheres the various essays and vignettes into a rigorous effort to rebalance the power dynamics of the classroom.

Next Steps functions as an encyclopedia of WAW knowledge and, as such, has the potential for multi-level application; readers can consult the text for lesson plans, curriculum design, or pedagogical theory. The editors describe the text as neither "simply a teaching resource nor a collection of scholars reflecting on writing pedagogy, theory, and research," but instead as a "deep repository" of WAW approaches (p. 272). They encourage instructors to "mine the data" to inform their own classroom experiences.

Instructors will return to this book often, searching for specific assignment ideas, curriculum inspiration, or simply for a sense of membership in a community of WAW instructors. Readers who, like myself, are preparing for first-year composition courses will likely bookmark Hart's

vignette “Writing Is Like Shaping a Bonsai Tree” that describes an in-class writing assignment meant to promote metacognitive awareness of the writing process. Instructors might also consider Wilson, Jackson, and Vera’s “El Ensayo” for WAW assignments in a non-WAW course or Wenger’s final project on discourse community infographics, complete with rubrics and assignment sheets. Readers will likely keep in mind the student feedback featured throughout both to inform their curriculum pre-semester and to re-invigorate classrooms during mid-semester slumps.

Stepping back from day-to-day instruction to ponder more ambitious pedagogical goals, readers can use the text to inspire innovative course design and to reflect on curriculum effectiveness. I find myself returning to Gennaro’s “Next Steps, or Rather, One Step at a Time” while in the process of planning an upcoming business writing course. When designing new courses, instructors might also consider the first-year writing journal, *Stylus*, detailed in Bryan, Roozen, and Stack’s “Finding a Way into WAW.” The creation of this journal, run by a team of student editors, student reviewers, and a faculty committee and maintained by a volunteer staff of past contributors, challenges instructors to re-evaluate the possibilities of a composition classroom. Though creating a student journal like *Stylus* from scratch may seem like an overwhelming task, the authors include a variety of rubrics and other materials to facilitate that process. Readers might also peruse chapters that report research on WAW implementation to inform future course plans, such as deWinter’s curricular overhaul review or Tremain’s ethnographic study of students during the high school to college transition.

One of the many strengths of this project is its commitment to inclusive writer identities. The collection takes seriously the editors’ claim that “we are all writers; we all have valuable perspectives on what it is, and means, to write” (p. 277). Students and faculty of all levels and from a variety of institutions, from community colleges to state research universities, contribute chapters. Students are clearly at the center of this collection, not only in the WAW philosophies described by instructors, but also as authors and consultants. The reader hears directly from students on how WAW courses impact their educational experience both in chapters written by students themselves and in the student reflections included by faculty.

The text balances aspirational pedagogy with frank accounts of institutional constraints to avoid leaving readers frustrated at their inability to implement seemingly ideal curriculum. Instead of minimizing institutional roadblocks and challenges to WAW in the classroom, contributors unflinchingly confront the practicality of adopting alternative educational philosophies. Read and Michaud’s chapter “Negotiating WAW-PW across Diverse Institutional Contexts” details

four case studies of WAW-Professional Writing instructional approaches and discusses the tensions that arise from incorporating WAW pedagogy in local contexts. The instructors in the study contend with local factors such as program standardization, student expectations, and a lack of established teaching materials, an effort further complicated by the tension between innovative pedagogy and career advancement. The case study of professor Barbara Bellwoar acknowledges the effects of negative student comments, her position as a nontenured faculty member, and her negotiation of perceived authority (p. 165). The authors go beyond noting these limitations and offer advice on how to respond to them while still participating in the WAW community. The final chapter, in particular, illustrates how to make WAW instruction work in any context. LaRiviere's "Play the Game but Refocus the Aim: Teaching WAW within Alternative Pedagogies" (p. 261) proposes a "double pedagogy" that allows instructors to implement WAW values into non-WAW programs.

Whereas pedagogical inspiration can often be accompanied with fatigue and dread at combating the pressures that arise when departing from default curriculum, the voices in this text empower instructors to recognize their potential to shape classroom experiences within the bounds of institutional demands. The "community-building and advocacy potential" (p. 276) of this collection is evident in both its content and form. The editors conclude in their afterward: "these instructors aren't necessarily doing WAW to the same extent, or in the same direction, as other instructors, but they feel *included* as both professional writing instructors and in the *profession* and the *conversation*" (p. 277, original emphasis). *Next Steps* invites instructors at any level, from graduate teaching assistants to tenured professors, to join the WAW community established here. Perhaps this is the text's greatest strength and enduring contribution.

References

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Contact Information

Alissa Winn

Department of English

University of South Carolina, Columbia

Columbia, South Carolina 29209

Email: aw38@email.sc.edu

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