

# Tiger Talking Time: Writing Across the Curriculum at Saluda High School

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## **The Idea (Gloria Caldwell)**

This year, as in the past two years, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has been the focus at Saluda High School in South Carolina. Each morning at exactly 11:05 after the Pledge of Allegiance and the announcements for the day, a silence descends on the classrooms. Students and teachers open their neon-bright journals for “Tiger Talking Time,” a fifteen-minute time slot named after the school mascot built into every day for recording ideas and concerns in personal journals.

This free-writing time is one of the components of Saluda’s emphasis on WAC. On August 19 when school began, each student in the fourth-period class received a bound book containing one hundred blank pages and one page of simple directions. Students were told in these directions that they are free to write whatever they like in their journal since no one will read the writing unless the student chooses to share it. The teachers keep the booklets in file boxes bought for each classroom.

Every week one fourth-period class chooses a topic for the entire student body to use as a writing prompt for the following Wednesday. These prompts are timely and thought-provoking, reflecting the concerns and problems that teenagers face today. On the other four days students simply write about anything they choose. Should a student fill up the journal, he or she may request that more pages be added, and many students have had supplemental pages added to their books. As a

means of sharing and publishing the writing generated in these journals, each week on a rotating basis fourth-period classes have an opportunity to share pieces of writing from their journals with the entire school.

Generally, student response to Tiger Talking Time has been positive. Many view their writing time as a way to focus what is in their heads and, as one student said, “to get rid of frustrations and go through the day easier.” Another said that he thought it would be good to “later on in life . . . look back at the record I kept.”

A second component of WAC is the use of writing as an aid for student learning in every curriculum area. All of the forty-five teachers at Saluda High School use writing as an instructional tool in their classrooms; during the year according to a schedule, each department publishes student writings in the magazine *Tiger Talk*.

### *The Context: Test Scores and Faculty Development*

Saluda High School is a comprehensive public high school with a student body of approximately 560 students in a small town in a rural, primarily agricultural South Carolina county with a total population of 16,357, two-thirds of whom are white. In 1987 the percentage of students at Saluda High School meeting the state standard on the writing sample of the state exit exam was 77.8 percent; in 1988 the percentage dropped to 77.5, and in 1989 it dropped to 74.8. In the fall of 1989, after examining this decline in student writing scores, Saluda High School decided to begin a WAC project to try to raise student and teacher awareness of the importance of writing and thus eventually raise student achievement in all areas. As a result of this schoolwide effort, the 1990–91 tenth-grade class passed the writing portion of the exit exam with 91.3 percent at or above standards. This means that of the 115 sophomores taking the exit exam for the first time, 105 students met or exceeded the standard and only 10 failed to meet the standard. It also means that in only two years’ time, the percentage of students at Saluda High School who met the minimum writing standard *increased from just under 75 percent to over 90 percent*.

In September 1989, Lyn Zalusky Mueller, director of the Writing Improvement Network (a teacher assistance project), spent two days in two of the classrooms at the high school conducting classroom demonstrations and discussing problems teachers were encountering, particularly with their reluctant writers. In November, Saluda High School conducted a survey of its students, teachers, and parents to solicit community input into its WAC project. This survey revealed among other findings that 43 percent of social studies students, 65 percent of science students, 76 percent of math students, 70 percent of vocational students, and 79 percent of physical education students *never* “write a composition for the purpose of learning information

about the content.” In December, partially as a result of this survey, Lyn was invited to conduct a WAC workshop for the entire faculty.

### **The Consultant’s Perspective (Lyn Zalusky Mueller)**

It started off like every other staff development day.

Teachers were milling around, not very anxious to get started. Most of the teachers at least recognized me—I had been hanging around the school a bit. I had even taught two days in the school, although no one really seemed to notice (except of course the teachers whose classes I had taught). The school was applying for a grant for a writing lab to help their students. It was an impressive grant—they were all very hopeful. At least the English teachers were.

Most of the English teachers sat at the front tables in the library that day. After all, *this* was something they were interested in!

I knew the principal was more than interested. In a previous conversation he had told me about a piece that his son had written about him several years earlier and published in their award-winning high school literary magazine. “My Father, My Principal” it was called. “There’s just something about publishing,” he tried to convince me. “It just does something to kids to see their work in print. And, you know what? That article did something to me, too.”

Since a great many of the pieces in the literary magazine were written about the local community, the principal seemed (perhaps without knowing it) to already have a good, down-to-earth, real-life understanding that writing and improving writing don’t come from additional skill sheets. He was also facing the recent results from the statewide basic skills tests that showed that many of his students were not going to receive diplomas unless they could adequately demonstrate their abilities on the writing portion of the state exit examination.

“The whole school has to be involved,” he told me. “There’s just no other way.” So we decided to start with staff development for the whole faculty. After all, the WIN (Writing Improvement Network) project had been funded to assist teachers and schools with their writing programs. However, it seemed like we were proposing to water a garden for just five minutes a day and expecting a healthy crop to flourish.

By the afternoon of the in-service, teachers were reading and writing together in small groups—but sparks weren’t flying. It wasn’t until I asked the groups to respond to a provocative quote found at the National Aquarium in Baltimore—“Without firing a shot, we may kill one-fifth of all species on this planet in the next twenty years”—that things got interesting. As the teachers in each group read their reactions aloud, heads nodded and mutual concern appeared in their eyes. Then one of the science teachers read his. To say he didn’t agree with the

others would be an understatement. People began to fidget in their seats. Then they started making huffing noises, like horses impatient to get out of their stalls. Finally, the “oh no’s” and “ah come on’s” started to erupt from the group. Before I knew it there was a knock-down, drag-out verbal fight going on. I let it go. At last, I sighed to myself, something meaningful.

In January I met with the teachers in small groups to address specific concerns in their respective content areas. In the next session the English teachers barked—“It’s *we* against *they*” (meaning the teachers in the content areas weren’t doing much for the cause of helping their remedial writers). In the second session the problems seemed overwhelming. Teacher comments were typical but genuine: “What can we do?” “I wish we could get those kids to write.” “But how?” “Publishing would help them so much. They need so much help.”

We all knew that the purpose of these WAC in-services was to involve the whole school in helping those kids write, write better, and care about their writing. During the final session an industrial arts teacher pointed his index finger at me and said, “I hate to burst your bubble, lady, but my kids can’t even write a complete sentence!” Quietly, one special education teacher responded, “You know, my students publish a class newsletter about what they’re doing in school for their parents. If my kids can do it, can’t those kids?”

That one comment started a smoldering revolution. From my perspective, it was at that point that the teachers took ownership. Now I could switch from in-service person to scribe of their ideas. I knew that somewhere in that comment was a solution to the “those kids” problems and to the *we/they* dilemma that many schools face. As I met with each group and proposed the previous group’s thoughts, the publication idea began to form and snowball. By the end of the day, we had an across-the-subject-areas committee, an idea for a publication, and a commitment from the principal to cover the typing and publishing expenses of whatever form this publication was going to take.

I was excited that day when I left the school. But as I drove the ninety miles back to my house, the industrial arts teacher’s comment haunted me. I couldn’t figure out how they were going to come together, how I was going to help them—or even if I should.

### **The Teachers’ Perspective (Missy Deloach and Gloria Caldwell)**

From Lyn Mueller all teachers learned that English teachers could teach the writing process but could not give students enough writing opportunities to perfect the process. As a result of the workshop, a committee of teachers was organized to create a schoolwide project

emphasizing WAC, and a pilot issue of *Tiger Talk* was published in May 1990. This magazine contained a sampling of the various types of writing produced by students as they used writing to learn content in all courses.

During the school year 1990–1991 Saluda High continued its emphasis on WAC. First, consultants were brought in to work with teachers individually in building writing to learn activities into their lessons. As a result, five issues of *Tiger Talk* were published with each department responsible for one month's magazine: English and French in November; science in January; social studies in February; vocational and physical education in April; and fine arts, special education, and math in May.

All teachers chose for publication three samples of writing from each class they taught. Each department was also responsible for the magazine cover, which was created by a student. In addition, some students also submitted related artwork to be used in the magazines. The magazines were each typed, edited, and designed by several teachers. Although the covers were printed professionally, the magazines were simply copied on the Xerox machine at school. Then they were assembled by students and teachers.

Unfortunately, this process was not without its pitfalls. Several teachers had to be reminded by the principal, a firm supporter of the project, to submit writing samples. Also, assembling the magazine took away from instructional time. Of course, the copying of the magazines took a toll on the school machine as well. Since only a few teachers were involved in the actual typing, editing, and layout of the five magazines, the task became overwhelming, with publication deadlines having to be extended. As a matter of fact, the last magazine was not completed until June.

However, the magazines received much recognition from the community, parents, and students. The publications had a vast audience because they were mailed to each student's home and to businesses in Saluda County. Every teacher received the magazines to display in the classroom.

Because of this recognition and improved exit exam writing scores, the faculty and administration agreed to proceed with the WAC project in 1991–92. This year the project also received special funding through REACH, the Rural Education Alliance for Collaborative Humanities. With a grant of \$3,000, "A Tiger Talks: Writing Across the Curriculum" became the schoolwide REACH project.

In 1991–92, the project had three components. The first component was *Tiger Talk*, the magazine itself. According to a set schedule, each department again published student writings in a magazine of fifty-two pages. Each teacher now selects two pieces from each class for publication, and summarizes the activity that generated the writing.

Subject-area writing activities were thoughtful and varied, and student writing showed a high degree of originality. Math teacher Louise Sanders gave her students the assignment to “use the unit vocabulary in a creative manner.” Student Brandy Miller took up the challenge:

Tiffany has a 1985 Mustang G.T. 5.0 she wants to sell. She placed an ad in the Saluda paper and it read as follows:

I have a 1985 Mustang GT 5.0 for sale. The car’s fuel economy, or miles per gallon, is 28 miles. The depreciation would be \$9,600. The variable costs, such as gas, oil, tires, on the average are about \$1,106 per year. The fixed costs, such as insurance, license, etc., on the average are about \$4,258 per year. As for maintenance, it comes to around \$1,000 per year. The car is in excellent condition.

Angie Shealy applied her talents as a poet to Joshlyn E. von Szalatnay’s computer programming class to produce the following verse about popular software for the IBM PS/2:

#### **Wonderful Link Way**

“Click”  
 1023 KB OK  
 “Press enter to continue”  
 “Enter your user ID:”  
 Shealy A  
 “Enter your password”  
 \*#@\*  
 “Computer Programming One”  
 Let’s see. What to do today?  
 “Link Way Version 2.01 for the PS/2”  
 “Loading Program”  
 Where’s the mouse?  
 “Link Way Program”  
 “Start Link Way with default start options”  
 Which one? “Getting Started, Link Way Tutorial,  
 Link Way Tools, Useful Buttons, or Exit Link Way”?  
 I know . . . Link Way Tools  
 “Link Way Paint Program”  
 Waiting, waiting  
 “Picture, Open”  
 No, that’s not it.  
 “Pictures, New”  
 “New Picture Name”  
 \*\*\$\*#  
 “Click”  
 Now . . . Let’s draw!

Subject-area teachers often used writing to help students master

essential processes by generalizing from observed examples or explaining key operations. Physical science teacher Deborah Minick involved her class in this activity: “After reading and solving density word problems, students described the step-by-step process of how to determine the density of an object.” Student Jamie Minick responded this way:

You want to find the density of a block of wood or even a round object. This is how you find density.

Using a ruler, measure the length, width, and height of the block. Next take the measurements and multiply them. Now you have your volume. Weigh the block. Now divide the mass by the volume and get your density.

To find the density of a small, round object, take a graduated cylinder and put 25 ml of water in it. Next drop the object in the water. Write down that measurement. Then subtract 25 ml from that measurement. That is your volume. Then weigh the object. Next divide the mass by the volume. This equals your density. This tells you how to find the density of a block and a round object.

Another way teachers in areas other than English at Saluda High School used writing as a learning tool was to relate subject-area content to students’ own lives—to make it relevant, in other words. For instance, personal health teacher Patsy Rhodes’s students were studying life spans of America’s aging population and how our older adults were treated and cared for. A discussion came up about how some older adults act youthful and that every young person has an older adult that they admire. Students were given ten minutes of class time to write about their favorite or most youthful older person. Students shared their writings with the class.

This is what Kendrick Stevens shared about his grandmother Mama Minnie:

The most youthful, older person I knew was my grandmother. She died a couple of years back, leaving behind her a family of twelve. She inspired us all and found time during her working hours to be with her family.

My grandmother was 72 when she died, but just because she’s dead doesn’t mean she’s gone. Her influence is still with us. Along with her hard work and dedication, she was wise. She always told me, “If you are going to do something, do it right the first time and you won’t have to do it again.” I’ll always remember those words.

Mama Minnie, I won’t forget the time you spent with me and just for me. For you I will try to do things right the first time.

Other examples could be given, but the point is simply this: Once they committed themselves to utilizing writing as a strategy to promote learning, the faculty at Saluda High School had little difficulty in deriving specific writing activities for their individual subjects.

This year a journalism student volunteered to be the editor of each *Tiger Talk* under the direction of teachers Bela Herlong, Gloria Caldwell, and Melissa Deloach. This student types the writing samples and lays out the pages. Art students design a cover for each magazine and are in the process of creating a clip-art book to be used for design of the magazines throughout the year. With the \$3,000 REACH grant, the publications will be printed professionally instead of on the school copier.

The second component of the WAC project is the free-writing period, which began in August when students entered school. Each student during the Tiger Talking Time chooses from his or her journal a selection of writing to share with an audience. The student copies the selection on a prepared page. Then students read their selections aloud to the class, and the class votes on which selection should be spotlighted on the bulletin board. There was much initial opposition to this component of the WAC project because a number of teachers mistakenly felt that it would require extra time and effort on their part. Therefore, the media specialist provided each fourth-period teacher with colorful pages and banners for the display boards.

Display-board writing was often personal and informal, but it was also heartfelt and reflective, the kind of writing that reveals the writer making meaning of experience. Melissa, for example, wrote "Forever in My Heart," a poem and prose piece about her grandmother:

I sit at my desk, thinking of the past.  
Eight years ago, yesterday, they came to get me with the bad news.  
"She's dead!" My Grandma! My heart!  
How can I fend without her? The teardrops roll, but they cannot  
wash away my pain.  
No longer can I hug her, or feel the wrinkles and cracks of skin  
tarnished with age and the task of time.  
No more walks along the creek, holding her gentle hand in mine, as  
my long, blond hair, as it was then, blew in the cool summer breeze.  
No more games of her youth. No more soft kisses on my forehead.  
No more of her praise for my sweetness and good accomplishments.  
No more Grandma!  
How have I lived my life without her this long? She dwells in my  
memory.  
She hugs me in my thoughts. I can feel her warm skin, her simple  
kisses, her joy, her love.  
It's all there, deep inside my mind, and forever in my heart.  
I'll always love you Grandma!

One measure of the support given the "Tiger Talking Time" project by the entire school staff is the principal's key participation as an audience for the display boards. Each piece of student work displayed



received Bill Whitfield's personal mark of approbation: his rubber-stamped message, "I saw your work today!! Mr. Whit," always accompanied by the handwritten addition of the date he read each piece.

The third component of the project is to have consultants once again work with teachers in all subject areas in using writing to learn content. That aspect of the project has not yet been realized this year because of a very busy school calendar.

Since 1989, Saluda High School has made every effort to permeate its atmosphere with the importance of skillful, effective writing as a part of every student's academic achievement; the results have been encouraging. Of the 111 eligible seniors this year (1991) taking the exit exam, only four did not pass the writing portion; and as explained above (see "The Context"), tenth-grade writing scores improved by fifteen percentage points. Those scoring below standard will have several additional opportunities to pass the exam before they graduate.

In commenting on the impact of the school's emphasis on WAC, Gay Mullinax, school guidance counselor, stated, "In my position as a counselor, I am quite involved with testing, both with administration and interpretation. I have seen a remarkable difference in the students' attitudes and abilities with regard to the writing portion of the exit exam. The phenomenal success of this year's juniors and seniors on the writing subtest, in my opinion, is directly related to the positive impact being made by our writing across the curriculum program. The value of this teaching concept should ultimately be reflected in grades and other tests as well."

In November the South Carolina Department of Education informed the school that it had been selected as one of four high schools in the state to be reviewed for recognition by the Writing Improvement Coordinating Council as having an exemplary writing program for 1992. In April 1992 the council officially designated Saluda High School as the site of an exemplary writing program.

### **Why it Worked (Ed Epps)**

To many the need for WAC seems obvious. We have students write about what they are learning because in so doing they learn more, not only about the content they are studying but about their own learning process and, ultimately, themselves as well. Progressive educators since at least the time of John Dewey and, more recently, many English and language arts teachers in all parts of the country have internalized this belief to such an extent that it is a given in their classroom praxis.

To others, however, especially teachers of such traditionally skills- and content-centered disciplines as mathematics, science, and even

physical education, this truth is not self-evident. Non-English teachers often worry that “adding” writing to their own lessons will necessitate eliminating some essential knowledge in their already overcrowded curriculum. Some also worry that their administration or their colleagues are trying to turn them into— heaven forbid— English teachers. Both concerns are natural enough, and at Saluda High School both concerns resulted in some initial resistance to the WAC project. Over time, though, most resistance abated and some of those who had been initially skeptical eventually became enthusiastic supporters of the project.

What things made the difference? For one, teachers were involved early on in the planning and implementation of all project activities. For another, Bill Whitfield, the principal, was involved as instructional leader from the outset; his commitment of local funds and his gentle prodding of a few reluctant staff members made a significant difference in the ultimate success of the project. Too, the consultants from the Writing Improvement Network were perceived as *colleagues* with valuable insights based upon actual classroom practice rather than as outsiders isolated in an ivory-towered office somewhere in the abstract realms of academe.

A final factor contributing to the success of the Saluda High School WAC project was teachers’ personal realization that writing in their subject areas was making a difference in their students’ learning. Writing is one way to achieve both student involvement and integration of content. In responding to an informal request for comments about the program, teachers in all subject areas at Saluda High School expressed numerous benefits of the WAC initiative. Comments included the following:

As a teacher of learning disabled students, I have discovered that the daily writing time has been an outlet for my students’ emotions. They are able to express their feelings about school problems on paper thus avoiding some verbal or even physical conflicts with their peers or teachers. (Joyce S. Berry)

As a United States History teacher, I have found writing to be an invaluable tool in my classes. Through writing, my students can actually become historical characters. They can live their lives and dream their dreams. History comes alive. The students learn and actually enjoy learning! (Patricia D. Cockrell)

Child care students have had to keep journals as a part of their graded effort while working in their classroom centers. I have noticed an improvement in these journals as they described details of what their children did, how they felt, etc. I attribute this to our writing emphasis this year. (Linda L. Padgett)

Teacher comments were not universally positive, of course. A special education teacher observed that “an every-day writing task became boring and nonmotivational [to these students] as the year progressed” and that “I’m not sure their skills improved to a great extent” since they didn’t receive “corrections and reinforcement instantly.” Another teacher noted, “Students get bored with [the] idea of writing—need variety of ideas to write from Science, Phys. ed., English, history, etc.” Even this teacher, however, admitted, “It needs some refinement but we have a great start”; and only these two teachers expressed reservations of any kind about the project.

Most teachers shared the opinion of Scarlett E. Hardin that “[t]he writing across the curriculum [project] at Saluda High has been a tremendous enabler for teachers, allowing us to encourage expression and creativity while giving the students an arena in which they define the boundaries and, as a result, feel comfortable in exploring the territory of their own abilities.” Linda Bodie agreed: “Our writing program has been a wonderful addition to our school. . . . The warm glow generated by [students’] success in writing in various content areas pervaded our halls and classes as we saw a new desire kindled within the students—a desire to share their ideas.”

At Saluda High School the principal and faculty committed themselves to the belief that students would learn more, better, faster through writing and then proceeded to develop a set of procedures and activities to integrate writing into all areas of the curriculum. The result has been greater student involvement in learning, increased mastery of content, widespread community enthusiasm for a series of anthologies of student writing, and expanded participation by the community in the life of the school.