



Doug Downs

**Writing-About-Writing Curricula: Origins, Theories, and Initial Field-Tests
(WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies, No. 12)**

September 2010*

Description. Writing-about-writing (WAW) curricula have students study and sometimes perform disciplinary research in writing studies in order to build procedural and declarative knowledge about and experience with writing with an eye toward maximizing transfer of knowledge from writing courses to new writing situations. By helping students use writing-studies scholarship to (re)construct knowledge about writing, writers, writing processes, discourse, textuality, and literacy, WAW aligns a writing course's object of study—writing—with its read and written content, the research of the field of writing studies. Teachers and students pose questions about these subjects and read articles that address them. Students write a variety of genres that facilitate reflection on their literacy experiences and help them put readings in conversation with each other and in some cases conduct original research on their own questions about writing.

WAW approaches to writing instruction are predicated on the effectiveness of declarative knowledge about procedural knowledge, and mindfulness of that knowledge, in facilitating transfer (see Beaufort), so transfer research is a major area of study in the effectiveness of WAW pedagogies. The pedagogy also hopes to change students' awareness and conceptions of writing as an activity that can be and has been studied empirically, and on which expertise can be gained, so research is currently focusing on these effects of the pedagogy as well.

Scope. While CompPile bibliographies favor data-driven research that provide readers with actual results and findings on the subjects they feature, data-driven studies that theorize or assess the effectiveness of WAW curricula are as yet limited by the newness of this approach, which has only been framed in these terms since the early-2000s. (Pedagogy in the 1990s by Wendy Bishop [*On Writing; The Subject is Writing*] and Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff [*Being a Writer*] emphasized writers and writing researchers telling students about the craft of writing, but did little to incorporate the element of *scholarship* of writing and students' participation in that scholarship that characterize the current approach.) This claim of limitedness is corroborated by a review by David Slomp and M. Elizabeth Sargent, who even in arguing for the wide-spread nature of conversation on WAW curricula were able to cite only textbooks and informal talk, not peer reviewed, published theorization, or data-driven research on effects of such curricula ("Thinking Vertically," *CCC* 60 [2009]: W25-34).

To be of greatest use at this stage of the pedagogy's development, then, this bibliography includes not only work demonstrating the results of WAW (Bird, Carter, Charleton, Dew, Downs [2004], Downs & Wardle, and Wardle) but also some theoretical articles that centrally ground the approach (Beaufort, De Joy, Downs [in press], and Russell), producing the hypotheses that

*Cite as: Downs, Doug. (September 2010). Writing-About-Writing Curricula: Origins, Theories, and Initial Field-Tests, WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies, No. 12. *WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies*. <http://compile.org/wpa/bibliographies/Bib12/Downs.pdf>. Date of access.

many WAW researchers are just beginning to test as WAW curricula increase substantially in number around the country. The beginning of this “second wave” of WAW research is a special issue of *Basic Writing e-Journal* with articles included here; look for additional articles in the next 1-2 years drawing from studies currently being conducted and submitted for review.

The bibliography does not include entries for curricula and pedagogy that have in the past been labeled “writing about writing” but that would today be identified more as **reflective** pedagogies because their main feature is have students write about their own writing processes. (See *e.g.*, Huot, Brian. “The Process Journal or Writing About Writing.” *Iowa English Bulletin*, 36 (1988): 44-48; or Winterowd, W. Ross. “Writing About Writing.” *Exercise Exchange* 30.2 (1985): 26-27). Such reflective writing is one feature, but not the defining feature, of WAW curricula as they are currently enacted.

This bibliography also does not include the wealth of research demonstrating perhaps the most central premise of WAW curricula: that writing is always situated and cannot be understood, or taught, in abstracts and universals. Readers wishing to review this case against universalism should explore a variety of socio-cultural theories such as new literacy studies, genre and activity theory, and communities-of-practice theory, each of which predicts the role of situatedness, activity, and disciplinarity in written communication. Extensive research in a variety of academic and professional settings (most notably by Bazerman, Russell, Hyland, Haas, and Ackerman) empirically demonstrates that academic and workplace writing is always a situated (or disciplinary) activity.

Beaufort, Anne

Writing in the real world: Making the transition from school to work

New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press (1999)

Drawing on ethnographic work with four college graduates working at a job resource center, Beaufort proposes five specific knowledge-domains that writing pedagogy ought to include: discourse community, subject matter, genre uses, rhetorical situation, and writing process knowledge. Beaufort derives these categories from work-related writing and the knowledge domains it draws on. She also asks what rhetorical knowledge workplace writers transfer from writing course and other college learning versus what they have to learn for the first time. She concludes that the students’ college writing courses are successful in preparing them for writing outside school only insofar as they help students think in rhetorical terms—but then notes that their writing instruction did not particularly focus on doing so. Her subjects report mostly what they learned in such courses was broad analytical ability. Her theory of the five knowledge domains and her observations on transfer lead to two major conclusions. First, the importance of *mindfulness* for a writer—self-monitoring what they are doing versus what they could be doing and what they might have encountered elsewhere to help them now (186); second, the reality of very limited transfer from writing courses that did not emphasize metacognition that would facilitate mindful transfer of learning (188-89).

KEYWORDS: academy-workplace, academic, expertise, site-analysis, job resource center, organization, institutional, ethnographic, apprenticeship, individual, discourse-community, cultural, action, skill-transfer, audience, knowledge-domain, authoring, case-study, longitudinal, genre, business, collaboration, socialization, grant-writing, imitation, press-release

Bird, Barbara

Meaning-making concepts: Basic writers' access to verbal culture

Basic Writing e-Journal 08.1/09.1 (2009/2010), 1-16

<http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/BWE/documents/Finals/BarbaraBird.pdf>

Bird offers a theoretical examination of the need for students “to deeply engage in the conceptual foundations of interpretation, response, and affective influences” if they are to “really learn how to be conversation partners in verbal culture” (2)—and how she has found WAW pedagogy to meet this need of teaching students about “meaning-making.” The article includes an extensive review of reading-writing literature that itself is extremely valuable for those looking to understand how influencing student conceptions of reading and writing can influence the ways students actually accomplish these activities. After Bird works through the theory underlying the three meaning-making activities she highlights (interpretation, response, affect), she explains ways in which each is “critical for gaining access to the world of ideas” that students identified as “basic writers” usually lack (5). The article includes a narrative of Bird’s own discovery of writing about writing and literacy as a successful approach to helping students gain this access, including a powerful account of her own journey to literacy as a basic writer and how composition theory helped her gain the kind of access she now seeks to provide students.

KEYWORDS: basic, WAW, pedagogy, interpretation, responding, affective, meaning-making, review-of-scholarship, read-write, teacher-story

Carter, Shannon

Writing about writing in basic writing: A teacher/researcher/activist narrative

Basic Writing e-Journal 08.1/09.1 (2009/2010), 151-169

<http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/BWe/documents/ShannonCarter.pdf>

In a retrospective on the development of a WAW curriculum in basic writing and then an entire writing program, Carter describes a pedagogy oriented around students’ ethnographic study of literacies. She details both benefits to student learning and impacts of the pedagogy on public conceptions of writing and writing instruction. Her reflective piece, which introduces a double issue of *BWe* featuring several WAW approaches to basic writing, connects WAW to other pedagogical movements that make student writing and writing instruction *visible* beyond the composition classroom by “talking about

writing.” Among these movements, she focuses on her experience connecting WAW and the National Conversation on Writing, an initiative developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Network for Media Action (NMA). She shows how WAW and NCoW can merge to provide writing students real publication opportunities that foster public discussion of writing.

KEYWORDS: basic, pedagogy, WAW, curriculum, program, ethnographic, public, National Conversation on Writing, Writing Program Administrators, Network for Media Action, student-publication

Charlton, Jonnika

Seeing is believing: Writing studies with “basic writing” students

Basic Writing e-Journal 08.1/09.1 (2009/2010)

<http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/BWE/documents/Finals/JonikkaCharlton.pdf>

Close description of the incorporation of a writing-about-writing pedagogy in writing courses at the University of Texas-Pan American. Charlton includes both narrative description of the intellectual and material evolution of the program via writing program TAs, and extensive recounting of actual student experiences in the resulting classes. She begins by describing introducing the WAW concept to TAs using Downs & Wardle (cited in this bib) “as part of a grander scheme to disrupt common assumptions about the purpose(s) of first-year writing classes and to make the familiar . . . strange again” (2). Working from TA questions—would the pedagogy allow a critical focus? Could students handle the readings? Would they be bored and disengaged?—Charlton details moving from using a few readings, to whole-course WAW designs, to redesigning the developmental writing program. The article shows readings the program is using, gives examples of assignments, and uses teacher comments and samples of student work to show curricular effects. Charlton theorizes the positive results of the curriculum (in ways not commonly talked about in other WAW literature) as *immersion* via a two-hour daily class meeting, *enriched knowledge base* of composition research, *network formation* among students, and higher *engagement* than she has observed with other curricula.

KEYWORDS: University of Texas-Pan American, WAW, pedagogy, curriculum, first-year, basic, TA-training, needs-analysis, critique, assignment, teacher-opinion, student-writing, sample

DeJoy, Nancy

Process this: Undergraduate student writing in composition studies

Logan, UT: Utah State University Press (2004)

DeJoy’s theorization and model of undergraduates contributing to scholarship in composition articulates well many of the hypotheses and rationales that drive writing-

about-writing pedagogy. DeJoy starts with the theorized assertion that traditional “process” pedagogy has grown oversimplified and stale, positioning students as objects upon which composition pedagogy is worked, rather than *participants* in composition. Emphasizing participation and conversation, she asks why we don’t imagine writing students as (and make them) contributors to the field. Using the example of a “Theories of Grammar and Composition” course taught to English/secondary-education students, DeJoy details how composition content should be as much the focus of composition instruction as writing processes themselves are. Providing an early articulation of one of the main themes of writing-about-writing instruction, DeJoy distinguishes between “mastery” of how-to process instruction and “identification with” the material of the field and those who study it, arguing that the latter goal is ultimately more effective for both writing instruction and participation in critical literacy.

KEYWORDS: composition-studies, undergraduate, discourse-analysis, process, theory, research-practice, student-publication, WAW, engagement, critical-literacy, mastery, identification

Dew, Debra Frank

Language matters: Rhetoric and Writing I as content course

WPA: Writing Program Administration 26.3 (2003), 87–104

Dew walks readers through the theory underlying a program-wide WAW curriculum and its initial results for faculty, students, and the standing of Rhetoric & Composition (as a field) in her institution. She theorizes the shift to a WAW curriculum as movement from writing “with no content in particular” to writing “with specific content” where the content is the language practices of a specific community, in this case the community of rhetoric and writing studies. This “relinking of language and content” (88) helps FYC instructors regain control of writing curricula by focusing on rhetorically contingent form and sentence structure and aligns FYC with content courses in other disciplines. Dew writes specifically from the perspective of a WPA, detailing the previous curriculum; the program review and assessment which led to the new curriculum; the institutional core goals and WPA Outcomes that shaped the new curriculum; and the shape and effects of the new “Language Matters” curriculum. Dew pays particular attention to the growth of disciplinary identity and the professionalization of writing faculty that the WAW curriculum has brought about in her institution, demonstrating how the curricular shift “reconstitute[ed instructors’] labor as scholarly teaching” (97).

KEYWORDS: FYC, curriculum, program, program-design, rhetoric, WPA, Outcomes Statement, administration, WAW, reconceptualization, teacher-training, disciplinary, professionalization

Downs, Doug

Teaching first-year writers to *use* texts: Scholarly readings in writing-about-writing in first-year comp

Reader, in press (2010)

Based on a survey of current reading theory as well as several years' experience teaching first year students how to read scholarly articles in support of WAW curricula, Downs theorizes where students are as readers when they enter WAW FYC classes and what, therefore, such classes need to do to support students' reading. In addition, it compactly summarizes the most current thinking on the shape of WAW pedagogies and the role of reading the work of the field in them. The article frames reading instruction in FYC courses from an activity theory/situated learning perspective, examining how general-education courses can teach reading using texts from specific activities—in the case of WAW curricula, the activity being the study of writing and rhetoric. After reviewing the challenges that typical student reading practices pose for WAW courses, the article walks prospective WAW teachers through how to select readings for WAW instruction by ensuring their relevance to and accessibility for students, how to guide students in reconceiving reading as meaning-making rather than information-gathering, and how to model rhetorical reading in WAW classrooms and create situations in which students practice it.

WAW, FYC, readings, scholarly-article, pedagogy, activity-theory, situational, gen-ed, rhetorical, needs-analysis, teacher-training, meaning-making

Downs, Douglas. P.

Teaching our own prison: First year composition curricula and public conceptions of writing [doctoral thesis]

Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah (2004)

Theorizes WAW pedagogy in terms of reshaping student and cultural conceptions of writing and the study of writing, toward the end of enhancing rhetoric and composition's standing in the university and students' learning in writing courses. Includes data from semester-long participant-observation of two pedagogies as enacted in one course each—an academic-argument based curriculum and a WAW curriculum. Context-sensitive critical discourse analysis of students' writing, student interviews, and pre- and post-course survey data in both classes showed WAW students' improved ability to read scholarly sources, ability to evaluate sources, ability to incorporate source material into researched writing, and heightened disciplinary awareness.

KEYWORDS: WAW, reconceptualization, pedagogy, student-opinion, pre-post, data, ethnographic, participant-observation, contrast-group, contextual, critical discourse-analysis, source evaluation, critique, discipline-awareness, public

Downs, Douglas; Elizabeth Wardle

Teaching about writing, righting misconceptions: (Re)envisioning “first year composition” as “introduction to writing studies”

College Composition and Communication 58.4 (2007), 552-584

Downs and Wardle describe WAW curricula that extend beyond students reading and writing about existing scholarship in rhetoric and composition (cf. Dew) to having students conduct primary research on related topics. They frame the pedagogy as an “Introduction to Writing Studies” that explicitly rejects the traditional FYC goal of teaching a universal academic discourse and instead seeks to teach (1) metacognition about writing via procedural and declarative knowledge of writing, and (2) a version of the activity of inquiry that centers universities and spans disciplines. The article theorizes the shortcomings of traditional FYC courses in terms of genre and activity theory and describes WAW curricula that can better respond to these theories of how writing works and thus needs to be learned. It then reports on early results from the curriculum as taught in multiple sections at three institutions, illustrating effects through two particular student experiences in the course. Student feedback and results suggest that the WAW curriculum results in increased self-awareness about writing, improved reading abilities and confidence, and raised awareness of researched writing as conversation. The article concludes with challenges that the curriculum presents, including the challenging nature of the course for students, the resulting imperfections in student work, limited textbook support for the approach, and the need for extensive instructor preparation.

KEYWORDS: FYC, pedagogy, WAW, writing-studies, objective, metacognition, activity-theory, genre-theory, curriculum, student-opinion, data, case-study, self-evaluation, research-awareness, student-confidence, gain, needs-analysis, teacher-training, academic, AP English, content-analysis, contextual, basic-skills, honors, recursivity, reflective, rhetorical, skill-transfer, writing-studies, WAC, WID, Charles Bazerman, Larry Beason, Carol Berkenkotter, John Dawkins, Linda Flower, James Paul Gee, Christian Haas, John R. Hayes, Thomas N. Huckin, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Sondra Perl, John Swales

Russell, David R.

Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction

In *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction*, Joseph Petraglia (Ed.), Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum (1995), 51-77

Russell builds a compact and persuasive argument for the ineffectiveness of FYC curricula that seek to teach a “Universal Educated Discourse” or to teach writing “in general.” The argument is based on the principles of cultural-historic activity theory, which theorize writing as a tool that subjects participating in shared social activities use to help achieve the objectives of those activities. Because FYC has historically imagined

itself as teaching “general writing skills instruction” without reference to any specific activity, Russell argues that its effect, particularly with regard to transfer, is blunted. He proposes an alternative method and goal for FYC that involves teaching students about writing in order to explain, for example, why there *can't* be a universal educated discourse, and what can be said studied and said about writing that does span various writing activities. Russell’s theorization of the function and limitations of FYC at the time of his writing thus provide significant grounding and scaffolding for the WAW curricula it foresees and calls for.

KEYWORDS: activity-theory, pedagogy, implication, FYC, curriculum, needs-analysis, disciplinary, academic, transfer, WAW, universal

Wardle, Elizabeth

“Mutt genres” and the goal of FYC: How can we help students write the genres of the university?

College Composition and Communication 60.4 (2009), 765-789

Wardle reports research from a large composition program that validates critiques of FYC based on genre and activity theory, focusing particularly on the limited range of genres that FYC can teach and questioning the “realism” of the genres that she observed being taught in FYC courses, or applicability of those genres outside the FYC class. Wardle’s two-year study of 23 teachers and 462 students in 25 sections of FYC using “rhetorically based” “academic writing skills” curricula found nine genres assigned (ranging from personal narrative, profiles, travel narratives, and interviews to rhetorical analyses and argument/position papers). She characterizes the genres required in FYC courses as “mutt” genres because they mimicked “real” genres doing real work in *other* activity systems but actually did some other work in the FYC system, so that the writing becomes assigned and performed for its own sake. Wardle concludes that such genres should, at least, be taught as “boundary objects” that bridge to writing embedded in the actual activities that require it; and, preferably, that FYC should in fact stop trying to teach *how to write* genres outside the activities that require them, and instead adopt a WAW content (like that described in this bibliography’s introduction) that prepares students for learning to write those genres once they *are* participating in the activities that require them.

KEYWORDS: FYC, objective, academic, genre, knowledge-transfer, skill-transfer, WAC, genre-theory, activity-theory, case-study, site-analysis, 'mutt genre', interlanguage, mushfake, program, USA, general skill, reflective, data, survey

Wardle, Elizabeth

Understanding “transfer” from FYC: Preliminary results of a longitudinal study

WPA: Writing Program Administration 31.1–2 (2007), 65–85

In this pilot study, Wardle tracks seven students through two years of college courses after a WAW FYC course to investigate what knowledge they appear to be transferring to other college courses, and how. She begins by extensively theorizing and reviewing evidence about transfer of knowledge from composition courses—which she argues, following other transfer researchers, we should call *generalization*—concluding that one reason that evidence of transfer may be difficult to find is that we’re looking for the “apples” students were taught when we need to be looking for the “apple pie” that they create from those raw ingredients in new settings. Her findings of self-reported (via interviews) transfer suggests that in their WAW course, students learned new textual features, management of research projects, how to read scholarly articles, and how to talk about writing in the university in disciplinary terms. At the same time, students in their first two years of college reported little *need for* their FYC learning, and generalization from it required “context-specific supports” (73).

KEYWORDS: skill-transfer, knowledge-transfer, FYC, longitudinal, data, WPA, case-study, student-opinion, WAW, 'generalization', interview, textual feature, researching, scholarly-article, reading, disciplinary, academic, contextual