
How I Started Using Writing Across the Curriculum and Ended Up Taking Algebra Again: A Review of Useful Works on Writing Across the Curriculum

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(Toby Fulwiler, *The Journal Book*, 1987; Robert P. Parker and Vera Goodkin, *The Consequences of Writing*, 1987; Karen Spear, *Sharing Writing*; Toby Fulwiler, *Writing Across the Curriculum: Research into Practice*, 1986. All published by Boynton-Cook/Heinemann)

As it enters its second decade, Writing Across the Curriculum in the United States is supported by an increasingly sophisticated literature which offers a great deal of hands-on, how-to advice, as well as a solid theoretical basis in linguistic and learning research. Generally, this work is free of jargon, accessible to any interested person, whatever their academic discipline. The four books reviewed here are typical in their blending of the theoretical with the practical; two are more valuable for their discussion of Writing Across the Curriculum theory and for their histories of the movement than as sources for classroom strategy.

Writing Across the Curriculum Theory

The most theoretical of them, Parker's and Goodkin's *The Consequences of Writing*, both presents an account of Writing Across the Curriculum history and explains the learning and linguistic theories underlying the technique.

The movement began in England in the late 1960s with the work of James Britton and Nancy Martin. They examined educational practice in light of the linguistic theories of Edward Sapir, Suzanne Langer, and Lev Vygotsky. These theorists asserted that, in Sapir's words, "The purely communicative aspect of language has been exaggerated...language is primarily a vocal actualization of the tendency to see realities symbolically." In other words, for Sapir, et. al., language is far more than just a system of signs we manipulate to achieve certain ends. It is the medium with which we construct our symbolic representation of who we are and of the world around us.

Considering the implications of this for learning and teaching, Britton and Martin concluded that we "construct knowledge from experience by transforming that experience symbolically" through language when we learn. In classroom research, Britton and his colleagues found that children in all grades, studying all subjects, learned better when all kinds of language activity — from note-passing and conversation to formal written and oral reports — was the basic instructional vehicle. Informal expression, or expressive writing — journals, letters, lists, impromptu poems — were found to be particularly valuable. Expressive writing in the child's everyday language has remained an important part of British pedagogy.

This was the origin of LAC (Language Across the Curriculum), a technique favored in Britain that uses all forms of language activity (reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills) to help students learn subject matter more quickly and effectively. WAC — Writing Across the Curriculum — was but one branch of this larger concern; U. S. educators embraced it at a time when criticism of student writing abilities was more than usually scathing. Unfortunately, we in the United States have often ignored the larger context of LAC and the benefits it can offer. Instead, our

general tendency has been to embrace WAC as an alternative way to reinforce the forms and skills of standard English writing instruction.

To remedy this confused application of WAC, Parker and Goodkin devote the second part of their work to a survey of current theory on the connections between thinking and language, especially the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. In Part Three, they draw out the implications for learning theory. Parker and Goodkin believe that much is gained from using the full range of language activity as a means of teaching people the content of disciplines. The final section presents brief case studies of people who use LAC and WAC to teach mathematics, applied psychology, entomology, and clinical nursing.

Indeed WAC is so widely applicable that it can easily move beyond the English department and may even alter entire institutions. That is the primary message of the Young-Fulwiler collection of essays. The workshop techniques we learned from Fulwiler here at PSC were developed between 1977 and 1984 when he taught at Michigan Technological University. The selections here, all composed by MTU faculty from several departments, demonstrate the many ways a WAC program, if undertaken seriously, can change institutional priorities. While there is some material here that will help in the classroom, the book's chief value is its account of how — despite some difficult faculty politics — MTU created a successful program. Thus it will be useful to those trying to establish a new program of their own. And for us at PSC, it will be helpful now that we are ready to begin documenting and assessing our program.

Members of our WAC Task Force, General Education Committee and Writing Program Assessment Committee will find reassurance and useful advice in Section II, "Evaluation: Assumptions and Discoveries." Anyone interested in undertaking classroom research on WAC's effects on student learning will rejoice in Margaret E. Gorman's essay, "Mucking Around," which explains that credible and responsible studies can be constructed even by those of us who don't actually remember college algebra and never even thought of taking statistics. (Gorman's advice: if you don't have statistics, you can enlist the help of a faculty statistician or educational measurements expert.)

Theory Into Practice

Every publishing season brings us new, down-to-earth books on how to use WAC in the classroom. Fulwiler's *The Journal Book* is one of the best. The journal has emerged as a mainstay of WAC practice, and Fulwiler's collection offers a fine selection of new ideas. I'd like to hear from colleagues who attempt some of them, such as the ones proposed by Verner Jensen ("Writing in College Physics"); George Meese ("Focused Learning in Chemistry Research: Suzanne's Journal") and Stephen BeMiller ("The Mathematics Workbook").

This is a good book to sample from. Last semester in Composition 120 I adapted a project recommended in Christopher Burnham's "Reinvigorating a Tradition: The Personal Development Journal." The informal, ungraded, expressive writing students did for the personal development journal led many to greater clarity and power when they came to write the more formal, finished language of the personal essay. At the same time my students were keeping their journals, we read about how professional writers use journals, deal with writer's block, develop expressive writings into formal essays, and so on. In time, many students began to think of themselves as writers rather than as captives in Composition 120 — a change I deduced from their behavior in conferences about their work. Instead of asking what *I* thought of their essays, they would begin by telling me what *they* thought and by asking my response to specific places in their work that they thought especially difficult or especially good. They became active, took the initiative in shaping their own work, which is how writers (as opposed to captives) behave. *The Journal Book* is rich in suggestions for getting this kind of satisfaction for students and teachers.

The success of last fall's journal experiment has given me the heart to try again — probably for the dozenth time — to incorporate peer response groups into my class. It's the kind of thing that sounds like it should work — it just stands to reason that students should be able to critique one another's writing and learn from the process. But so far, I haven't been able to get it to happen.

This time, however, with the help of Karen Spear's *Sharing Writing*, I

may succeed. She admits that peer response groups are usually ineffective. The reason, she says, is that students lack the social and interpersonal skills to make them succeed. As often happens in WAC literature, she spends the first half of her book on theory, relating the peer response problem to students' lack of expertise in discussing, listening, reading, giving or receiving feedback — that full range of language activity encouraged by LAC.

Spear then shows, however, that highly-polished — or, at least, much-improved — final drafts will come from groups that work consciously to improve their interpersonal skills. The second half of *Sharing Writing* explains how Spear developed such groups in her freshman composition courses at the University of Utah. Instructors interested in developing peer response in any class — whether in writing or in a content area — will find much here to ponder: many interesting revision checklists (ones that work, ones that don't); strategies for improving reading and listening; ways to teach groups to monitor their own effectiveness.

I'm planning to try Spear's method, with a few modifications, on my technical writing students in spring semester. Technical Writing is an upper division course populated by juniors and seniors, most of whom have a strong professional orientation. Nearly all writing done in a professional setting these days requires some degree of peer collaboration. So I want my tekkies to learn two things: how to respond constructively to other people's writing and how to use other people's responses to their own work. In setting up the course, I'm borrowing freely from Spear.

Making peer response a priority has substantially altered my usual way of presenting the course — one that has worked pretty well for the last eight years. If it doesn't work, I'm going to ask Karen Spear for a refund. If it does, I'll make some big changes in next fall's Composition 120 sections and some little ones in my literature courses, making peer response central to the writing course and using it to help the literature students in their writing assignments.

And after that — well, maybe I'll attempt some classroom research so I can reliably demonstrate what's been going on in my classes, and why. I'll follow Margaret Gorman's advice and find a statistician to help me design a study. Because I'm embarrassed... all that bragging about last

fall's composition students and their wonderful journals is a true account of my impression of what happened. But if you want evidence... well, I did save a few papers and some journals, and I meant to save more and do an attitude survey, but I forgot. . . .

I want to get out of that embarrassing spot, even if teaching writing means I do an algebra review next summer and take a stats course in the fall.

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