

Review

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Mark L. Waldo

Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy: Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs

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Seldom does an author attack the writers of the bible on the second page of a book, but most authors are not Mark Waldo. But Waldo has a point, and he presents it with a missionary zeal to counter the “crusadelike thrust” of expressivism and writing to learn he decries throughout his book. *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy* is a passionate, lively, thought-provoking argument advocating the specialization of language within disciplines and housing WAC programs in autonomous writing centers. The book can essentially be broken into three sections: an argument for specialization, an argument for housing WAC in a campus-wide writing center, and a collection of helpful materials for developing a successful WAC program.

Demythologizing is a revision of Waldo’s 1993 article, “The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum,” and this book-length project affords Waldo the space to fully elaborate his argument for combining WAC and writing centers. But locating WAC is not the only thrust of this book. Waldo spends over half of the book making his argument that specialization is vital to solving complex problems and attacking what he terms process-expressivism. The crux of this

argument is a good one. Faculty from all disciplines need to commit to teaching writing because without the commitment student education will suffer. Poor writing is only a symptom of deeper problems for students because, as Waldo argues, learning the language of a discipline is also learning to think within the discipline. Here is the book's strongest argument. Drawing on the works of David Russell, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Kuhn and others, Waldo makes an impassioned case for specialized language. His point is that we need specialized language to solve complex problems, such as global warming and storing nuclear waste, and only people in highly specialized disciplines will be able to provide the answers.

Waldo begins in chapter 1 with an examination of how students become immersed in a discipline and learn to "think" in it. This is the foundation for Waldo's theory, and it is well supported by scholarly research. Also, at this point, his second argument is clear: process-expressivism doesn't work at best and is detrimental to writing instruction at worst.

So in chapter 2, entitled "Saving Wordsworth's Poet," Waldo explores the problems with process-expressivism in WAC. He examines some of the historical context behind the process-expressivist "fervor" by explaining the rise of composition as a discipline and its intent to nurture the "inner self" with an either/or mentality that was founded in the works of Wordsworth – either one nurtures the self or one suppresses it. Waldo admits to evangelically supporting such ideas early in his career, but he also claims to have learned that the passion with which process-expressivists were preaching was equaled by the passion other academics had for their own disciplines. Here Waldo introduces one of the most provocative parts of the book. In an unorthodox, conciliatory fashion, Waldo attempts to reconcile disciplinary specialization with the Romantic notion of "inner self." In essence he posits that the inner self can be reconciled with disciplinary specialization by claiming that individuals choose a specialization that nourishes their inner self.

The next two chapters explore the problems created by composi-

tion, heavily influenced by process-expressivists, who, according to Waldo, proselytize writing instruction to other disciplines. Waldo challenges the notion that composition scholars are in the best position to provide writing pedagogy to faculty, something he likens to the Friereian “banking” model of education. The drawback I see in Waldo’s argument is his seeming unwillingness to consider that writing-to-learn activities can be pedagogical tools that aren’t expressivist. One might extrapolate then that computers are only good for computer science. But Waldo’s concern for the expressivist influence on WAC is worthy to note and should serve as a cautionary tale for WAC directors.

In chapter four he challenges two traditional models of WAC: 1) a model in which the English department teaches all of the writing courses, and 2) a writing-intensive model in which select courses fulfill a student’s requirement for writing in their curriculum. Waldo admittedly simplifies WAC models for convenience, as evidenced by the fourth chapter’s title, “WAC Administration Reduced to English-Only, Writing-Intensive, or Discipline-Based Models.” His intent is not to try to address every permutation that sprouts up on campuses across the country, but his simplification neglects strides WAC has made toward discipline-based models, like those at Iowa State University or the University of Toledo, and the scholarship written about them. Of the three models he addresses, he advocates a discipline-based approach in which participation by faculty and departments is voluntary.

Then, after thoroughly drubbing the process-expressivist movement and arguing for a voluntary, discipline-based approach, Waldo makes a powerful case for the autonomous writing center’s being the “last best place” for the WAC program because of what he considers its rhetorically neutral placement in the university. His argument, as he made it in 1993, is a very strong one. His writing center is uniquely situated in a university, and both the WAC program and writing center benefit from the symbiotic relationship. Interestingly (and to the chagrin of writing center directors, I’m sure), he argues writing cen-

ters “are not disciplines yet,” in essence claiming that their specialized use of language has not reached an unnamed threshold for discipline status. Still, his point is well taken that autonomous writing centers do not have some of the conflicts that arise from having traditional departmental status (e.g. colonization, faculty and course “turf wars,” etc.). In this section, Waldo claims his survey done at the University of Nevada, Reno showed that eighty to ninety percent of courses at UNR include writing. He surveyed “full-time faculty,” and I wonder if he can extrapolate that to all courses, including those taught by part-time faculty, from that data. I also wondered if the eighty to ninety percent was for courses or sections of courses. Despite questions about the survey data, the autonomous writing center is a strong choice for housing a WAC program, and he extols the benefits well.

Chapters six and seven represent a much lighter, yet equally compelling section of the book. In these chapters, he details how he has built the University of Nevada, Reno’s program to be so successful. Building off of the theoretical footing of the first six chapters, Waldo describes his process for running workshops and an unusual, yet powerful, way to perform large-scale writing assessment. The workshop approach is not unique, though the text does provide some excellent ideas that WAC programs should consider incorporating. The assessment plan involves a discipline-based portfolio project. What is special about this approach is that each department looks closely at a small, yet representative, number of portfolios from their students, and uses those texts as a focal point to address program strengths and weaknesses. In Waldo’s program, the writing center facilitates the project so faculty aren’t overwhelmed by the task and drop it. The results will benefit the departments and university while satisfying some calls for outcomes and assessment.

Waldo’s concluding chapter approaches his argument for specialization differently than in the previous chapters. He provides current examples of environmental issues, like global warming and nuclear waste storage, as evidence for why specialization is so important. But for Waldo it is more. He argues that there needs to be a greater em-

phasis on ethics when initiating students into disciplines to solve these problems. His plea here is heartfelt, and it is a powerful way to end the book. This is an argument not frequently heard in WAC scholarship, and Waldo's call to arms should be heeded and pursued by WAC administrators and scholars as an integral part of working with faculty.

Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy is a compelling read for those involved in writing across the curriculum and writing centers. It argues for the importance of disciplinary specialization and strong ethical foundations for students who will have to solve complex problems in the world. Finally, though the argument at times can seem overly aggressive, the book is a strong argument for a partnership of programs that benefits an entire campus community, and the book will therefore be an asset to all who read it.