

The Tallest WAC Expert in North America: An Interview with Bill Condon

by Carol Rutz, Carleton College

At six feet, six inches, Bill Condon literally towers over his WAC colleagues—as well as almost everyone else. Easily spotted at crowded conference sessions, hotel lobbies, and on the sidewalks of Washington State University, where he is Director of Campus Writing Programs, Bill Condon lends a presence to writing pedagogy and assessment that is truly out-sized. His influence is in proportion to his personal dimensions; few WAC directors have the range of experience and interests that Bill brings to his work at his campus, as a consultant, and as a workshop leader and training facilitator for faculty interested in methods associated with WAC, assessment, critical thinking, and new media.

Among Bill's current projects is co-editorship with Liz Hamp-Lyons of the journal *Assessing Writing*, an international journal that appears quarterly. He and Hamp-Lyons also collaborated on a 2000 volume, *Assessing the Portfolio*, published by Hampton Press, a scholarly book that introduces the theoretical and practical foundations of portfolio assessment within courses, majors, programs, and curricula. With Wayne Butler, Bill co-authored a landmark textbook aimed at helping students navigate electronic media, *Writing the Information Superhighway* (Allyn & Bacon, 1997). His work at Washington State University on writing program design, curriculum, and assessment is well known; two chapters written with multiple co-authors in *Beyond Outcomes*, edited by Richard Haswell (Ablex 2001), address the fascinating research that is emerging from the WSU program.

For the past five years, Bill has overseen Washington State's Critical Thinking Project. With grant support from Washington's Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), Bill and his colleagues have designed the *WSU Guide to Rating Critical Thinking*, the only tool capable of measuring critical thinking in student learning outcomes—and according to FIPSE, the only tool that has ever been able to show growth in critical thinking. The project helps faculty across the disciplines integrate critical thinking into their course materials and assignments, and it provides feedback on how well those materials and assignments are working, based on students' success in thinking critically in their responses. A wealth of information about this project is available at <http://>

wsuctproject.wsu.edu; Bill and colleague Diane Kelly-Riley have co-authored “Assessing and Teaching What We Value: The Relationship Between College-Level Writing and Critical Thinking Abilities,” *Assessing Writing*, 9.1 (2004), 56-75, on the relationships among WAC, writing assessment and critical thinking.

These publications, among others, reflect Bill’s collaborative and exploratory attitude toward writing pedagogy and assessment. Never satisfied for long with the status quo, Bill seeks to test and extend the possibilities for communication in the academy, the workplace, and in civic life. As a result, Bill is a highly valued speaker and workshop leader who can comfortably engage any audience while cheerfully challenging current practices and leading the way toward extended horizons. Bill is the kind of teacher who sees more in his students and colleagues than they see in themselves. His encouragement and expectations are nearly always realized, thanks to his supportive vision and positive engagement in collaboration.

At the recent convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco, I talked with Bill about his career thus far. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

CR: *You are the third person I have interviewed for WAC Journal’s series on noteworthy figures in WAC. Like John Bean and Chris Anson, your training was in literary studies—in your case, Victorian literature. And like the other two, your current professional life is based in non-literary pursuits. Your reputation rests on your work in WAC, WID, assessment, and new media. What happened?*

BC: To be honest, as a graduate student, I always thought I would do both lit and comp. At Miami U (my MA institution) and at Brown (where I earned my doctorate), I encountered mentors such as Bill Gracie, Max Moremberg, Don Daiker, and A.D. Van Nostrand, who made sure I kept both emphases going. It was the age of generalists in many ways, and I was motivated to be broadly prepared. Actually, I thought about doing a rhetoric-based dissertation, a theoretical investigation of whether reading and writing are two sides of the same coin—a topic of much speculation in the late 1970s—but that project would have required more coursework and taken longer to complete. My wife and I had a baby daughter, and finishing in a timely way was important for us as a family.

I was fortunate to work with George Landau, a real pioneer in the World Wide Web, intermedia, and more. George was just beginning his interest in technology back then, but through the 1980s he spawned a corps of graduate students who have gone on to do work that links computers with literature and writing. For me, preparation as a generalist meant attention to

media as well as content, theory, and practice.

Specialization came much later. At Arkansas Tech, I taught 19th-century British literature, but everyone in the department also taught composition. My repertoire narrowed in some ways when I joined the University of Michigan's English Composition Board (ECB), a free-standing, university-wide program that turned out to be a great opportunity for me. I initially went there in transition mode, having earned promotion and tenure at Arkansas Tech, but hoping for better career possibilities. I expected to be with the ECB for one three-year term as I sought another tenure-track or tenured job. Instead, I stayed nine years, became the director of the program, and charted a new direction for my career that emphasized computers, assessment, and WAC. Along the way, I was fortunate to work with some truly wonderful and successful people: Emily Lardner, Susanmarie Harrington, Helen Fox, Wayne Butler, Barbara Monroe, Becky Rickly, Jay Robinson, Mark McPhail, and too many others to list. As Associate Director for Instruction, I had a window into these folks' amazing teaching practices; as Director, I was able to participate in their projects. What a learning experience being "in charge" of these colleagues was!

CR: You have taught and served as an administrator in institutions large and small in many geographical regions. In terms of WAC, how do institutions differ, in your experience? Are there common issues or themes?

BC: The same issues bubble up differently—not based on location, but more on institutional culture. For example, at Arkansas Tech, the culture was that everybody on the tenure track teaches comp. No debate, no question. At Michigan, it was hard to be a writing program administrator (WPA), because the university didn't want to think it needed a writing program. Writing and writing faculty were marginalized, and the program was treated as temporary, as something that the university would outgrow over time. Viewed from that perspective, I now understand that the ECB's growth toward strength and national prominence was a recipe for competition for university resources and eventual abolition. The permanent faculty saw a bunch of lecturers in charge of a university-wide program—setting the agenda on an important aspect of the curriculum—and they didn't want the curriculum to be in the hands of temporary employees. The ECB was too visible and influential for a culture that valued senior faculty. Ultimately, the ECB was replaced with the Sweetland Writing Center, something I proposed and worked on over the years, which better fit the institution's sense of its own needs.

At Washington State, we are a land grant university that became Research I fairly recently—recently enough that many remember their days as a Research II university. The teaching mission is critically important, and writ-

ing is central to the curriculum. The university is not ashamed of the writing program, it's proud of it! Thanks to the great work of Rich Haswell, Susan Wyche, Sue McLeod, Robin Magnusson, Richard Law and others, I was able to take a newly developed position designed to unify programs that were already exciting, successful, and owned by faculty. Nevertheless, my guess is that if the program had relied exclusively on adjuncts, people at WSU might have been as nervous as those at Michigan; a long-term commitment from faculty is far more desirable than dependence on contingent labor—no matter how terrific those folks might be. In any institutional culture, it's important to know how teaching is valued and who controls the curriculum.

CR: *What trends or movements in WAC concern or encourage you at present? Where does assessment fit into WAC?*

BC: Big changes are coming for WAC as more institutions become fully engaged in outcomes-based assessment. Historically, WAC has largely served its own agenda. Now we see prominent programs—such as the wonderful program at George Mason University run by Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki—embrace assessment, faculty development, curricular development, and research. The same kind of thing is going on at WSU, resulting in faculty investment in the program's success. Look at the University of Missouri, where a huge cross-disciplinary program supported by a strong WAC Advisory Committee has been a tremendous influence. We're going to see more of this as programs continue to develop. Leading WAC programs are already serving more and broader agendas than writing. Another example is Chris Anson's program at NC State, a program that fosters writing and speaking across the curriculum.

At WSU, assessment drives faculty investment through our junior portfolio. We have multiple faculty in every department and program on campus signing off on student work for the portfolio, and over 25% of our faculty are trained portfolio readers. The whole system works toward active participation in both WAC and assessment. Consequently, WSU, like other schools that combine WAC and assessment, presents a coherent program that can respond to a department's needs to assess outcomes. In fact, the assessment itself is a ready-made set of outcomes that lends itself to longitudinal study. The book Rich Haswell edited, *Beyond Outcomes*, details the WSU assessment story. To my knowledge, it's the only book devoted to the writing programs at a single institution, and the reason for the exception is that WSU's programs were designed to serve an unusually broad set of institutional agendas, ranging from course and curriculum development to accreditation and accountability. Haswell, et al., took up a cause that was important to all the faculty—the ability of our students (and graduates) to write well—so naturally faculty invest in the programs. In a similar way, our Critical Thinking Project has succeeded by

taking up a value that faculty hold and want to promote and working with them to foster it in their students, in their courses, in their disciplines. Successful WAC programs will incorporate the larger competencies that are expressible in writing and that faculty value.

As far as my concerns about WAC directions for the future, I still see a pattern of waxing and waning on some campuses. Nationally, as Sue McLeod discovered in the late 1980s and confirmed a decade or so later, more than half of the WAC programs die when the person with the original vision leaves the program or the campus for whatever reason. We need to find ways to avoid a collapse after the departure of a personality whose energy somehow catalyzed the whole system. At WSU, we successfully dodged that bullet when a Writing Program Administrators' Consultant-Evaluator team suggested unification of our programs. The institution showed admirable vision in response to that advice, creating my position, which was a potentially risky senior hire. That investment in WAC would not have happened without the strong infusion established by my predecessors that affected not just curriculum, but institutional identity and culture.

CR: As you work with graduate students and mentor new faculty, what do you learn about their experience of WAC, and how do you advise them?

BC: People who administer and who teach in WAC programs need to learn to see over the walls of their disciplinary training. A WPA can't stay a rhetoric/composition specialist and do WAC. However, a WPA can use that grounding in rhetoric and composition and appreciate the variety of communicative activities among disciplines. WAC faculty in general have to communicate with students who are involved in many different courses and disciplines, respecting the challenges tossed at them.

I had a personal epiphany not long ago when I was assigned a course in British literature for the first time in many years. As a classroom teacher, I realized that my role was that of a WAC faculty member, not merely a teacher of literature. In that context, before those students, I had to take my own advice about how to use writing effectively to advance learning and improve my own teaching. I'd naturally taken that approach in teaching World Civilizations, a first-year course that demands a writing-to-learn pedagogy—but somehow coming to that realization in the process of planning a literature course brought the realization home. That experience reminded me that WAC directors and other WPAs need to seek out and maintain “street cred” to be effective with colleagues and students.

CR: Through your workshops and graduate courses, you teach faculty and future faculty the benefits of using new media. How do you foresee WAC and

new media intersecting? Should we be thinking more broadly about Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC)?

BC: I think about the future of WAC or CAC on two levels. First, the dominance of new—and old—media is inevitable and unavoidable. Students come to college with skills that were scarce or unknown as recently as ten years ago. Now they are incredibly savvy about computers, and they rely on them for entertainment, communication, access to information, and much more. As faculty, we have to honor our students' skills and be ready to put those skills to work in the service of our academic agendas. At the same time, our students are both much more adept at navigating visual media and much less savvy about interpreting its content. So our jobs teaching critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation are safe.

That reality leads to the second level: faculty development. How do we make the best use of what is available to us on our individual campuses? If we want to promote inquiry-based, student-centered, problem-posing, problem-solving learning in the context of media new to us, that's a big nut to crack. Faculty cannot afford to ignore the difference between the learning apparatus available to current students and the older technologies that supported their own undergraduate and graduate experiences. Fortunately, I see a positive, responsive attitude among many faculty that is innovative and open to newer pedagogies and fresh ideas about teaching and learning. I suppose the lynchpin of my own faculty development efforts has been the knowledge that all of us want our students to do well. If we grant that among ourselves, then we can work together to discover how to boost learning.

I've used computers in my own teaching since 1984. Over the past twenty years, I have seen a change among faculty at institutions of all kinds. In my earliest workshops, I spent time helping faculty learn how to turn the computers on and convincing faculty that they weren't going to break the things. A decade later, when putting your course online meant getting your syllabus on the Web and learning how to upload your Powerpoints so that students could access them after a lecture, I had to help move faculty to use the technologies to engage students in active learning, in what Randy Bass calls distributive learning. Today, though, I see a strong majority of WAC faculty teaching in a hybrid mode that combines classroom and online features in one way or another. As they gain experience with various ways to do hybrid teaching, successes build toward a new status quo that has clearly moved away from teaching methods that dominated in years past. A concomitant increase in institutional resources for technology infrastructure and staff has made the shift more comfortable for everyone. Faculty with a sense of methodological adventure are using media well, thanks to improved support from IT programs and exciting, impressive response from students.

If anything, electronic media advance the goals of inquiry-based, problem-oriented pedagogy, helping students master research and rhetorical strategies that will be useful to them as workers and citizens. The use of electronic media places students closer to the research processes in their fields, allowing them access to the people doing research before it appears in print. This level of engagement, of ongoing knowledge-making, has never before been possible to this degree. Why would they—or we—turn back?

Given the ongoing successes connected to electronic media and related pedagogical innovations, we need to make sure that our programming for faculty keeps pace with the sophistication students bring with them to our courses. To stretch their intellectual and media-savvy muscles, we have an obligation to get in shape and stay in shape ourselves. I think we'll do well to embrace electronic portfolios as our "zone of proximal development" (in the spirit of Vygotsky), since portfolios are something we know about—our familiar ground; therefore, electronic portfolios allow us to work in a familiar environment while extending ourselves in learning how to assign and evaluate new kinds of text. You know, years ago, I gave a talk in which I made a pun about "human textuality." Turned out it was an inside joke—only the insiders in computers and writing got it. At that point, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, text was still regarded as words on paper. Today, no one would disagree that a film is a text, that a Web site is a text, that e-mail is text, that a mediated space is a text—or, maybe, that the definition of text has broadened to the point that a person can be a text that others have to read. Maybe now that pun would work.

Anyway, since I first began working with computers—taking advantage of word processing to promote revision in first-year composition classes—I've felt that computers were an ally in promoting our construct of writing as recursive, as a process, as social, and so on. As word processors gave way to networked electronic learning environments like the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment and similar kinds of Web-based software, that feeling has grown. Now, with electronic portfolios, we have a tool that can help us make common cause with our colleagues across our campuses in promoting learning outcomes that matter to all of us. Once upon a time WAC pioneers like Barbara Walvoord, Art Young, Toby Fulwiler, Dan Fader, and Jay Robinson were missionaries, promoting something they felt all faculty should value. Now, WSU's Teaching Academy—a blue-ribbon task force comprising stellar teachers from every discipline—has formulated six learning outcomes that they propose all students should exhibit: Critical and Creative Thinking, Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning, Information Literacy, Communication (meaning writing, speaking, and listening), Self in Society, and Specialty (that is, depth and breadth in a major). Obviously, WAC plays a strong role in all these outcomes, and the only practical way I can see for students to exhibit them and for faculty

to assess them is via an electronic portfolio. Again, the technology arrives to enable what we want to do, almost at the moment we start wanting to do it. E-portfolios are bound to play a prominent role in WAC—and, coincidentally, e-portfolios bring together the various strands of my own career.