

# Review

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Tarabochia, Sandra L. *Reframing the Relational: A Pedagogical Ethic for Cross-Curricular Literacy Work*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2017. 208 pages.

While many have recognized the challenges of working across disciplinary boundaries, few address these challenges as generatively as Sandra L. Tarabochia does in *Reframing the Relational: A Pedagogical Ethic for Cross-Curricular Literacy Work*. WAC scholars have long explored the complex—and sometimes problematic—dynamics of cross-curricular partnerships. For instance, Toby Fulwiler recognized the difficulty of assessing WAC. Chris Anson provided a glimpse into common issues that arise when faculty from across the disciplines come together to discuss writing in *The WAC Casebook: Scenes for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*. Similarly, Martha Townsend identified the “vulnerabilities” of WAC programs. More recently, these reflections have shifted into criticisms of “missionary” (Jablonski, 2006; Mahala and Swilky, 1994) narratives of WAC that gloss over these issues. Responding to these criticisms, Tarabochia conducts a cross-institutional study that asks: “What challenges to cross-disciplinary communication do faculty face in CCL [cross-curricular literacy] contexts? How do dilemmas manifest discursively through interaction? How do participants discursively respond to the challenges they face?” (Tarabochia 6).

What I found most innovative and compelling about Tarabochia’s study is how she grounds her claims within “the conversational realities” of her participants (6). Building upon the discursive strategies already employed by her participants, she crafts a *pedagogical ethic* that can “help writing specialists adjust communication strategies to foster productive conversations with faculty in other disciplines, build sustainable relationships, and revise writing curricula amid complicated, ever-changing dynamics” (Tarabochia 6). By employing a pedagogical lens, Tarabochia effectively reframes WAC’s often dilemmic moments as opportunities for reciprocal learning and collaborative meaning-making. She draws attention to the often overlooked challenges faced by WAC practitioners while also convincingly demonstrating how a *pedagogical ethic* can help to mitigate these challenges.

Tarabochia’s methodology and theoretical frameworks are most clearly outlined in her introductory chapter. She applies an understanding of pedagogy as *epistemic* (Berlin, 1987), *reflexive*, and *relational* as an “interpretive frame” to analyze participants’ experiences (7).

Over a ten-month period, Tarabochia collects data from five participant groups from four post-secondary institutions of various sizes: a public and private college, and two research universities. Each group includes at least one “writing specialist” and one “disciplinary context expert.” She recruits writing specialists who planned on meeting with faculty from another discipline at least twice during the Fall 2012 semester to discuss writing by contacting WAC/WID administrators and circulating calls on WPA and WAC listservs. Using snowball sampling, she enlists six writing specialists with different degrees of CCL experience, including an undergraduate writing fellow, graduate teaching associate, and non-tenured and tenured faculty and writing program administrators. The five disciplinary content experts—who include a graduate student, tenured professors, and an associate dean—come from a variety of disciplines, such as communication science, chemistry, computer science, and education. By not enforcing strict requirements in her recruitment of participants, she includes the perspectives of a variety of WAC stakeholders, and offers meaningful insight into how CCL work operates across different contexts.

The breadth of data that Tarabochia gathers in one study is impressive; she collects a variety of data from each participant group: two surveys, at least two recorded meetings, and at least two semi-structured participant interviews (Tarabochia 21). She investigates how participants navigate the complex dynamics of *expertise* (chapter two), *change* (chapter three), and *play* (chapter four). More specifically, she identifies the discursive moves employed by participants to overcome unexpected challenges, which include *negotiating expertise*, *openness to change*, *willingness to play*, *reflexive practice*, and *relationship building*. Tarabochia provides examples of each of these moves in subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, Tarabochia explores one of the most complicated dynamics at play within cross-disciplinary partnerships: expertise. She asks, “How do writing specialists claim and validate our writing-related expertise and also urge disciplinary colleagues to recognize their own writing expertise and take responsibility for teaching writing in their disciplines?” (Tarabochia 29). Examining the communicative strategies participants use to “claim” or “share” expertise, Tarabochia argues for an understanding of expertise as ever-evolving, collectively distributed, and in constant negotiation. In addition to drawing attention to the sophisticated moves CCL workers make surrounding expertise, Tarabochia models a distributed view of expertise that can cultivate a co-construction of knowledge between “teacher-learners.”

Tarabochia explores how participant groups discuss and encourage change as instances of liminal learning in chapter three. She contends that, “While the objects, agents, and goals for change vary across stages of the WAC movement, a largely limited, one-directional view of change remains constant” (Tarabochia 69). Working against hierarchical or linear views of change, Tarabochia highlights moments of

mutual change between participants. She associates change with “deep” and “transformative” learning, effectively disrupting unrealistic narratives of progress that can impede efficacious cross-curricular partnerships.

One of Tarabochia’s most unique contributions to WAC is her investigation into play in chapter four. She “identif[ies] cognitive and relational functions of playful moves in CCL exchanges and explore[s] their potential for supporting faculty experiences of liminality in the process of transformative learning” (127). Tarabochia analyzes three forms of play employed by participants to communicate and relate across difference: *metaphor*, *storytelling*, and *silliness*. From this analysis, she persuasively demonstrates how play can promote intellectual openness and reciprocal cross-disciplinary cooperation. In addition to making constructive connections between WAC and learning theory, Tarabochia offers important details on the “face-to-face exchanges so vital for cultivating productive cross-disciplinary relationships” (3). Instead of focusing on the products or effects of CCL partnerships as many other WAC studies do, she provides insight into the everyday processes of those partnerships in action.

These processes inform the tenets of Tarabochia’s *pedagogical ethic*, which she most clearly defines in chapter five. She organizes the culminating chapter around three guiding principles of this *ethic*: (1) *commit to reflexive practice*, (2) *maintain a learner’s stance*, and (3) *approach CCL conversations as pedagogical performance*. For each principle, she identifies the discursive strategies used by participants to enact it. Some of these strategies include making the theories and best practices of writing studies more accessible to others, withholding advice, and reflecting on the differences and similarities between one another’s learning experiences. From these strategies, she builds practical heuristics for addressing common challenges that arise in CCL work. After articulating the interdisciplinary applications of her findings, she identifies writing center tutor training and graduate education as two areas in writing studies that would find a *pedagogical ethic* particularly valuable. Like WAC’s attention to students’ learning processes, Tarabochia emphasizes that “faculty members come to CCL exchanges as complicated people and multifaceted learners” (153). She urges us to approach our cross-disciplinary relationships with the same critical and ethical care that we devote to our classroom pedagogies.

Tarabochia successfully manages both her large dataset and the various interdisciplinary theoretical lenses she employs. Yet, I did want to know more about the contexts surrounding the participant groups. While Tarabochia states that “the impetus for the conversations varied across groups,” she provides more information on some groups than others (Tarabochia 15). For instance, in the case of Alicia and Ann, there is not much explanation on the impetus for the particular meetings Tarabochia analyzes, only on how they originally met. It seems that participants’ willingness

to decenter their expertise and openness to new learning would be influenced by whether they chose, were required, or had incentive to meet. Relatedly, I wondered how the presence of a WAC program—or another CCL initiative formally endorsed by the institution—might correlate with Tarabochia’s findings. She provides some of this institutional context in her description of the participant groups. However, more attention to the influence of these initiatives in her analysis could potentially provide support for arguments about the value of WAC programs. In addition, as Tarabochia directly acknowledges in both her introductory and final chapters, her study raises questions of power and difference that she does not address. However, I do see the potential in a *pedagogical ethic* for inspiring productive and critical discussions about the relationships between power, learning, and cross-disciplinary alliances.

Tarabochia ultimately calls for more critical reflection on “how we perceive, pursue, and measure the success of faculty exchanges in WAC/WID” (168). In this way, she echoes other scholars’ efforts to evolve WAC practices to better address new contexts, including community engagement (Guerra, 2008; Kells, 2012), linguistic diversity (Zawacki and Cox, 2014), and technological advancements (Lunsford, 2009). Her call is particularly resonant right now, given the ever-shifting dynamics of higher education. For instance, traditional disciplinary boundaries continue to blur, evidenced by the average number of different occupations a student will have upon graduation and the increasing rate at which faculty and administrators are required to engage in cross-disciplinary collaboration. In addition, globalization necessitates approaches to WAC that interrogate how learning occurs across difference. Victor Villanueva speaks to this need in “Politics of Literacy Across the Curriculum:” “While we all explore ways of helping students translate their ways with words into the conventions of particular disciplines, we can also listen and learn from other disciplines about the political economies that give rise to difference” (174). Like Villanueva, Tarabochia emphasizes WAC’s potential for mitigating myopic models of cross-disciplinary collaboration through cooperative learning. As a result, she contributes a sustainable model of WAC that is responsive to new and ever-emergent exigencies.

While anyone involved in cross-disciplinary or cross-curricular conversations would benefit from reading Tarabochia’s text, WAC practitioners will find her contributions especially pertinent. Firstly, Tarabochia’s presentation of CCL work as mutually pedagogical could prove useful to consultants and administrators as they make arguments about the value of WAC programs. For instance, her assertion that effective partnerships require change from both the writing specialist and content expert can help to dissuade perceptions of WAC as invasive. Secondly, Tarabochia contributes insight into an important quandary within WAC: “How do writing specialists teach expert processes and practices while maintaining respect for specialized writing expertise?” (53). This question is especially important given the history of

writing studies' professionalization. By resisting finite metrics for assessing expertise, Tarabochia offers strategies for expanding the locus and responsibility of writing instruction while maintaining our own disciplinary capital. Thirdly, Tarabochia's inquiry into play provides inventive approaches for establishing the long-term, cross-disciplinary partnerships that are so integral to WAC's longevity. Finally, the heuristics for engaging in cross-disciplinary dialogue provided throughout the text and in the Appendices are applicable in a variety of WAC initiatives. In particular, new WAC consultants, or those unfamiliar with cross-disciplinary work, would find these heuristics beneficial.

Tarabochia's study is an exemplar of what can be gained from in-depth analysis of the unpredictable, day-to-day processes of WAC. Overall, she successfully reframes CCL work as a "pedagogical activity," and offers an innovative approach to WAC that is amendable to a variety of contexts and stakeholders.

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