

Beyond WAC: Transforming Institutions, Transforming WAC through Deep Change

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The WAC movement has historically aimed to foster changes in student writing experiences and abilities, but few in WAC work have engaged explicitly with change theories as a way to understand their goals and document evidence of their program's impact. This article argues for WAC leaders to adopt a "deep change" approach to understand how their programs contribute to changing an institution's culture of writing. After elaborating on Adrianna Kezar's (2018) description of deep change, I identify four strategies that WAC leaders can adopt to enact deep change at their universities. This approach enables WAC leaders to change persistent attitudes that have historically been seen as obstacles to changing writing pedagogy and curriculum.

Introduction

Since the very beginning of the WAC movement, practitioners aspired to change how students learn to write through diverse approaches like disciplinary writing courses, peer tutoring, and faculty retreats about writing and teaching (Condon & Rutz, 2012; Russell, 1991; Thaiss & Porter, 2010).¹ Approaches to this goal varied by campus, leading to a "decentralized" movement with a "plethora of goals and philosophies" (Walvoord, 1996, pp. 61–62). This variety of goals has been summarized in the International Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs (INWAC) Statement of Principles and Practices (2014) as five "typical" goals of WAC programs:

- To sustain the writing of students across their academic careers;

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- To increase student engagement with learning;
 - To increase student writing proficiency;
 - To create a campus culture that supports writing;
 - To create a community of faculty around teaching and student writing.
- (p. 1)

Though these are “typical” goals, WAC programs might take up some, all, or none of them. At one institution, WAC might consist of weekly workshops run out of the writing center, while at another WAC might be a full-fledged program that offers disciplinary writing courses and houses the writing center. This variety is a benefit for individuals working to develop and sustain programs within local institutional contexts that can differ based on a number of factors: university enrollment, number of faculty, process for shared governance, or the institutional location of a WAC program or its director’s position. This variety, however, has also led to questions about what WAC aims to do. “[The] emphasis on writing as the answer,” Walvoord (1996) critiqued, “allowed the *question* to be left vague. What sort of student learning did WAC aim for? What were WAC’s central goals, beyond getting more teachers to use writing?” (p. 63, emphasis in original).

To understand what impact WAC programs have made, researchers have tended to take one of two approaches. Many WAC leaders turned to assessments of student work through portfolio programs and institution-wide assessments to determine if they were “improving” student writing (Condon et al., 2016; Rutz & Grawe, 2009; Thaiss & Zawacki, 1997; Willett et al., 2014). Other scholars have looked at the ways that faculty change their teaching practices after participating in a professional development experience (Hughes & Miller, 2018; Wilhoit, 2013). Others have offered faculty stories of change as they embrace WAC pedagogies or ideas (Walvoord et al., 1997). The sustainable WAC methodology suggests tracking quantifiable features (release time for director, number of course sections offered) that are tied to a program’s mission or goals (Cox et al., 2018). Many of these approaches focus on quantifiable data that will be valued by university administrators, but they may not help WAC leaders understand other aspects of how they make change. Without looking at faculty teaching practices in a quantifiable way, or without (only) directly assessing student writing, how can WAC practitioners know what impact their programs are having on an institution’s culture?

Developing an orientation toward *deep change* in our WAC programs can help leaders and researchers answer this question. In particular, deep change theories provide strategies for understanding how institutional cultures change as a result of WAC work, a task as challenging to research as it is to enact.

What Is Deep Change?

Deep change is the name Kezar (2018) uses to describe the fundamental transformation of an institution. It describes a process through which “organizations challenge existing assumptions and beliefs in order to align with the environment” (Kezar, 2018, p. 85). The exigence for deep changes varies. This approach does not assume there is a single exigence for change or a single approach to lead it. Instead, deep change can begin from external sources, as top-down initiatives, or in a grassroots manner. Deep change could look at an entire institution, or it might be adapted for smaller institutional levels such as those identified as loci of WAC work: individuals, courses, programs, departments, and colleges/higher units (Anson, 2006). Given WAC’s common goal to change institutional cultures of writing, deep change is a fitting approach to leadership and change that has the potential to re-invigorate WAC program practices.

Achieving deep change requires the simultaneous manifestation of two types of change: first- and second-order changes (Kezar, 2018). First-order changes are explicit and identifiable: behaviors, structures, and practices change by making “minor improvements or adjustments” that “are more likely integrated as they fit the existing system” (Kezar, 2018, p. 71). First-order change is most common in change scholarship; in higher education and WAC contexts, first-order changes might impact pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, policies, funding, and institutional structures that relate to or support writing on campus, as well as changes to the locations or processes by which decisions are made about writing. For example, a university’s faculty senate may approve new general education guidelines that require a substantial writing component in all general education courses. The university creates a committee to ensure all general education courses meet the new requirements. This first-order change impacts university policy, as well as curriculum, funding, and where and how decisions are made about teaching writing.

These changes alone are unlikely to lead to the fundamental transformation of an institution’s writing culture, however. Enacting this policy can face many obstacles. Individual faculty or entire departments resist incorporating writing in their courses. The policy requires students to write at least twenty polished pages of writing, so many faculty assign a twenty-page paper due at the end of the semester. The writing committee shares specific pedagogical practices, but faculty members resist pedagogical changes that take up time they need to cover disciplinary content. Faculty continue to complain about the substandard quality of student writing, asking why the first-year writing course is not more effectively helping students writing in economics or psychology or biology. This narrative is likely familiar to many in writing studies. It reflects the challenge of higher education’s emphasis on first-order changes. When assessment processes reveal that requiring writing in every general education

course has not “improved” student writing, this policy may come under scrutiny. Faculty become disgruntled and frustrated with assigning writing. WAC may fizzle out or die completely. Structures have changed, but they lacked something to make them sustainable.

That missing *something* is a change in beliefs, values, and attitudes about writing, or second order changes. In order for this type of change to occur, an institution—and the people in it—must “challenge existing assumptions and beliefs” (Kezar, 2018, p. 85). Rather than simply assigning writing, for example, faculty members and other institutional stakeholders may need to reconsider what they mean when they critique the quality of student writers. That is, instead of changing strategies or practices, change agents focus on the beliefs and values about writing that are held by individuals on their campuses. Instead of looking for easily identified changes, a WAC leader will document more invisible and abstract features of their university. Change theorists suggest documenting second-order change by looking at implicit indicators: how groups and individuals interact, the language used to discuss the institution, the types of arguments made for or against the change, and the relationships between different institutional stakeholders (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2018). Second order change can happen without first-order changes, but it alone will also not transform an institution.

Deep change is more lasting than either first- or second-order change alone because beliefs and values change *concurrently* with strategies and practices. Though the naming of first- and second-order change might imply a binary, both types of change are necessary to make deep, lasting change on faculty, programs, departments, and institutions. One might assume, for instance, that faculty who begin to assign writing under new general education mandates will eventually come to see writing as deeply integrated into their discipline, but faculty members can assign peer reviews and journals without reconsidering how writing in economics varies from writing in philosophy. Leaving second order change as the eventual by-product of first-order change can lead to haphazard changes as students and their learning hang in the balance. Working toward deep change makes first- and second-order changes an intentional target. WAC scholarship has several powerful testimonials of faculty change as a result of WAC work, some of which occurred over several years and in unexpected ways (Walvoord et al., 1997). Our students, however, do not have time to wait.

Why Strive for Deep Change?

Working to change both practices and their underlying values at the same time is urgently needed. In WAC, deep change can help us challenge dominant views of students and their abilities as writers. WAC programs have typically taken writing

pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment as their purview: three explicit features of a campus culture of writing that can demonstrate first-order change to documentable behaviors and practices. New curriculum, pedagogies, and assessments alone cannot challenge commonplace views of writing as a skill that leads to the production of an error-free text. WAC and writing studies have not fully reckoned with the underlying assumptions and values that lead to challenges for WAC and other writing programs. Anson (2015) suggests a few ideas about writing that WAC programs might embrace if they want to achieve deep change, adapted from threshold concepts of writing studies: “writing in a discipline reflects the ways that writing is produced there” (p. 205), “writing is a social and rhetorical activity” (p. 206), “writing can be a tool for learning or communicating” (p. 207), “improvement of writing is a shared responsibility” (p. 209), “writing in all contexts involves situated learning, challenging the ‘transfer’ of ability” (p. 211), and “writing is highly developmental” (p. 212). These ideas are some of the unstated assumptions about writing that have motivated WAC programming since its beginning.

In addition, there are several “aspirational threshold concepts” (Wardle et al., 2019, pp. 29) that serve as beliefs about writing that WAC leaders can integrate to speak back to the dominant narrative of writing, which is itself based on the supremacy of white, middle-class linguistic norms (Baker-Bell, 2020; Inoue, 2015). Among these are “writing only occurs in accessible conditions,” (Wardle et al., 2019, pp. 26–28) “writing assessment must be ethical,” (Wardle et al., 2019, pp. 28–29) and “literacy is a sociohistoric phenomenon with the potential to liberate and oppress” (Vieira et al., 2019, p. 36). Though these are unlikely to be radical statements to us, they are likely novel and troublesome to many outside the field of writing studies who may view writing in current-traditional forms (Fulkerson, 1990). As such, this variety of statements represent the beliefs about writing that our WAC programs might offer through a deep change process.

Achieving Deep Change

Deep change theories suggest four strategies that WAC leaders might use to begin such a transformative process: focus on underlying conceptions of writing, teaching, and learning; develop long-term initiatives; engage in shared, distributed leadership; and document the mundane. Existing WAC scholarship has several models that are already well-suited to make deep change because they demonstrate these principles.

Shift Our Focus from Practice and Strategies to Underlying Conceptions

Deep change requires a focus on underlying values, practices, and attitudes that stand in the way of making lasting change. Second-order change has been part of WAC’s mission since its inception as early leaders aimed to help faculty members see writing

as a “powerful. . . mode for learning” (Emig, 1977, p. 125) rather than only as a final product that “must be graded, evaluated, or otherwise judged by the instructor” (Maimon, 1980, p. 9). Early WAC models created this conceptual shift by focusing on pedagogical practices with volunteering faculty participants (Fulwiler, 1981; Fulwiler & Young, 1990). To make deep change more intentionally, WAC leaders can make the underlying conceptions that inform pedagogical practices (and other first-order decisions about writing) the target of our change-making efforts.

The Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) model is one promising approach. In this approach, entire departments work with a writing expert to name their disciplinary writing values and develop writing plans that explicitly incorporate writing into their courses (Anson & Flash, 2021). Anson (2021) describes WEC as “conceptually-oriented,” explaining that it “recognizes the power of writing-related assumptions to drive or block the integration of writing instruction across disciplines” (p. 10). This model, he continues, “is designed to draw out often tacit knowledge about writing that defines ways of knowing and doing in the discipline” (p. 10). Flash (2021) further clarifies this model, saying that “unchallenged, tacit-level conceptions of writing and writing instruction inform the ways writing is taught and the degree to which writing is meaningfully incorporated into diverse undergraduate curricula,” (p. 20). Several authors in the collection *Writing-Enriched Curricula: Models of Faculty-Driven and Departmental Transformation* illustrate the power of this approach at diverse institutions, from large, public research institutions to small liberal arts colleges (Anson & Flash, 2021). Through conversation about what makes “good” writing in their disciplines, faculty members often begin with “prescriptive assumptions about writing and writing instruction” that, once surfaced, can be discussed in more detail and then begin to shift (Flash, 2016, p. 236). These conversations enable the WEC approach to change attitudes and values while also introducing new practices as departments create writing plans.

Another department-focused model for WAC work is the Howe Faculty Writing Fellows program at Miami University, where I served as a graduate assistant director for three years. Faculty members enroll as disciplinary teams; three to four teams participate in weekly meetings over a semester. This program targets conceptions explicitly by offering faculty a “framework for thinking about learning and expertise” (Glotfelter et al., 2022, p. 15, italics removed) that draws on threshold concepts and learning theories. Participants name their disciplinary values, explore writing threshold concepts, and discuss writing pedagogy before developing a project for their department. Importantly, working with multiple disciplinary teams helps faculty members understand how their writing values differ from other disciplines on campus. In an article exchange activity, for instance, participants bring in an example of “good writing” from their scholarship. They trade with someone from another

discipline and are tasked to “look for what is similar to their own discipline’s writing, as well as what is surprising or strange, who is cited and how, what counts as evidence and how it is presented, etc.” (Glotfelter et al., 2022, p. 19). By seeing such varied examples of excellent, published scholarship, faculty come to realize that their initial definitions of good writing—frequently “clear and concise”—are not communicating what they really value.

Threshold concepts and learning theories also underscore the framework to Linda Adler-Kassner’s Opening New Doors for Accelerating Success (ONDAS) faculty development program at University of California Santa Barbara. She describes this seminar as “neither ‘WAC’ nor ‘WID,’” but “based on the idea that writing is never just writing but is instead a product (writing as a noun) and a process (writing as a verb) integrally related to epistemologies and identities” (Adler-Kassner, 2019, p. 35). Participants discuss four teaching-related domains—disciplinary knowledge, representational knowledge, empathetic knowledge, and learning knowledge—and are challenged to use those domains to develop a project for one of their courses. In one study on the effects of this program, a participant explains that he “realiz[ed] that just being able to write with a new set of terminology, or being able to speak with a new set of terminology, is difficult for students,” leading him to reconsider how he grades writing. “If it’s worded oddly,” he continues, “does that mean the student doesn’t understand it, or does it mean they’re learning to use this new terminology?” (Adler-Kassner, 2019, pp. 45–46). Unlike the previous two models, the ONDAS seminar convenes individual faculty members, not teams. Like the WEC and Faculty Fellows models, participants in this seminar come to think about writing and its relationship to their discipline in new ways.

In order to engage in a conceptual change process, these WAC leaders have engaged in *sensemaking*, a process that “changes mindsets, which in turn alters behaviors, priorities, values, and commitments” (Kezar, 2018, p. 87). This process gives institutional stakeholders opportunities to develop new language or ideas about familiar concepts as they “appreciate how a change might shape their identity and adopt the perspectives that emerge through the change process” (Kezar, 2018, p. 91). These models provide examples of the ways that WAC leaders can work to intentionally cultivate conceptual change through such a process.

Develop Long-Term Initiatives

The WEC, Fellows, and ONDAS programs also demonstrate the second principle of deep change for WAC work: develop long-term initiatives that engage institutional stakeholders in sustained conversations about writing, teaching, and learning. One-off workshops common in WAC and broader professional development activities are unlikely to offer the time and space for participants to engage in this sensemaking

process; instead, more sustained models are key to making deep change. Developing a writing plan in the WEC model occurs over a series of meetings, with implementation and assessment occurring over the next several years (Flash, 2021). The ONDAS seminar meets frequently over three quarters, and the Fellows program meets weekly for a semester or daily for two weeks over the summer. These programs reflect the principle that “WAC is not a ‘quick fix,’ but an initiative that requires sustained conversations among faculty that extend beyond a single workshop or consultation” (International Network of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs, 2014, pp. 1–2). WAC leaders stand a stronger chance of enabling deep change when they create programs that convene dedicated groups of institutional stakeholders over time. While these models focus on faculty development, making deep change a goal can also require WAC leaders to consider how best to bring other campus constituents into the conversation.

Engage in Shared, Distributed Leadership

Long-term initiatives that can reach many types of institutional stakeholders help change agents develop and tap into shared and distributed leadership from across the university. One of the most important points that deep change can offer WAC programs is that change efforts require leadership of different types from multiple institutional standpoints. There are two ways to think about sharing leadership: first, WAC programs may need more than a single, dedicated leader. All of the model programs discussed above are part of institutional sites with multiple employees. Second, WAC programs may be best suited to make deep change when they have both grassroots support and support from upper administrators.

Each of the promising models demonstrates this broad buy-in in some way. At North Carolina State University, the Campus Writing and Speaking Program that developed their WEC initiative was from “its inception. . .neither an isolated grassroots effort nor an isolated control unit. Rather, it was fully integrated into the university, working in partnership with other units in the institution” (Anson et al., 2003, pp. 29–30). The Fellows program and the ONDAS seminar are also part of a large institutional hub for writing, teaching, and learning on their campuses. The WEC model and the Fellows program cultivate shared leadership by engaging disciplinary groups (either small teams or full departments) in the process of making conceptual and curricular changes. These programs, however, also have institutional authority to guide this work. These models employ both grassroots *and* top-down change strategies, which contributes to their success both as WAC initiatives and in making deep change about what writing is, how writing is learned, and how writing can be taught.

In addition, WAC leaders aiming to make deep change will need to foster buy-in from students, from faculty across disciplines, from department chairs and academic deans, and from the provost and other upper administrators. Each of these institutional stakeholders has different leadership strategies available to them, giving programs that have distributed leadership and broad support more potential for change-making and sustainability. Integration with other units on campus is an important approach for WAC leaders wanting to engage in deep change.

Finally, WAC leaders need not be the lone face of WAC at their institutions. Deep change requires more than a single dedicated leader. Their excitement and enthusiasm can be “limited” by a variety of institutional and personal factors (Cox et al., 2018, p. 74). To work with departments and disciplines so intensively and to integrate themselves into the institution more deliberately, a WAC program may need more writing experts, which itself requires institutional buy-in and increased funding.

Document the Mundane

In order to understand if—and how and why—deep change occurs, WAC leaders need to document implicit features of their institution, including how groups and individuals interact with each other, the language used to discuss the institution, the types of arguments made for or against a change, and the relationships between different institutional stakeholders (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2018). These implicit features can help WAC leaders understand the campus “mood” for WAC or other writing initiatives, which is also an important first step in the sustainable WAC methodology (Cox et al., 2018). The power of these implicit features comes, however, when a leader is able to identify changed attitudes over time.

Institutional ethnography (IE) provides a promising methodology for documenting how implicit features change over time. LaFrance (2019) explains that IE can help “writing studies researchers to reveal the deep and often hidden investments and experiences of those people, making visible the values, practices, beliefs, and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourse” (p. 5). In other words, IE as a methodology is designed to uncover the very attitudes and values that WAC leaders need to understand their campus cultures and work toward deep change. WAC scholars can employ a variety of methods to understand how individuals engage in “work”—a term generously defined as “anything that people do that takes time, effort, and intent” (Smith, 2005, p. 229)—including “interviews, case studies, focus groups, textual analysis, discourse analysis, auto-ethnography, participant observation, think-aloud protocols, and archival research (LaFrance, 2019, p. 30). Because IE is a longitudinal methodology, these methods can be used over time to document and understand changing beliefs and values.

Textual analysis can be useful for documenting the language used by various groups to discuss writing. Institutional policies, course descriptions, and assignment sheets are just a few texts that “can dramatically order conceptions of writing and student writers, enabling and constraining the faculty who teach writing classes, what their students do, and other elements of a site of writing” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 43). Such texts reflect an institutional discourse and ideology around writing that may not share the same values as the WAC program or the scholarship that informs its work. WAC leaders may already be in the habit of reviewing documents for this language, but these everyday texts can also become the focus of discourse-based interviews (Odell et al., 1983/2022) to engage faculty in reflection and conversation about the writing they ask their students to complete.

Interviews and focus groups also offer a glimpse into the ways that institutional stakeholders talk about writing. As a new WPA, I just concluded a series of focus group interviews on “faculty perceptions of general education writing” to better understand what faculty members across the university believe constitutes the “writing program.” Every focus group interview involved faculty members from a mix of disciplines to discuss what they think students learn in our classes and how it connects to the writing they assign. The transcripts from these interviews help me understand the ways that writing is perceived on campus currently, as well as what previously unstated assumptions faculty members in various disciplines have about where students learn to write. These conversations inform my efforts to build more explicit bridges between existing writing program courses, so that our technical and business writing course faculty can more explicitly prompt for transfer *from* first-year writing and *into* students’ disciplinary writing contexts. I anticipate conducting these interviews again to help understand how perceptions of these classes may be changing.

Understanding whether and how deep change occurs requires looking at everyday documents and interactions anew. Taking care to document implicit features of the university from the initial stages of WAC’s development can help WAC leaders and researchers document attitudinal change over time.

Challenges of Deep Change through WAC

I believe, firmly, that deep change ought to be a more pronounced part of WAC and other writing programs. I recognize, however, that enacting deep change is a challenging task. Achieving deep change means a shift from the usual practice of WAC. Focusing on conceptions of writing, or learning theories, might surprise faculty members who attend WAC workshops and seminars expecting neatly packaged pedagogical strategies or tips and tricks. The main challenges to working deep change into our WAC programs, in my view, are not surprised faculty who can be excited by their own curiosity (Maimon, 2018) and empowered to make change meaningful

to *them* (Glotfelter et al., 2022). Deep change is a long-term endeavor that requires time, energy, and resources from WAC programs *and* from faculty members across disciplines.

WAC programs may find it easier to make deep change with a larger staff. One of the reasons the Fellows program at Miami University is able to enact deep change is its team of leaders, including a tenured director and full-time associate director supporting WAC on top of other center duties, and one or more graduate assistant directors working ten to twenty hours toward WAC initiatives. This team was able to lead the program, work closely with individual teams, and conduct follow-up research to understand how and why the program worked. WAC programs without a large leadership team might benefit from a “train the trainer” model, in which past participants can become part of the leadership. In other programs, working with a dedicated liaison, like the WEC program at Minnesota does, can also help distribute some of the labor of institutional change.

Institutional support, unfortunately, is not a panacea for deep change. The types of programs with the institutional backing to achieve deep change might have the most difficulty researching it in meaningful ways because of institutionalized ideologies of change. Accreditation processes, for instance, often privilege first-order changes, and related change initiatives like quality enhancement plans (QEPs) often assume change begins by identifying a deficit to improve. Even established, well-funded WAC programs may need to begin a deep change process slowly. Identifying smaller goals that relate to a broader initiative can give WAC leaders some milestones to celebrate.

Finally, deep change can encourage WAC leaders to confront whether they are living their own values. Regardless of their institutional positioning or funding, WAC leaders might begin by looking at whether their own policies and practices reflect their values. A WAC leader who wants to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts might check their program’s role in systemic oppression: who participates in WAC programming? What features of the program might be accidentally or intentionally leaving out participants from diverse backgrounds? How does the language the program itself uses to talk about writing reinscribe misconceptions of writing that might make faculty and students of color uncomfortable in the program’s space? After documenting the writing ideology manifested in their own practices and mundane texts, they can make change: adopting new language in their brochures, intentionally working to cultivate a welcoming space, or reaching out to faculty who have never attended a WAC event on campus to understand how the WAC program might support their goals. Deep change is about fostering WAC’s values beyond WAC itself; that means turning the same critical lens onto our own practices before advocating

for change elsewhere. For programs with limited resources, internal deep change is a worthy starting point.

Conclusion

As WAC leaders work to achieve their local goals, the idea of deep change provides a useful mechanism for understanding, planning, leading, and evaluating change. Too often, first-order assessments reinforce the very misconceptions about writing that WAC programs seek to change, often despite a WAC leaders' efforts. Working toward deep change encourages us to pay more attention to the implicit indicators, tracking how attitudes and beliefs about writing appear, manifest, and change in our local institutions. Though deep change is a time intensive endeavor, it does not need to be a pipe dream—nor does it need to be limited to our local programs and institutions.

Deep change also provides a path forward as WAC as a field rises to meet calls for improvement in diversity, equity, and inclusion. At IWAC 2020, a new generation of WAC scholars reminded the field of the isolating nature of whiteness and called for change. Leaders of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (n.d.) “[urge] WAC scholars, administrators, and practitioners to call immediate attention to structures of systematic oppression in their home programs; and, wherever possible, [to] advocate for anti-racist practices and pedagogies.” Understanding deep change can help us consider how to meet this call. It is not enough to suggest anti-racist practices and pedagogies. We must also advocate antiracism, look at our own programs for the ways that we further systemic oppression, and use our tools and networks to further change in our institutions and beyond. From its inception, WAC aimed to support student writers in higher education. It is not enough to help them survive in existing systems. We must use what power and authority we have as institutional leaders to change those systems. The strategies of deep change offer us a promising start.

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