



Another Whack at WAC: Reprising WAC in Australia

Roslyn Petelin,
University of Queensland

This paper will discuss the implementation of the first Writing-across-the-Curriculum program in the Australian Higher Education sector, a program I initiated at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 1992, but only remnants of which remained past 1997. Three years after the demise of that WAC program, I accepted an invitation to join another faculty at a different university, the University of Queensland (UQ), one of the seven original “sandstone” universities in Australia. My new appointment gave me an opportunity to reprise WAC at a new I institution. The demise of the first program provided lessons for the implementation of the second, but also serves as a cautionary tale for WAC programs everywhere. I will frame the narrative of demise and reprise using Miraglia and McLeod’s analysis of enduring WAC programs in the U.S.

The Place of Writing in the Australian Higher Education Context

There are 41 universities in Australia, the majority of which have been created over the last 12 years out of former institutes of technology, colleges of advanced education, and teachers’ training colleges. A clear division exists between the “Big 8” research-based universities and the others. The “Big 8” comprise the seven traditional “sandstone” universities, including The University of Queensland, located in the capital cities, plus Monash University in Melbourne.

Although there is some activity at the “writing skills” level in many of the 35 universities, there is no tradition of composition as a part of the undergraduate curriculum as there is in the U.S. There are no programs in rhetoric and composition, in or outside of English departments. My former

position was in a Communication Department. My new position is located in a Faculty of Arts in a newly created (as of January 1, 2001) School of English, Media Studies, and Art History. English departments in traditional Australian universities have, to date, specialized in literature and linguistics, with an expansion into cultural and media studies in the last two decades. As Tapper ("Partnerships" 42) points out, "in Australian universities English departments are much less likely to be involved, or interested, in cross-curriculum writing or communication programmes." UQ introduced a Master of Arts degree in creative writing only five years ago; my new position teaching academic and professional writing apparently took quite some time to set in place after it was initially mooted, as there was initial resistance to what some faculty see as lower-status "functional" writing.

Neither are there academic and professional associations wholly or partially devoted to academic and professional writing in higher education; Australia has no local equivalent to the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition, the Society for Technical Communication, or the Association for Business Communication. There are no specialized composition journals; we do have the *Australian Journal of Communication*, which I edit, but only nine writing-related papers out of the total of over 200 papers published have made it past the Editorial Advisory Board (a sample of those that have include Bright & Schirato; Durham; Knight; McGregor, Saunders, Fry, and Taylor; Skrebels; Tapper; Williams; & Woods).

There has, however, been rising interest in the issue of student literacy at the university, as evidenced by several writing-related conferences in recent years. Because of the structure of the Australian tertiary curriculum, however, these had a rather different make-up than a similar conference might in Northern America. In early 1996, a First Conference on Tertiary Literacy was held at the Victoria University of Technology. The majority of papers were generated mainly out of study skills centers. In late 1996, a conference on "University Writing Programs" was held at the University of Technology, Sydney, but the only session that was not on creative writing was a panel session on "professional writing."

Starting the Writing-across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program at QUT

Motivated by my long-term interest and involvement in writing education, in mid-1992, I responded to the university's call for proposals for teaching and learning initiatives with a proposal to set up a Writing-across-the-Curriculum program at Queensland University of Technology. In late 1992, having received an initial grant of \$45,000 to set up a WAC program, I set about laying the groundwork for the program by recruiting research and tutorial assistants. I hired several graduates of the Communication program, all of whom had distinguished themselves in one way or another for their networking skills, their writing skills, and their work ethic.

Our initial step was to design a questionnaire that we sent out to all 1000 full-time faculty across the university to determine their views on the role and importance of writing for them and for their students. The response rate was 45%, and 265 out of 450 faculty representing all the disciplines within the university expressed a willingness to be interviewed about the form that such a program should take. Of the respondents, 84% expressed the belief that writing is a significant or very significant component in their courses, and 150 faculty wrote extended comments about writing-related issues.

Of the remaining 16%, respondents who clearly revered a form/content distinction commented that they were committed to "teaching the content of their discipline" and did not see writing as important to their students' learning. A small minority was of the opinion that the place to learn writing is before university. These latter faculty would likely not agree with the notion that writing is "not an autonomous set of easily generalised skills but a very complex, developing accomplishment, central to the specialised work of the myriad disciplines of higher education, and to the professions and institutions students will enter and transform" (Russell 1).

As a follow-up to our analysis of the questionnaire answers, we gathered and examined course outlines across the university to determine the "hidden" writing curriculum. Our analysis revealed that dozens of different kinds of documents were required of students. Documents included literature reviews; research papers; speeches; letters; memos; reports; proposals; log books; short stories; descriptions, analyses, and reviews of dance, theatre, music, literature, and art events; rhetorical analyses of videotaped speech presentations; news

and feature articles; catalogues; legal briefs and opinions; advertising copy; media releases; learning contracts; short and long exam essays; journals; case studies; newsletters; mathematical arguments; curriculum materials; lesson plans; training programs; scripts and synopses; plans for public relations campaigns; policy statements; computer and other training manuals; requests for tenders; resumes and cover letters for job applications; and, of course, the standard academic essay based on research.

We designed a writing workshop for those faculty eager to learn and share strategies to integrate writing into their disciplines, which we ran as a one-day workshop in early 1993, and which we repeated the next day, attracting 98 faculty over the two days. We prepared handouts covering topics such as integrating writing into courses as a teaching and learning strategy, designing and evaluating written assignments, and document frameworks and writing genres. The feedback was very positive, with participants commenting on:

- “. . . the value of discussion with people other than immediate colleagues about the emergent issues.”
- “. . . [the] time to focus on the issue of writing. This would probably not otherwise arrive.”
- “. . . heuristics for composing and critiquing extremely useful.”
- “. . . the connection with experts.”
- “I was initially looking for quick fixes, but enjoyed having the context. It confirmed what I have been thinking and doing and offers me confidence to keep on including writing within my curriculum.”
- “. . . [the] emphasis on being systematic (without being dogmatic).”
- “. . . the workshop really stimulated me to go on and extend writing in my classes.”

The two suggestions for “next time” were for the provision of exemplary documents accompanied by a criteria sheet identifying why they are exemplary and a plea for discipline-specific workshops rather than the generic workshop that we had presented. We were pleased with the favorable response. It seemed that WAC was successfully launched at QUT.

Having made initial contact with key collaborators in some disciplines through our survey and workshops, we set about working with faculty in Civil Engineering, Construction Man-

agement, the Academy of the Arts, Chemistry, Early Childhood, and Public Health to redesign their assessment to incorporate writing, to design criteria to assess that writing, to analyse student writing to determine recurrent problems, to develop student exercises to deal with those problems, to redesign existing practices to promote WAC's philosophy of exploiting the writing-thinking-learning connection, and to develop exemplary writing models for both faculty and students by reworking samples of problematic student writing.

In 1994, we continued to expand and intensify liaisons with those disciplines and continued to collaborate with their faculty to design and to develop teaching and assessment materials; to incorporate writing-to-learn and learning-to-write strategies into their teaching practices; and began to lecture, to tutor, and to run workshops in those schools. We started to "assess the assessor" (examine assessed student writing to determine recurrent problems in that assessment) and to realize WAC's role as a forum for faculty across the curriculum to discuss teaching and learning strategies within their disciplines by holding discussion sessions attended by faculty from various disciplines. We had also formed a university-level WAC Steering Committee with whom we met from time to time to discuss the program.

In 1995, we continued in those schools and began to contact new schools. We mailed teaching material developed specifically for the School of Chemistry (in collaboration with their faculty) to all Heads of Schools to offer to develop material specific to their schools. WAC designed and developed discipline-specific writing handbooks for the Schools of Mathematics, Construction Management, Geology, Nursing, Optometry, and Data Communications. (The new schools in this list had responded to our mailing of chemistry-specific material to their Heads of Schools.) WAC dubbed the handbooks *Writes: Writing know-how for QUT's (Mathematics/Geology/etc.)* students. Each school's *Writes* was written in collaboration with key faculty in that school. For example, our School of Optometry collaborators provided us with a collection of final-year projects and introduced us to the leading scholarly journals in the field of Optometry, material that we combed through to construct our handbooks).

In mid-1995, WAC planned and executed an advertising and publicity campaign to offer a series of generic writing workshops (WAC dubbed the workshops *Know Your Writes*)

to undergraduate and postgraduate students across the university. While we were well aware that workshops of this kind run counter to WAC philosophy, we wanted to provide a writing-enhancement opportunity for students whose teachers had not implemented WAC principles in their classrooms. As in Europe, there is no general writing requirement in Australian universities, so many students had never taken part in a writing workshop. WAC mailed flyers to faculty, posted posters across the campuses, and placed one free advertisement in the university newspaper.

WAC ran *Know Your Writes* for students across the curriculum in September 1995; 60 undergraduates attended two workshops intended for 20 each; and 40 postgraduates attended one workshop intended for 20 only. WAC attributed these students' overwhelming response to *know your writes* to its carefully planned and executed campaign. WAC followed up the workshops with a weekly two-hour workshop to allow these students one-on-one access to WAC's writing educators.

The Beginning of the End

So far this has been a narrative of success. But the program did not last. What caused its demise? Miraglia and McLeod identify three factors that determine the continuation of WAC programs: administrative support and funding; faculty support; and strong, consistent leadership. The absence of any one of these can undermine or jettison the most successful program. The death of WAC at QUT illustrates this analysis. Let me discuss them in reverse order.

1. Strong, Consistent Program Leadership

Miraglia and McLeod emphasize the "importance of a WAC director with commitment, creativity, and energy." Other characteristics that they mention include "pioneering", "persevering", with a "collaborative, collegial leadership style" (55). They also observed that many of their respondents commented on the difficulties of keeping a program operating with little, if any, released time (55). It is of course difficult to analyze one's own leadership style, and I will not attempt it here. But I can comment on my situation with regard to time and energy. In 1992, when I submitted my proposal for the initial funding to set up WAC, I was already heavily committed in the classroom, teaching writing to public relations, advertising, and journalism students enrolled in a degree in Communication. I had been editing and managing a scholarly jour-

nal, the *Australian Journal of Communication* (three issues a year) since 1988. I was an executive member of the national scholarly association, the Australian & New Zealand Communication Association and was to serve as President in 1996-1997. I was administering service-writing units for around 2000 students that colleagues were teaching in other faculties. I was also in the process of writing my doctoral thesis and collaborating on my second book. My Head of School at the time, an American professor who had just arrived in Australia to take up the position, was astonished at the load I was carrying. For a couple of semesters, I was given some teaching relief for WAC, but it did not compensate for the time I spent on WAC.

Had I been able to confine my energies to my writing classes and the WAC program, and had I been given adequate resources, I have no doubt that the WAC program would still be running. In April 1996, my assistant and I had the privilege of spending time with Professor Susan McLeod, when she visited QUT. Some time after that visit, she wrote a warm letter of support for the WAC program to the Pro Vice-Chancellor at QUT, from which I quote:

What I find most impressive about Dr Petelin's work is the consultancy model she has developed. Working with her assistant . . . she has created materials that are enormously useful to the faculty in the various client schools involved in the program. From my observation of other programs across North America, the only difficulty with the QUT program is that it is too lean in terms of staff.

Professor McLeod closed her letter with the observation that QUT's WAC program was "as fine as any" she had seen. The leanness of the staff that McLeod noted was one of the factors in the demise of the WAC program. Because of my other obligations, I did not have the time to network to the extent that would have been necessary to mainstream the program and build the broad-based support needed to continue it.

2. Faculty Support

The second factor that Miraglia and McLeod identify as determining whether a WAC program will survive is the "willingness or desire on the part of faculty to accept some responsibility for their students' academic literacy" (51). Most of the faculty whom we worked with backed up our efforts strongly

with their own; we could not have asked for more enthusiastic responses from our workshop attendees. Unfortunately, the one instructor who left the classroom to do other work during a WAC writing workshop that we conducted with his students was on the university committee that decided to cease funding WAC. In committee deliberations on that occasion, he commented that he could not really see the value of WAC. After learning that we would be no longer funded, when drafting our final report, we went into our files for letters of support from our collaborators, who had earlier responded with comments such as the following:

- “As a member of the WAC steering committee, it is gratifying to me to see how far you have traveled”;
- “At the postgraduate level, where the awareness of both the importance of writing and the shortcomings of the average chemist is so much higher, the student response was stunning. If it were to be summed up in three words, they would be ‘Give us more!’”

One strategy that Miraglia and McLeod highlight is the growing popularity of “alliances between WAC and other teaching and learning programs on campus, capitalizing on the increased strength and momentum that can be generated when goals and resources are shared” (53). Unfortunately, this was not a strategy that we implemented, in part because of lack of time, and in part because we were unwilling to associate WAC with what might be considered the most obvious ally, the service units that catered to students needing remediation. We did not want to associate WAC with remedial work.

3. Administrative Support and Funding

Miraglia and McLeod also emphasize how important it is that an institution’s administrators are enthusiastic about the program—enthusiastic enough to fund it. In my case, the crucial factor was the enthusiasm of the institution’s university-wide Teaching and Learning Committee. For four years running (1992-1995), the committee endorsed proposals for funding. By 1995, key administrators within the university, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic), suggested to me that I campaign to “mainstream” WAC within QUT. Shortly after I had spoken with them, the fifth and first unsuccessful proposal for WAC funding coincided with the onset of a cost-cutting campaign by the university, accompanied by a change in administration at the Fac-

ulty of Business, in which I held my substantive teaching position. Administrative support ceased.

When the University failed to endorse the funding for the fifth year, I approached the most senior administrator in the university, the Vice-Chancellor, who communicated to the Dean on 14 June 1996 that

... we would all agree that the WAC program makes an important contribution to development of communication skills in graduates, a key skill area for employment. Personally, I'd like to see the program continue, but I don't think we can use special teaching and learning grants to fund core activity. I am willing to provide \$10,000 from the VC's initiatives fund for 1996 to continue to support the WAC program. For 1997 and beyond, the Faculty [of Business] needs to come up with alternative arrangements to continue the program.

This endorsement by the Vice-Chancellor unfortunately did not result in the WAC program's being mainstreamed into the university or being supported by the Faculty of Business.

The new Dean was in the midst of a huge re-structuring of the Faculty of Business, which serves over 10,000 students and has the largest of the six faculties in QUT. (QUT has a student population of about 30,000.) This Dean was unable to commit to the WAC mission and refused to fund what he regarded as a service to "other" faculties. I felt I could not approach all our clients (who had enjoyed WAC services for free for four years) and inform them that they would have to pay in the future if they wanted to access WAC support. With no money to sustain the program, the WAC program started to slowly unravel. All that remains now are the discipline-specific handbooks that were put together, and which are, to my knowledge, still being used in areas where WAC-enthusiastic staff have remained constant.

Another Whack at WAC

In mid-1997, the key research assistant and writing tutor for the WAC program moved to Sydney. The remaining research assistant and I persevered with refining handbooks and consulting to faculty on a small scale. In mid-1998, I accepted an invitation to teach at Cornell University for a semester. My absence effectively signaled the end of WAC at

QUT. After my return from Cornell, I was invited to apply for a position teaching academic and corporate writing, editing, and publishing that had been created in the English Department at the University of Queensland. During the negotiations, it became clear to me that taking up this position would give me an opportunity to set up a new WAC program—a pioneering step, as no English Department in any of Australia's other six "sandstone" universities has a WAC program.

Is my fledgling WAC program at UQ very different from WAC at QUT? Yes. First, I have the advantage of a committed administration. The Head of School, immediately after my arrival, arranged meetings to discuss WAC issues with Deans and Directors of Studies of Faculties (there are seven) across the university. This resulted in my meeting the most influential faculty across the university within the first couple of months of my appointment. Since then, I have been inundated with requests to contribute to the writing component of many programs and to run writing workshops for students.

Of course, it has not gone totally smoothly. The first workshop for faculty that I was invited to present was not an unqualified success. The Director of Studies of Science decided that her staff could be trained by me to run the writing workshops that she and I had designed for science honours students. She unexpectedly went overseas, so I was left to persuade about eight faculty that they could be successful teachers of writing. As many WAC advocates have cautioned (most recently John Bean in a workshop at the June 2001 conference of the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing at the University of Groningen), the idea that every teacher within the university is a teacher of writing needs to be handled very slowly. I ended up taking most of the 6 workshops myself. Two faculty observed me on the initial one and then felt confident enough to repeat the task. When the time came this semester, the Director of Studies had persuaded several others that they could indeed run a writing workshop, using the material that I had prepared.

There have been some other gratifying moments. In preparing to teach the science students, I discovered that the Head of one science department had been using a photocopied version of the handbook that my assistants and I had prepared at QUT for his discipline with his UQ students. He has invited me to take some writing workshops with his students. I was invited to give a guest lecture on engineering writing to

engineering students (an easy task as I have consulted to many engineering firms on writing-related matters). I subsequently was awarded a university small grant of \$9000 to research engineering writing (in the academy and in the workplace) and have been working on this with an engineering professor.

Will this WAC Program Succeed?

It is probably too early to predict whether or not this new WAC program will succeed. But there are some hopeful signs that help convince me that it has a chance for some longevity. First, since 1996, UQ has had in place a requirement for “graduate attributes” to be fostered in all undergraduate courses. To this end, all course outlines are required to indicate which attributes are fostered in that particular course. At the top of the list of attributes are communication (written and oral) and critical thinking. This institutional expectation emphasizes the centrality of writing for students and provides the intellectual underpinnings for a continuing WAC program. Further, WAC is not something ancillary to the rest of my duties at my new institution but one of my charges from the beginning. The administrative support and the budget that accompanies that support bode well for the future. With a writing requirement in place and a great desire to enhance the academic and professional writing of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, the university has inspired me with the confidence to launch, and I hope, maintain on a long-term basis yet another WAC program.

Works Cited

- Bright, Philippa, Tony Schirato, and Susan Yell. “Communication Meta-Literacies and Tertiary Graduates.” *Australian Journal of Communication* 27.2 (2000): 99-110.
- Durham, Marsha. “The Writing Ways of Organisations: Composition Research in Workplace Writing.” *Australian Journal of Communication* 17.1 (1990): 64-73.
- Knight, Kathryn. “Understanding ‘Discourse Communities’: A Strategy for Unlocking the Mysteries of Academic Discourse.” *Australian Journal of Communication* 22.3 (1995): 116-31.
- McGregor, Helen, Shirley Saunders, Kate Fry, and Elizabeth Taylor. “Designing a System for the Development of Communication Abilities Within an Engineering Context.” *Australian Journal of Communication* 27.1 (2000): 83-94.

- Miraglia, Eric, and Susan McLeod. (1997) "Whither WAC? Interpreting the Stories/Histories of Enduring WAC Programs." *Writing Program Administration* 20(3), (Spring 1997), pp. 46-65.
- Russell, David. (2000) "Learning to Write and Writing to Learn across the University: The US Experience." *Writing Development in Higher Education: Partnerships across the Curriculum*. Leicester: University of Leicester, 2000. pp.1-11.
- Tapper, Joanna. "Partnerships in Writing Development: Communication across the Curriculum and the Disciplines." *Writing Development in Higher Education: Partnerships across the Curriculum*. Leicester: University of Leicester, 2000a. 33-45.
- Tapper, Joanna. "Preparing University Students for the Communicative Attributes and Skills Required by Employers." *Australian Journal of Communication* 27.2 (2000b): 111-30.
- Williams, Tess. "Writing Creatively in Academia: Archetype Speaks to the Paradox." *Australian Journal of Communication* 24.1 (1997): 94-103.

Dr Roslyn Petelin teaches writing, editing, and publishing in the School of English, Media Studies, & Art History, University of Queensland, St Lucia 4072, Brisbane, Queensland, AUSTRALIA.
r.petelin@uq.edu.au