

## **They're Not All the Same: Using Disciplinary Difference to Support WAC Faculty**

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At the IWAC conference in 2012, my colleague Beth Daniell and I presented preliminary findings from an ongoing study of faculty participants in our university's College of Humanities and Social Science WAC program. We argued then that faculty implementation of WAC strategies varied in ways often traceable along cultural and epistemological disciplinary lines. This paper will share new, more specific findings from our study – now in its eighth year.

Four year ago, we cited significant differences in the pace and intensity with which professors in our WAC program embraced WAC ideology and implemented WAC principles. We couched our discussion at that time in terms of “trust” – that is, we considered how certain faculty embraced WAC with little skepticism or caution while other faculty were more hesitant and thus restrained in their approaches to adapting their teaching with WAC. *Perhaps* not surprisingly, this latter, more cautious group consisted almost entirely of faculty in *social science* disciplines, whereas more zealous faculty came primarily from the humanities.

We recognized that this disciplinary difference was significant when our research further showed that the eager humanities faculty frequently fell into one of two “traps” as they sought to implement WAC strategies: They either uncritically used so many disparate WAC strategies that they overwhelmed

themselves and their students (we have called these faculty “overboarders” in previous discussion) or they saw WAC as something so aligned with their existing perceptions of their teaching that they attempted little true innovation, instead only tweaking assignments and approaches used prior to their participation in the WAC program. (This group of faculty we have referred to previously as “tinkerers”.)

But social science faculty, because they often were not immediately “sold on” WAC’s promise to improve student learning, were instead prone to consider carefully how to implement WAC. Often these professors would design their courses by setting up their use of WAC almost as one might an experiment. During the course of the semester, as they began to note the impact of WAC in their classes, they then became more persuaded of the validity of WAC theory.

This difference in and of itself is interesting, but more important than characterizing faculty approaches is understanding how they play out in the classroom and their subsequent potential for impacting student learning over the long term.

We have continued to track patterns of difference between the social science and humanities faculty participating in our program and note that the tendency for more meaningful pedagogical change among social science faculty persists. Furthermore, our research *suggests* that such change often results in more positive results for students. Ultimately, in examining the contrasting experiences of these two groups of faculty, we identified five key actions characteristic of social science faculty’s approaches to WAC. Those

characteristics thus suggest to us a number of ways WAC programs might profit from an approach applying social science-based principles to all faculty development. Let me first outline these five specific actions and then close by describing how we are beginning to use them to inform our work with WAC faculty.

First, more so than their humanities colleagues, social science faculty readily identify ineffective current teaching practices. This is not say, of course, that humanities faculty members never discuss their problems in teaching; they often do. But it is to say that the social science professors are often more precise. For example, in one cohort of WAC fellows, several humanities faculty explained a goal of “improving discussion board participation” whereas one of the social scientists explained that her goal was to revisit each of an assignment’s three-phases to facilitate student transfer.

Second, social science faculty attempt and assess WAC strategies in far more measured ways than humanities faculty. Almost all social science teachers recount in their narrative reports specific percentages from student surveys, but rarely do the humanities faculty discuss data from the student surveys at all. Instead their reports dealt primarily with their own experiences and their *perceptions* of their students’ experiences.

Third, as I mentioned earlier, humanities faculty tend to implement “tweaks” or make additions to current practices while social science faculty attempt more significant, pedagogically transformative changes. For example, a humanities professor might add peer review to an already-existing assignment or

work out a new way to hold students accountable for drafts, but time and time again we see social scientists who have never used informal or in-class writing commit to attempting such practices consistently throughout a semester.

Fourth, social science faculty use strategies more identifiable as WAC while humanities faculty tend to favor more WID-like approaches. Social science teachers are generally more willing to revise major assignments more radically (for example, they might use John Bean's RAFT heuristic to create an entirely new final project) than are their counterparts in the humanities, who are more apt to continue to focus on traditional academic essays and make smaller, more procedural alterations.

Finally, reflective narratives provided at the end of their initial WAC semester tend to be discursive for humanities faculty yet social science professors reflect on their experience in more systematic and evidence-based ways. Sometimes we were surprised at the lack of organization in the narratives of humanities professors, whereas the social science reports often reminded us of the IMRaD format (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion), which made the organization and results clear not just for us as the researchers but for the social science teachers functioning as reflective practitioners.

Seeing how important disciplinary habits of mind are in terms of pedagogy and faculty approaches to pedagogical change, we have been led to re-think some of our own practices as WAC leaders. Because the methodical, scientific approach used by social science faculty was ultimately a more successful one, we now look to this approach to guide the inquiry and action of all faculty in the

program. What follows are the steps we have begun to take in our work advising faculty in how to approach their use of WAC.

We now ask all instructors to think in terms of an experiment or trial or testable thesis as they develop their syllabus for their WAC semester. In other words, we ask them to consider *what* change they hope to effect in their course and *why* a particular WAC strategy is the best way to address the issue(s) they have identified.

We have always encouraged faculty to be selective in their use of new strategies and not to “go overboard” as some teachers have in the past. By couching our discussion in terms of “testing out” their more goal-oriented pedagogical change, however, we now have a much more concrete explanation as to why faculty should want to control for clearer results by making just one or two distinct changes to an assignment or course.

We talk frankly with all faculty about threshold concepts; we often use our own examples from composition such as those Adler-Kassner and Wardle discuss in *Naming What We Know*. We ask professors to consider what counts as this sort of knowledge in their own fields to help them achieve some awareness of their disciplinary assumptions and practices. With this awareness, they come to realize that undergraduate and even graduate students do not automatically share these assumptions. This in turn helps faculty who may be less accustomed to thinking in more social science-like, experimental terms approach pedagogical innovation through the lens of how knowledge is produced in their fields. Our hope is that doing so will lead them to look for a clear end

result in their WAC semester and make their goals for student learning and writing clearer.

We have always used freewriting as a staple of our monthly meetings with WAC Fellows, but we now direct those freewrites a bit more carefully to help all faculty consider their WAC work more systematically and critically. At a first meeting, we might ask what specific aspects of an existing course or of student outcomes most concerns them. In later meetings, we'll ask them to describe what they will need to see from students to determine if a new strategy is working.

Truly embracing Writing Across the Curriculum ideology requires rethinking a great deal of what we “know” of writing, of teaching, and even of one’s own discipline. Our research shows that this is the kind of change WAC can invite, but that such change requires not only trust and enthusiasm, but a reasoned and comprehensive approach to pedagogical change. As WAC leaders, we too have had to rethink our beliefs about and approaches to faculty development across disciplines. We think this shift will prove a productive one and look forward to sharing those results with you at IWAC 2018.