

# Making a Difference through Serendipity and Skill: An Interview with Kathleen Blake Yancey

CAROL RUTZ

CARLETON COLLEGE

*THE WAC JOURNAL* HAS BEEN GENEROUS in offering print and online space to a series of interviews with WAC professionals. My interview for this issue, the eighth in a series that began in 2003 (all archived at *The WAC Clearinghouse*: [wac.colostate.edu](http://wac.colostate.edu)) brings Kathleen Blake Yancey to these pages at long last. If there is one *TWJ* reader who is unacquainted with Kathi and her work, it is high time that I help correct that deficit.

A graduate of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where she also earned her MA in English, Kathi began her career as a teacher of language arts at the middle school level. She earned her doctorate at Purdue University, completing a dissertation on a multivariable model of composing, and staying on to work in a couple of administrative capacities. Since then, she has taught at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte and at Clemson University, and is now the Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English at Florida State University, where she directs the graduate program in rhetoric and composition and is serving her second stint as interim department chair as well.

A fundamental appreciation of Kathi and her career begins with her broad professional experience. Over the last 30 years, Kathi has made her mark through significant contributions as a teacher, researcher, assessment maven, administrator, technical innovator, adherent of the scholarship of teaching and learning, and literacy activist on the national level.

How do we know this? Let's start with her ubiquitous, tireless presence as a keynote speaker, conference presenter, author, co-author, and editor. Her vita lists 32 keynote addresses since 1994; 55 conference presentations over that same period; 12 books (some co-authored or co-edited with various colleagues); numerous editorial positions, including co-editing *Assessing Writing* with Brian Huot for many years and her

current editorship of the composition/rhetoric flagship journal *College Composition and Communication*. The list of her articles and book chapters runs to several pages, rivaling the list of consulting and faculty development sessions all over the country—and the world. [Disclosure: I have benefited from Kathi's mentorship as an editor, both as an author of a chapter in *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon* and co-author of an article for a special issue on assessment in *Across the Disciplines*.]

Simultaneously, she has been more than fully employed as an influential educator of undergraduate and graduate students (having taught dozens of courses at all levels) as well as local, national and international colleagues, not to mention administrators, legislators, and anyone who pays attention to higher education and issues of teaching and learning. Her service to professional organizations goes well beyond committee and editorial board service to top leadership positions with multi-year commitments.

Ergo, Kathi is everywhere, operating in several spheres, and known to all as iconic, but in the most cheerful, approachable way possible. Her personal presence is characterized by a preference for black—jacket and skirt or jacket and pants—a ready smile, her phenomenal memory for names and biographical details, and an idiosyncratic, irresistible laugh that commands both startled attention and contagious participation.

Kathi's textual presence features emoticons, parenthetical asides, and italics for emphasis, all of which help convey the exuberance of her effervescent, upbeat energy. Because this interview is based in e-mail correspondence, I have preserved those textual elements that speak to Kathi's eloquence mediated by many a wink and a grin designed to engage her audience—in this case, me. And now you.

Simply put, the woman is exhausting. And inspiring. And remarkably productive as a professional while maintaining close ties with family and friends. What follows is a brief taste of the WAC slice of Kathi Yancey as a person and professional. I invite you to do a little online research to supplement this appetizer. Whereas Kathi's modesty insists that many of her contributions have had more to do with luck than intentional planning, the truth is that Kathi's scholarship matters, along with her formidable contributions as a citizen of higher education. The WAC world, among others, is a grateful beneficiary thereof.

**Carol Rutz:** You have taught in situations ranging from junior high school to doctoral programs. What has that breadth of teaching experience brought to your understanding of WAC's value as a pedagogy?

**Kathleen Blake Yancey:** One of the lessons from WAC is the value of a vertical, structured curriculum, and when one teaches from middle school to graduate school,

as I have, you see the need for such a curriculum as students develop and as their writing increases in sophistication and as it travels into different communities—which is what WAC offers, in part, those communities—so I think that’s one observation. The research on learning and transfer underscores this personal experience, of course; if students are going to transfer what they have learned, they need a place to transfer *into*, hence WAC. A second lesson is the need for a curriculum that includes both writing to learn, which is still a useful strategy for many students, and writing in the disciplines, which is necessary as students move increasingly into disciplinary contexts. I’m glad to see that we don’t see them at odds, but as ways of writing that work together.

**CR:** Can you help us understand how you became interested in writing assessment? Did your WAC experience have a role? Or did it work the other way? In parallel ways? In short, what’s the story?

**KBY:** The story isn’t all that interesting, really, but I’ll try ;) When I was in graduate school, I took a course in German for my language for the PhD, and the course grade was determined completely by how well you did on the final test. So in my case, the first test grade I received—an F ☹—didn’t count against me: I got an A on the final and an A for the course. What the professor was interested in, I understood, was how well we performed at the *end* of the course rather than throughout it, so given that aim, averaging grades was inappropriate. This was a Joycean moment for me: the next term, I introduced what I called a portfolio in my writing classes, where the grade was determined by a collection of work showing how students performed at that moment in time. As this narrative suggests, a good deal of my interest in assessment has been motivated by how assessment can foster learning.

When I completed my graduate work, I stayed on at Purdue and directed a testing center and continued to work in Purdue’s Writing Lab, so I acted as tester and coach, my interest especially in helping students pass the test. In this context, I talked to many students who were writing many different kinds of assignments outside of the test environment, and the difference between those assignments and genres and our expectations in English always struck me as a problem given how often we in English generalize about what good writing looks like. And I saw this personally as well: while we touted (and continue to tout) the value of sentence variety, for example, I saw my husband write long texts in engineering with every single sentence in passive voice—and this was what was expected *and* valued. So clearly, there was a disjunction here.

In directing the testing center, I began moving us toward portfolios (and away from timed tests of writing), and then in my first tenure-line job, at UNC Charlotte, I began meeting informally with a group of WAC faculty, just to talk about how we

were teaching. In that group, we began doing some unofficial program assessment, so that's when it all began to come together.

Interesting, to me, is that my experience with WAC has always benefited from official positions and tasks and unofficial, informal ones as well. Fortunately, I like that combination!

**CR:** You are well known for your tireless promotion of electronic portfolios as a vehicle for writing assessment as well as other purposes that serve students, faculty, and institutions. Tell us what excites you about electronic portfolios as an educational phenomenon. Is there a way to tie WAC to the work that electronic portfolios accomplish?

**KBY:** Well, as I write this, I'm in the UK at an electronic portfolio "residential seminar," which is basically an institute focused on the e-portfolio developments over here: [heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2010/26\\_28\\_April\\_CRA\\_Personal\\_Development\\_Planning\\_and\\_E-Portfolio](http://heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2010/26_28_April_CRA_Personal_Development_Planning_and_E-Portfolio). Interestingly, they include writing (!!!), in part because of an emphasis on written reflection, and in part because there is such interest in authentic tasks and assessment. So writing and e-portfolios seem a natural fit.

More generally, I'm here in connection with my work with the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research [ncepr.org](http://ncepr.org), and here too we see increasing interest in and from the WAC community. The Coalition is a cohort model, and right now we have several institutions in our fifth cohort that are looking at WAC through an e-portfolio lens, including the University of Denver and Virginia State University. In our next cohort, the sixth, we anticipate other kinds of WAC projects, particularly those interested in exploring together how we can use the affordances of electronic portfolios to create a new vocabulary for assessment. Given the variety of media we see in WAC texts—from print to posters, from PowerPoints to podcasts—and given the rhetorical situations they respond to, this will be very challenging, but exciting, too—and definitely needed.

**CR:** In the 10–12 years we have known one another, you have been affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Clemson University, and now Florida State University. To the untrained eye, you seem to have taken on progressively more complicated and responsible positions with a wide variety of expectations. What has been attractive to you in various academic situations?

**KBY:** I have loved each of them, and you're correct in thinking that each has offered different opportunities, but I hasten to add that the opportunities often developed serendipitously.

At UNC Charlotte, I loved the ability to focus on teaching and to teach so many diverse kinds of classes, from first-year composition, advanced composition, and methods

for pre-service high school teachers to graduate classes in rhetoric, in assessment, in the college teaching of English as well as a team-taught honors class on the technologies of peace and war. What a treat! And through the wonderful colleagues I met, I discovered a number of informal opportunities that were fabulous: a chance to work with faculty to develop WAC-like classes and program portfolios in the honors program, for example, and a chance to co-lead teaching circles. And some of this work has been published as well, so the intersection between teaching and research was generative.

At Clemson, I loved the CAC [Communication Across the Curriculum] efforts, of course, but it was only because Carl Lovitt left that I had the chance to lead the Pearce Center. And what a treat that was, to work with terrific colleagues across the campus; to develop the Class of 1941 Studio for Student Communication and to open it with the help of our undergraduate Studio Associates; to learn from the architecture students on whose graduate committees I served. Again, I had many, many opportunities, although in this case, they were more institutionalized in the way I'd put it.

And then here at Florida State, where I signed on to lead our graduate program in rhetoric and composition, which has worked wonderfully well, but where I have also spent 1.5 years serving as interim chair of the department. Whew! Fortunately, I'm just now moving back to directing the program full time, and that's yet another treat. The attraction here was to return to the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and in part, I think, to bring what I had learned at UNC Charlotte and at Clemson to the study of rhetoric and composition with faculty and graduate student colleagues. So we created a Digital Studio, for example, nearly two years ago, Florida State's first, and we are working with several colleagues to open a 17,000 square foot learning center, where we will have a third site of our writing center and a second digital studio. Several doctoral students are studying transfer in college composition, so they are getting a first-hand look at WAC classes here, which is also wonderful because FSU is a very writing-friendly place.

**CR:** To my knowledge, you are the only person who has held the top elected leadership positions in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the National Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). How does the work of those three organizations overlap or provide congruence for WAC professionals?

**KBY:** Great question! NCTE provides a through line from elementary classrooms where WAC is natural and normal to middle and high schools with literacy coaches working with teachers across the curriculum and then college with all our activities. CCCC focuses on the postsecondary level, linking both practice and research, and CCC, the journal, also plays a role, with the Melzer article in the December issue (looking at

assignments across the curriculum) and the Thaiss and Porter WAC program article in the February issue, for example. WPA, it seems to me, focuses more on the administrative angle, as the name of the organization suggests, and it does so more in the context of programs, so it has yet another perspective. Each one, it seems to me, offers a piece of the larger puzzle, so to understand WAC in its contexts, practices, and research, one needs all three.

**CR:** If you were to design a research agenda for higher education that draws upon the resources of WAC curricula and faculty, what would that agenda look like?

**KBY:** Right now the national government is very interested in alignment, i.e., in connecting different levels of education. I'd love to see us take that interest seriously. What would that mean? Perhaps taking up a question around how we'd design first-year composition on the basis of what we see in WAC and WID programs. Perhaps mapping the multi-disciplinary universe of composing. I'm thinking here of how writing looks when we work with faculty in new ways; we see an example of that in Pamela Flash's WEC (writing enriched curriculum) work at Minnesota: just go to the web site to see the vast array of writing plans, genres, processes, and outcomes. It's a treasure. I'd love to see more of this work so that we had a working map of what writing across the curriculum actually looks like. Perhaps more research focused on transfer, which underlies all of education: what makes it work, and what impediments can be identified? We do know some about this, but with some research funding, we could know so much more. And study as well of our alums: what have they found useful and what intersections between school and work do they see and how might those inform our own programs?

**CR:** What question(s) do you wish I had asked?

**KBY:** Oh gosh, I'm not sure. I think you hit the high points! But perhaps one about the recent WAC conference, since we're finishing the interview as the conference concludes. It was just wonderful, and I'd like to highlight three dimensions of it that I found particularly praiseworthy (if I can put it that way).

- One is that there was such a great mix of experienced WAC teachers and scholars—from the keynoters Art Young and Terry Zawacki to Neal Lerner, Chris Anson, and your own self!—and newer scholars. Such a mix helped us see both past and present not as competition but as a continuum, and it speaks to the health and future of the field.
- Second is that the sessions themselves spoke to newer questions being raised, and for me one of the most intriguing had to do with questions about genre that are being revisited and newly created: do we need to teach it explicitly, for instance, and

what role if any does prior genre knowledge play in new learning? I went to several sessions focused on that. The field itself is becoming more sophisticated, I think, too. Now, we'd expect that, but it was good to see ;)

- Third and not least, I was glad to see how writing continues to capture the attention of higher education; for example, there was a session on the NSSE questions at WAC and a meeting on that as well, both focused on new writing questions that might be permanently added to the NSSE. Again, we believe that writing is critical to intellectual development, but it's great (1) to see that others out of field do; (2) to have such a claim institutionalized; and (3) to be consulted on what those questions might look like, especially from a WAC perspective because then we're more likely to have a fuller and more complex conception of writing.

In closing, let me say thanks for the lovely write-up, Carol. Very generous on your part, and on mine very fun to think with you about some of what all this might mean!

#### **WORKS CITED**

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