



Writing To Learn To Do: WAC, WAW, WAW — Wow!

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I've heard lots of reasons offered for the surprising success of WAC over the last 27 years. But you know, the I think it's the acronym. WAC. Have you ever had colleagues good naturedly kid about the acronym. "This is WACy!" There is something a little crazy about this whole thing.

In 1984, when the WAC movement was 14 years old, I first started researching the history of attempts to improve students' writing across the curriculum, dating back to the beginnings of mass education in the waning years of the nineteenth century (Russell). What struck me most often and most forcefully then was that the WAC movement had lasted longer—and involved far more students and teachers—than any previous attempt to improve writing across the curriculum—and there had been many, I found.

Now in 1997, as we celebrate the 27th anniversary of WAC, and we look at mass education in the waning years of the twentieth century, what still strikes me most often and most forcefully is that the WAC movement has lasted longer—and involved far more students and teachers—than any previous attempt to improve writing across the curriculum. And unlike so many other educational reform movements, it's still growing, as this conference attests—dramatically. WACy!

So I think the big question for the future of WAC is "In what directions shall we expand?" Expand where, how—and with whom? Because there's every indication that WAC will expand, as it has for 27 years now, since Barbara Walvoord began what was, as far as we can tell, the first faculty writing workshop at Central College, in Iowa, just down the road from where I teach in Ames.

I agree completely with Barbara Walvoord, when she says in her recent *College English* article on the future of WAC, that we must not focus too much of our attention on the enemies of WAC, present and potential, but instead focus on our allies, present and potential. We've got to be open to new and more powerful ways to expand our connections, our network of influence. Influence for good.

This doesn't mean that we have to play Pollyanna and ignore the serious challenges that face us, in our classrooms, our departments, our campuses, our legislatures. Because we all know that those challenges are there. And it's at meetings like this that we can learn from others and expand our professional and personal networks to help us meet those challenges.

But we mainly need to celebrate our accomplishments, our amazing history, not for pointless self-congratulation, but to realize the enormous possibilities in WAC. I just want to point out two directions for expanding that our history suggests, realizing that each one of us here in this room could also point to possibilities for expanding. (And also realizing that for those of us who do WAC, burnout from overwork is never more than a semester away.)

Writing Across Workplaces

The first direction is expanding into those workplaces that our students will enter and, eventually, in this fast-changing culture—transform. That's why we're doing this work in the first place, isn't it? To help students learn by expanding, as Yrjö Engeström puts it, to empower students to enter and transform those workplaces—to change those students and those workplaces for the good. So studying the ways writing is used in workplaces, consulting with people in workplaces about how to use writing more effectively and ethically, can expand our usefulness, our social credit as experts in writing and learning—and our social credit as an educational reform movement. (It can also teach us a very great deal about how to construct our assignments and our courses and our day-to-day interactions with students.) Because WAC is not only about writing to learn, it is also about writing to learn *to do*—with others. Active learning means expanding our students' and our own involvement with other people, with powerful social practices—disciplines, professions, institutions, communities, organizations of all kinds where writing can be transformed and transformative.

Research into workplace writing is well under way—as it was not fifteen years ago, when we knew very little about writing in academic research, in government, business, industry, and non-profit advocacy and community organizations (Peck). From the pioneering research by Lee Odell and others on writing in “non-academic settings,” as it was called, to the pioneering work of Bazerman and others on writing in academic research (which is of course another workplace), this research has become a major direction, increasingly acknowledged as valuable in other fields. It is, I think, a milestone that there is a wonderful new series of books, published by Erlbaum, reporting research on how writ-

ing works in worlds of work, and how students come to enter and transform them. The first in the series, by Dorothy Winsor, is a superb longitudinal study of five engineering interns as they moved into the workplace. And another milestone, I think, is that Susan Peck MacDonald's study of professional academic writing in the humanities and social sciences won the CCCC best book award last year.

Research has opened doors for the expansion of WAC programs into workplaces, and this is already going on, through service learning, consulting, and a host of other ways. It's terribly exciting. People in business, government, and non-profit organizations are often eager to invite in people with expertise in written communication (and they often have grant funding money, I might note in passing). We need to recognize and celebrate the fact that we have expertise that is real and valuable—and real valuable.

I am thinking of the work in finance at Clemson, or the work with a range of businesses at Robert Morris, or the work with community activist groups at Carnegie Mellon (Peck). And there are a many others. At Iowa State, for example, we're funded for two years from the US Department of Agriculture to research writing in typical government, business, and non-profit workplaces, and construct a Web site of materials to help students and teachers *and* workplace professionals understand the functions—and importance—of writing and other communications media in their work.

Through research, consulting, internships, practicums, service learning, distance learning, on-line writing centers, and myriad other kinds of involvement with worlds of work, WAC can expand its influence for good (Adler-Kassner). We must remember that learning to write and writing to learn are valuable in so far as they help us and our students *to do* important things with others, not only in school but beyond school, to make a difference in the worlds students will enter—and eventually remake. That is the progressive vision of active learning that is ultimately what WAC is about.

So that's one direction for WAC. And by the way, writing across workplaces also gives us a great new acronym. WAW. Which I suggest we pronounce WOW.

Writing Across the World

A second fascinating direction WAC is expanding is into other nations. Really. Now in one sense, nations outside North America already have writing across the curriculum, because students are assessed on the basis of their extended writing in the disciplines. And they have virtually no composition courses, as we do, that try to teach writing in general. But as the pressure in other nations mounts to admit students

from previously excluded groups—working class students, students of color, and women—educators are finding that they need structures for supporting those students, and the faculty who work with them. They are finding they need something like WAC—in our sense of it.

In England, for example, at Lancaster University, a support center originally designed to help international students learn English began a very effective program to involve faculty in the disciplines in helping them. The faculty got together and talked over the needs of the students, then held workshops for them. The tutors in the support center began offering help on writing the specific discourse of the various disciplines. Then a very interesting thing happened. When English working class students saw how effective it was for international students, they began attending the sessions. In essence, the faculty employed the idea of WAC to make a difference for non-traditional students (Ivanic).

In South Africa, academic support units, emphasizing writing, are springing up in universities and secondary schools, which have enrolled vast numbers of new students with the fall of apartheid. At the University of Cape Town, I understand they even have a kind of writing-mobile, like a book-mobile, to offer tutoring and consulting services to students and faculty across the curriculum and across the city. Students can get help with writing—and essential materials that are often unavailable in schools sorely in need of them.

Similar movements to understand and use writing for learning in the disciplines are springing up around the world. Australia and New Zealand are becoming pioneers in WAC research and program development (Radloff and Samson). There is a growing movement toward writing centers in nations that have traditionally been highly selective in admission to higher education and have now begun admitting non-traditional students. I understand there are even writing centers in France.

Innovators around the world are beginning to look to North American writing research and practice for ideas, for inspiration, in their search to build more effective and more inclusive education. So I think we need a new acronym for writing across the world! WAW—which we might also pronounce WOW!

Conclusion: First Principles First and Last

Educators in other nations look to us because what we have built in 27 years is certainly inspiring. WAC has expanded because it meets a deep need of people in modern societies, to connect with each other. That's what writing does, isn't it? It connects us to one another in powerful ways. And by learning to write in new ways, students are expanding their involvement with different worlds that make up our world. We're finding

ways to help students enter and eventually transform powerful organizations of people, lives linked by the written word, in ways so pervasive and daily that we forget sometimes how powerful writing is to our futures—and the futures of our students. So if students learn by expanding their involvements, so too must the WAC movement learn by expanding, as it has for a quarter century now. The future of WAC, like its past, is about forging alliances, expanding with new connections. And I'm terribly optimistic about its future.

As Barbara Walvoord pointed out, WAC—like so many other movements—may be transformed through its alliances and involvements into something that looks very different than the movement looks today. It might not even be called WAC. But the deep principles on which the WAC movement was founded, and to which it has persistently held, should continue to undergird whatever new transformations we create. These principles were articulated beautifully on Thursday by Elaine Maimon, who has done as much as—perhaps more than—anyone to make the modern WAC movement what it is. Here they are:

- Writing is a complex process integrally related to thinking.
- WAC means active learning across the curriculum.
- Curriculum change depends on scholarly exchange among faculty members.
- Writing helps students make connections.
- WAC helps faculty members make connections, with students and with each other.
- WAC leads to other reforms in pedagogy, curriculum, and administration.

The first is a truism (and we have the WAC movement to thank for making it so). The second emphasizes *active learning*. The third, fourth, and fifth are about *connecting*, expanding. And the last is about the change for good that can come when we actively learn by expanding, connecting. Whatever changes—transformations—we and WAC will experience, in the next 27—or 54—years, whether across the curriculum, across workplaces, or around the world, I hope we will hold to these principles and continue to actively learn by expanding our connections with others. Then we can always be a little amazed at the movement, at ourselves. And say it's wacky. Wow!

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