**A Short History of the WAC Movement**

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Today many colleges and universities boast strong WAC programs. These programs often feature a generous number of “writing-intensive” courses spanning the breadth of the curriculum, a fixed number of which each student must take before graduating. At most schools these courses’ instructors must apply to receive the “writing-intensive” designation, attesting that the copious amounts of writing in such a course will be supplemented by discipline-specific writing instruction and opportunities for revision. These courses are often highly valued by university administrators, and instructors may be given regular opportunities to take part in training program to help them teach writing in their courses. WAC is on the map.

This wasn’t always the case. For much of the past writing played only a subsidiary part in disciplinary coursework. Before the late 19th century the role of most American colleges was similar to that fulfilled by modern liberal arts institutions, with highly generalized course offerings that granted students holistic interdisciplinary training. Up until the Civil War, the purpose of a college education was to prepare students, most of whom were members of society’s economic and cultural elite, to engage in professional careers as doctors, lawyers, and members of the clergy. Disciplinary specialization at the undergraduate level was rare. A student’s undergraduate education helped him (it was almost unfailingly a “him”) master classical rhetoric and other generalized scholarly skills.

**The Early Years: New Writing and New Writers.** All of this changed in the second half of the 19th century. In 1862 the U.S. Congress passed the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act. This legislation led almost immediately to the establishment of an enormous number of colleges and universities whose explicit mission was to prepare students to pursue careers in a wide variety of disciplines in the natural and social sciences, with specific emphasis on agricultural and mechanical arts. (See Chapter 12 of Rudolph, 1990 for a thorough discussion of the Morrill Act’s effects.) Many of the institutions founded during the post-Civil War period were modeled on the German university, in which disciplinary courses were spread across distinct departments. At such schools, after taking an initial year or two of courses in a school’s “core curriculum,” students would specialize by enrolling in courses designed to give them expertise in one or another particular field.

Then, as is the case today, each discipline had its own discourse, its own rhetoric, and its own of writing. Neither in the disciplines nor in the general curriculum were students given specific instruction in writing, rhetoric, or composition. Rather, it was simply assumed that students would enter college with some baseline writing ability, and that they would develop their disciplinary writing skills through imitation and practice, as though the students were to be “apprenticed” to their instructors.

This system functioned well as long as most students came to college having completed a secondary education that equipped them with solid communication skills. As you might imagine, the system began to falter and fail when college education became accessible to a broader segment of the population, many of whom lacked the pre-college preparation the social elite had had. College enrollment was indeed skyrocketing: in the wake of the Civil War the nation, invigorated by new urban and industrial growth and unprecedented material wealth, had a new need for a more “democratized” system of higher education open to a growing middle class. The new generation of college students were often less well-prepared than their predecessors to write at the level their professors expected. These students would need help if they hoped to bring their writing skills up to speed.

In response to this need Harvard University, then, as now, one of the nation’s leading institutions, developed the first comprehensive writing program. This course of study, developed by Harvard alumnus Adams Sherman Hill, comprised a number of courses in rhetoric, literature, and writing “forensics.” (John C. Brereton’s *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History* presents an excellent picture of this program in its early years; see pages 33 ff.) Students were placed in this program according to their performance on entrance examinations that tested the skills they’d developed during their years in preparatory schools. Given their traditional focus on classical languages and mathematics, these schools often gave students inadequate preparation for writing in English, and university instructors lamented students’ poor performance on entrance exams.

Harvard’s faculty were hardly alone. At dozens of colleges and universities nationwide, professors complained of students’ insufficient writing skills. One widely-adopted solution was to introduce a first-year composition course, now a bulwark of the college curriculum. According to Bazerman, et al. (2005), “this course separated writing from the subject matters and career orientation pursued by students, and aimed at developing general writing skills based on a model of general cognitive faculties” (p. 16).

At that time there were a few college faculty members who recognized the importance for instruction in disciplinary writing, but for the most part their work was pushed aside by greater and greater demands for disciplinary specialization. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw technology advance at a dramatic pace. As students needed increasingly more focused training in order to keep up with the ever-changing content of their disciplines, increasingly little attention was paid to the development of their communication skills. Students still mastered discipline-specific writing conventions through the apprenticeship of imitation and practice, and aside from a handful of technical writing and business writing courses, explicit disciplinary writing instruction was practically nonexistent.

**Breaking Through Disciplinary Barriers: Early WID and WTL.** In the 1920s and ‘30s teachers of writing began to recognize the following fact: it is difficult to inculcate solid writing skills in the few months of generalized writing instruction students receive in a first-year composition course. To help them become effective writers, instructors would have to give students many opportunities to write, and in many different settings. In the widely-read *English Journal* Oscar J. Campbell of Columbia University wrote an article, “The Failure of Freshman English,” attacking the mechanistic methods of writing instruction applied in first-year composition courses and calling for a more diversified and distributed writing curriculum. There he insisted “what your students need is not more instruction in writing but a few teachers of geology who are capable of describing not only geological phenomena but also of teaching their students how to think consecutively and logically about geology” (Campbell,181, cited in Bazerman, et al., 2005, p. 18). Here we see hints not only of writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines, but also writing-to-learn.

As time went by, the need for more broadly distributed writing instruction grew stronger still. The World Wars brought yet greater technological advancement, and with this advancement came yet more specialized modes of writing. Moreover, in the aftermath of World War II hundreds of thousands of Americans, many with relatively weak secondary school preparation, enrolled in college courses under the GI Bill. More than ever before there was a need for diversified writing opportunities.

It was in this culture that “communication” was first studied systematically as a formal scientific discipline. Connections were found between language and critical thought, and at last it was recognized that language is more than a means of communicating; it is moreover a means of thinking, learning, and understanding. This thesis was put forth most famously by thinkers like Lev Vygotsky (1962), and even before him Piaget (2002), who distinguished between egocentric speech and socialized speech in children. While the latter type of speech is meant to communicate with others, according to Vygotsky the function of the former type is “thinking aloud, keeping a running accompaniment, as it were to whatever [the child] may be doing” (1962, p. 15). He goes on to assert that egocentric speech does not remain an accompaniment; rather it soon becomes an “instrument of thought” as the speaker begins to plot out solutions to whatever problem is presented him (p. 16). In this way language plays an integral part in critical thought, problem-solving, and concept formation. It is worth noting that Vygotsky placed special emphasis on the development of scientific concepts, the subject of an entire chapter of *Thought and Language*.

Much of this work in communications theory was going on outside of the United States. For instance, James Britton and his contemporaries in British composition studies introduced their ideas to an American audience in the late 1960s. These scholars placed great value on students’ “expressive” (personal and reflective) or “poetic” (creative) writing, in contradistinction to the “transactional” writing students had traditionally focused on. This latter form of writing is concerned with persuasion: successful transactional writing requires a strong thesis which is defended with argumentation and evidence. On the other hand, expressive writing, championed by Britton and his colleagues, is concerned with exploration, thought, and discovery. It is informal, unstructured, and even playful. It is writing done to learn.

Britton’s *Language and Learning* (1970) played a seminal role in the writing to learn movement. This book built on the works of Piaget and Vygotsky by outlining the way children and adolescents used writing as a “sense-making” means of understanding the world around them. Language in general, and written language in particular, are for Britton tools for understanding as much as they are for communicating. Britton and others (like Emig, 1971 and Martin, 1976) rejected the more mechanistic approach to writing instruction favored in American school in the middle of the last century. These scholars placed more value on what Britton called “expressive writing,” writing through which the author could articulate and organize his own personal experience. Britton and his colleagues brought their ideas to American academic audiences and put new force behind WAC efforts. Notably, the title of the chapter “Language Across the Curriculum” in *The Bullock Report*, to which Britton contributed heavily, even gave the WAC movement its name.

Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s attention was paid to the cognitive benefits of specific writing tasks (notetaking, for instance). Experts on academic writing soon recognized that students who engaged in “active” study practices, like outlining, summary writing, or guided journaling, learned course content more fully than students who merely read or studied without taking notes. Through writing students were able to increase their ability to recall, synthesize, and make sense of the information they learned. Soon a number of scholars like Britton, Janet Emig, Toby Fulwiler, and Peter Elbow led others in the development of countless low-stakes writing techniques. These techniques were not designed to help the writer communicate her ideas; very often no one but the writer will ever read what she’s written. Rather, these techniques were designed to help the writer organize her ideas or make sense of them in some other way. Through the very act of writing the writer explores potential arrangements and arguments.

**WAC Comes of Age: Official Recognition.** During those same decades administrative support for WAC programs increased substantially. This was in part a response to broader educational movements like open admissions policies guaranteeing college enrollment to all high school graduates. Frequent fervent calls for reform had been made, sometimes in mainstream periodicals like *Newsweek* (see Sheils, 1975). College and university administrators responded by redesigning curricula to expose students to writing instruction at every opportunity.

With Carleton College’s foundation of a formal WAC program in 1975 (see Maimon, 1982), the WAC movement began to receive “official” administrative recognition. In the next few years several other schools, including Beaver College (PA), Michigan Tech and Michigan University, the College of Great Falls, Assumption College, University of Tampa, and Pacific Lutheran University, started similar programs (Maimon, 1982). While it enjoyed newfound success at these schools and others, the movement also suffered from growing pains, as it was hard for proponents of WAC to stay in touch with one another. A grassroots movement had become global, and the many disconnected communities within it had yet to find an efficient means of keeping in contact. Moreover, as Elaine Maimon (1982) pointed out, even ardent WAC adherents had to overcome their tendencies to work in isolation from one another. She closed this essay on a hopeful note, however: “We have developed strong momentum for our explorations. These explorations beyond our own disciplinary boundaries have helped us to understand our home territory more richly” (p. 72).

That momentum remains, and with it the WAC movement has made great strides in recent years. Since the mid ‘70s hundreds of more schools have instituted WAC programs, and the faculty and staff in these programs enjoy the benefits of a stronger-than-ever communication network. Several academic journals (such as *WAC Journal* and *Across the Disciplines*) publish a wide variety of scholarship related to WAC. Prominent regular conferences on WAC (such as the biannual International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference) offer scholars from all disciplines a chance to share their ideas with one another. Websites like the WAC Clearinghouse (maintained by Colorado State University at wac.colostate.edu) serve as catch-all collections of WAC resources available to teachers and researchers around the world.

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