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# Writing Across the Curriculum in Historical Perspective: Toward a Social Interpretation

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Literacy instruction or the lack of it has a wide range of social consequences—political, economic, cultural. These consequences are most obvious when the members of some community are forbidden by law to learn to read—as, for example, blacks were in states of the antebellum South—in order to prevent them from raising their social standing and posing a political, economic, or cultural threat to the dominant community. More subtle but equally pervasive consequences stem from restrictions on advanced forms of literacy. In modern urban-industrial society, less visible barriers to achieving advanced literacy also preserve the integrity and status of existing communities and limit access to coveted social roles. That process, however, like modern society itself, is much more complex than the crude legal bans on literacy common in agrarian societies.

The recent discussion of the university as discourse community, and of the role of rhetoric and writing instruction within that community (see Bizzell; Bartholomae), offers a useful framework for tracing one aspect of this complex process. In this essay I will explore in its broad outlines the history of what is now called Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), using the analogy of the university as discourse community, in order to place the WAC movement in historical perspective and to begin to assess its significance for advanced literacy. For though the phrase writing across the curriculum is relatively new, dating from the early 1970s, the idea of sharing responsibility for writing instruction forms a recurrent theme throughout the history of the American university. There have been literally hundreds of cross-curricular writing programs since the turn of the century at institutions of every type. Indeed, each generation has produced its own versions of cross-curricular writing programs, yet none, except perhaps the last, has made a permanent impact on the modern university curriculum or on literacy in America.

This tradition of reform (oxymoron intended) is, I suggest, an important manifestation of what Mike Rose has called the “myth of transience,” the belief

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within the American university “that if we can just do x, y, and z, the problem [of poor student writing] will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work” (355). The myth of transience, Rose goes on to say, preserves the status quo by keeping academia from recognizing certain fundamental institutional structures and attitudes which prevent the permanent changes that reform measures are designed to effect.

I will argue that cross-curricular writing instruction has never made a permanent impact on academia for two structural reasons. First, it resisted the fundamental organizing principle of modern academia, the compartmentalization of knowledge. Second, it upset the usual methods of regulating access to coveted social roles by challenging the convenient assumption that writing is a single, generalizable skill, learned (or not learned) outside a disciplinary matrix—in secondary school or freshman composition—and not related in any discipline-specific way to the professional roles associated with a discipline. In the absence of conscious, discipline-specific writing instruction, students whose language backgrounds allowed them to learn the discourse of a discipline without such instruction were more likely to enter successfully the professions associated with it; those students whose backgrounds made conscious, discipline-specific language instruction necessary were much less likely to succeed. But because the function of language in this sorting was thought to be generalized, transparent—a matter of prior instruction, aptitude, intelligence, or dedication rather than conscious, discipline-specific teaching—faculty rarely felt responsible for addressing the issue of language and access to professional roles.

Like other educational reform movements, cross-curricular writing instruction was accepted in principle (“Every teacher should teach writing” is one of the oldest saws in American academia), but in practice, reforms were absorbed and transmuted by the system they resisted. In this way reformers’ ideas lost their power for change and instead merely reinforced the myth of transience, a process educational historians have long noted in other areas (see Tyack, Katz, Botts).

### **Community or Communities?: The Origins of Modern Academia**

Let me begin with two implications of the concept of community (a discourse community or any other kind). First, community implies unity, identity, shared responsibility. Second, it implies exclusion, restriction, admission or non-admission. For without some standard, some demarcation, identity and community are meaningless. Within a discourse community those standards of inclusion and exclusion are, by definition, linguistic: the one who uses language the way we do is one of us. In a very real sense, education is initiation into a discourse community, a process of learning how to use language in a certain way to become accepted, literate, or, as is often the case in American higher education, credentialed in some profession.

The problematic nature of the modern academic discourse community in large part explains the American university’s century-long flirtation with cross-

curricular writing. In a recent review of WAC textbooks, Patricia Bizzell concludes with two crucial questions: “Is [the academic discourse community] defined by ways of thinking and writing common to the academic community or by discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing? Can we even distinguish a generic academic discourse from its specifically disciplinary forms?” (Review 215). As these questions imply, it is much easier to define the university as an aggregate of discourse communities than as a single community. Those discourse conventions shared by all academic disciplines are also shared by professional communities outside academia. And within academia, the conventions (and beyond them the assumptions and methodologies) of the various disciplines are characterized more by their differences than by their similarities.

American academia today is a community primarily in a broad institutional sense, a collection of people going about a vast enterprise—community in the sense that we use the term when we speak of the “business community” as a recognizable segment of national life. The academic disciplines are in one sense united through their common missions—teaching, the advancement of knowledge, and social service. But disciplines have been so diverse, so independent, and so bound up with professional communities outside academia that they require no common language or even shared values and methods within the university in order to pursue those missions. The various disciplines have grown to constitute the modern university through accretion, as Gerald Graff has forcefully argued (6–15), and by their relevance to concerns in the wider society, not through their logical relation to each other—so much so that interdisciplinary study is always a notable (and often suspect) exception. Indeed, an academic is likely to have more linguistic common ground with a fellow professional in the corporate sector than with another academic in an unrelated field, except in regard to purely institutional matters (governance, academic freedom, teaching loads, etc.).

Because it is tempting to recall academia’s past and hope for a very different future, the term “academic community” has powerful spiritual and political connotations. But today academia is a discourse community only in a context so broad as to have little meaning in terms of shared linguistic forms, either for the advancement of knowledge (which now goes on in disciplinary communities and sub-communities) or for the initiation of new members (who are initiated into a specific professional community’s discourse). Thus, to speak of the academic community as if its members shared a single set of linguistic conventions and traditions of inquiry is to make a category mistake. In the aggregate of all the tightly knit, turf-conscious disciplines and departments, each comprising its own discourse community, the modern university consists. Many have wished it otherwise, for this lack of a single academic discourse community has profoundly restricted writing instruction.

Before the advent of the modern university at the close of the nineteenth century, institutions of higher learning built an intellectual and social community and guaranteed linguistic homogeneity by selecting students on the basis of social class (less than 1% of the population was admitted) and by initiating them intellectually through a series of highly language-dependent methods—the tradi-

tional recitation, disputation, debate, and oral examination of the old liberal curriculum. Equally important, most students shared common values (Christian, often sectarian) with their teachers (primarily ministers). They pursued a uniform course of study and were then duly welcomed as full members of the nation's governing elite (Halloran 246–49).

The modern university changed all that. It provided the specialized knowledge that drove the new urban-industrial economy and a new class of specialized professionals (the term came into use during the period) who managed that economy, with its secular rationale and complex bureaucratic organization (Bledstein). Beginning with the land grant colleges of the late nineteenth century, and continuing with the rise of the modern university on the German model, the academic discourse community became fragmented. Numbers swelled, with enrollments tripling as a percentage of the population between 1900 and 1925 alone. Students from previously excluded social groups were admitted, and linguistic homogeneity was destroyed. The new elective curriculum was introduced to prepare students for a host of emerging professional careers in the new industrial society. The elective curriculum compartmentalized knowledge and broke one relatively stable academic discourse community into many fluctuating ones. And finally, the active, personal, language-dependent instructional methods of the old curriculum were replaced by passive, rather impersonal methods borrowed from Germany or from scientific management: lecture, objective testing, and the like. Rhetoric faded as a university subject—though not without a fight—and language instruction was compartmentalized into freshman composition, classed as remedial, and housed in English departments, where it competed (unsuccessfully) with the new professional discipline of literary study. Ultimately, the professional faculty which replaced the gentleman scholars and divines of the old curriculum came to see undergraduate education, initiating the neophytes into a discourse community, as only one of several competing responsibilities—along with graduate teaching, research, and professional service.

Significantly, the modern university's compartmentalized, additive organization of knowledge was made possible—or at least more efficient—by the particular forms writing instruction took and by the lack of cross-curricular writing those forms also made possible. From its beginnings, the university adopted Harvard's current-traditional rhetoric, an "inner-directed" pedagogy (Bizzell's term) which assumes that writing is a single universally applicable skill, largely unrelated to "content"; it ignored the "socialized" rhetoric of Scott, Buck, and the Deweyan reformers, with its "outer-directed" view of pedagogy, which assumes that thinking and language use can never occur free of the social context which conditions them ("Cognition" 215–21). Writing thus came to be seen as a *ding an sich*, a separate and independent technique, something that should have been learned elsewhere, taught by someone else—in high school or in freshman service courses. Hence the almost universal complaints about students' writing and the equally ubiquitous denials of responsibility for teaching it.

The resulting lack of student writing not only freed the faculty from much paper grading and interaction with students, leaving more time for research and service within their specific discourse communities, but in a deeper sense, it

allowed faculty to ignore other disciplines. Conscientious writing instruction forces a teacher to explain (and to some extent conceptualize) the conventions of her discipline and—more difficult still—occasionally to describe how the conventions she requires on, say, a history paper, are different from the conventions a student is wrestling with on a chemistry or literature paper in another class. Ignoring writing instruction in the disciplines made it much easier for higher education to proceed in neat compartments, without confronting messy questions about the relationships between discourse communities or, messier still, questions about the ways students should be capable of using language when they entered the broader society. Because faculty rarely asked their students to struggle with the complexities of entering a specific discourse community through writing, they could more easily maintain the illusion that the university was still one discourse community and that terms such as reason, the generally educated person, or the humanities referred to single, unitary concepts, independent of the new organization of knowledge and the new mass society which created it.

Yet almost from the beginning of the modern university, critics from many quarters attacked academic specialization and the relegation of responsibility for writing instruction to the English department. They sought to reestablish an academic community where students and faculty shared a common language and, in many cases, a set of values. We can roughly divide the reform efforts into two strands, though the two often intersect in complex ways. First, the genteel tradition (or “liberal culture,” as Laurence Veysey describes it) defended the humanities against the onslaught of scientific specialization, commercial philistinism, and the diluting of “standards of taste,” which they blamed on immigration and industrialization. General Education was its ongoing manifestation. Second, the Deweyan-influenced progressives sought to unify the sciences and arts, manual and liberal education, in a new, rational democratic state. The progressives promoted cross-curricular writing in a series of educational movements—cooperation, correlation, and communications—which pursued a less elitist policy but had no more success than advocates of liberal culture in establishing a tradition of writing instruction across the curriculum.

### **The Search for Academic Community: The General Education Movement**

The first of many diverse movements for General Education began in 1909 at Reed College, a small, selective-admission liberal arts college of the kind that succeeded the nineteenth-century sectarian college in educating the nation’s social elite. Its founders were reactionary reformers from the humanities who hoped to reunify the newly-fragmented American university curriculum by defining what generally educated persons are and turning them out. But with no single community of educated persons in America’s pluralist society, the movement chose one community—the liberal humanist culture of the genteel tradition—into which all students would be initiated. They rejected not only the fragmented communities of the new sciences, but also the Christian sectarian community of the old American college, with its classical Latin and Greek cur-

riculum. With General Education they tried to preserve the elitist character of higher education by substituting a secularized, Anglo- and Francophile version of high culture, with its own canon of great books—this time in the vernacular—and its own value structure, a conservative, even brahminic romanticism (Berlin 43–46; Graff ch. 2).

But instead of uniting academia, General Education in the new public university became yet another compartment or component of the curriculum, and this component itself was rarely unified. It typically consisted (and still largely consists) of a smorgasbord of electives which did not present a coherent picture of knowledge. Where it was unified into core courses, as at Columbia (1919), those courses quickly evolved into a “Cook’s tour of Western civilization,” as one early critic described them, designed to improve the cultural level of the rural, middle-class, and ethnic minority students flocking to the new university (Bell 18–21).

In keeping with these aims, general education courses typically “stressed enjoyment, understanding, appreciation, and taste at the expense of intellectual rigor,” as Frederick Rudolph puts it in his history of the American college curriculum (240). Rigor would come in the specialty, where students learned to use language the way professionals in that specialty used it. But the general education courses did not ordinarily stress writing. The typical method was lecture, sometimes supplemented with discussions led by graduate students. And objective tests were common, since the faculty member’s primary commitment of time (and his loyalty and reward structure) lay in the specialty. More importantly, even if the faculty had sufficient interest in and rewards for teaching general education, the very nature of the courses militated against extensive writing in them. There was no single community, no body of shared knowledge and values, no clearly defined audience to write for. It was difficult to ask students to use the conventions of the academic specialty (or specialties) which the courses treated, since most students were not majors and did not have the time in one or two courses to acquire the linguistic forms of the discipline(s), even if they had the interest (Bell 32). Nor was there consensus about what a general audience was, what genres and conventions a generally educated person should have mastered. Would it be a non-academic genre, a journalistic style? If so which one—that of the hometown newspaper, the *Scientific American*, or the *Times Literary Supplement*? Or would students simply be taught some academic genres (the essay test and research paper, perhaps) and a general academic style (however that might be defined)? There was no more agreement about the aims of writing in general education courses than there was about the aims of the courses themselves, for there was no one community of generally educated persons into which general education courses initiated students. Faced with these obstacles—and the lack of time and rewards for assigning writing in any class—faculty tended to require little writing.

However, there were many attempts to incorporate writing into general education programs, though these experiments are all but forgotten today. The programs at Columbia and Chicago—perhaps the two most visible—illustrate the problems of writing in a comprehensive university reflecting America’s pluralist

society and additive organization of knowledge. Where general education courses pursued a clear intellectual direction, they left themselves open to the charge of being forums for doctrinaire preachments. Columbia's famous "Contemporary Civilization" core course began in 1917, when the War Department asked the dean to set up a Washington-approved War Issues course to teach democratic values in support of the war effort. But a dissenting faculty member set up a competing Peace Issues course to teach a different version of democratic values (Bell 33). These controversies were inevitable, since every coherent reading of cultural history presupposes an ideological stand, and there were many ideological camps in the new American university (Rudolph 279; Bell 211–13; Bennett 16). But in the politically charged atmosphere, it was easy to downplay rigorous analysis—and writing. The single "Contemporary Civilization" course which emerged two years later rarely required students to engage those issues in writing; instead it was almost exclusively a discussion course, an attempt to understand and appreciate the issues, not debate them in writing.

The literature core at Columbia—the "Cook's tour of Western civilization" mentioned earlier—had an opposite problem. Beginning in the 1940s, students in Columbia's humanities core were taught some of the techniques of New Critical analysis in order to write about literary works. The literature faculty argued that New Critical close reading of texts provided some intellectual (rather than purely personal) content, but without troubling students or faculty with the time-consuming study of historical context (or ideological conflict). The great books, they claimed, would speak for themselves. However, critics outside the literature departments complained that this method had no clear purpose, no rationale in producing generally educated persons other than teaching another specialized vocabulary (the literary critic's), and that the method isolated the courses from both historical and contemporary social context (Bell 214).

The most famous General Education experiment deftly skirted the problems writing posed. In 1929 Robert Maynard Hutchins, the University of Chicago's thirty-year-old president, set about to restore the intellectual community of the old curriculum by reestablishing a common learning based on a Thomistic framework of knowledge, which he argued would unify society and make true democracy possible. He relieved the lower division undergraduate faculty of their responsibilities for research and set up a required curriculum of five core courses—humanities, social science, physical science, biological science, and, significantly, composition (see Boucher, esp. 64–73).

In theory, the composition core would teach the liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric in the medieval sense as the fundamental tools of acquiring and sharing knowledge in the other disciplines. The course was planned by a committee from several disciplines, which selected material from among the other core courses and developed carefully sequenced reading and writing assignments, each timed to correspond with the presentation of material in the other cores (see Kerby-Miller). In practice, however, the composition core course was a service course, taught by junior faculty, which freed faculty in the other four cores from the tedium—and challenge—of reading papers. To be fair to students,

those core courses used objective examinations for which they were often criticized (Bell 38; Boucher 66–68). Writing was a separate, subordinate element.

In any case, the Chicago Plan, like most core programs, withered away under the power of departmental structure. The university faculty ultimately rejected Hutchins' theology of education as being "at war with the modern temper" and discontinued the program (Rudolph 279). And as the examples of Columbia and Chicago suggest, no tradition of writing instruction developed within general education—no set of techniques, assignments, expectations—as it did, for example, in technical fields [see Connors] because the motive remained obscure and the genre, the audience, the purpose, and the responsibility for writing remained ambiguous.

The crucial period for General Education was the fifties and sixties, when the movement became entrenched in public institutions with skyrocketing enrollments. Educators tried to maintain the semblance of unity and community in the university by invoking General Education as the democratic common denominator in the postwar enrollment deluge. Mortimer Adler's Great Books program, the 1945 Harvard reform proposals (*General Education in a Free Society*), Project English and a host of other programs sought to unify the curriculum (Applebee 185–88). But few incorporated writing instruction in any systematic way, focusing instead on the reading of literature. And among public universities, only a handful of these programs were able to survive the structural inertia of specialization. (Michigan State's American Civilization freshman course, begun in 1950 as an interdisciplinary humanities/writing course, is a notable exception.)

Today core courses are popular again, and many incorporate writing. George Mason's PAGE, for example, actually grew out of a WAC program when grant money for WAC dried up and money for core courses became more plentiful under William Bennett's NEH. But will the latest general education reforms last any longer than their predecessors? History would encourage caution. What Rudolph says of interdisciplinary programs in general is no less true of their writing components: "Unless handsomely funded and courageously defended, efforts to launch courses and programs outside the departmental structure [have] generally failed" (251; see also Bell 25). There is no specific constituency for interdepartmental programs within the structure of the American university, much less for interdepartmental programs which incorporate writing, because the academic community is fragmented. There is thus no permanent defense against the slow erosion of programs under the pressure of well-defined departmental interests.

### **The Search for Community: The Cooperation, Correlation, and Communications Movements**

Progressive education is notoriously difficult to define, but in several of the forms it has taken, cross-curricular writing instruction has been a key element. The progressives' first organized attempt to share responsibility for writing instruction was the cooperation movement (about 1900 to 1925) championed by

the Deweyan reformers of the NCTE. This movement was based on Dewey's notion of active (transactional) communication within a community, a democratic "shared partnership." Borrowing Fred N. Scott's socialized approach to composition (influenced at Michigan by his colleague Dewey), NCTE founder James Fleming Hosis (a colleague of Dewey at Columbia), Joseph V. Denney, and others promoted interdepartmental cooperation in teaching language. With Dewey, they argued that language and thought are inseparable and that communication is a "social transaction among partners" which forms and improves society—particularly democratic society. Thus, effective teaching in all fields must incorporate speaking and writing if education is to be either truly effective or truly democratic. The NCTE made cooperation part of its national reorganization plan of 1917, and by 1922 over 300 schools, school districts, and state education departments, as well as many universities, had cooperation programs (see Vose 5–8).

For example, in one model cooperation program at MIT (1905), science and technology classes incorporated writing in a system which in some ways anticipates today's consultant model of WAC. English faculty helped other instructors design assignments, met with students in conferences to guide revision, and regularly lectured on writing in the technical courses (Russell, "Composition"; Seaver). In many land grant universities, there were discipline-specific writing courses. Ohio State under Dean Joseph V. Denney had rhetoric courses for pre-law, pre-medicine, journalism, engineering, and agriculture (Russell, "Rhetoric"). But despite many such experiments, the Deweyan progressives' view of language's central role in learning did not prevail against the increasing fragmentation of the curriculum and the massive influx of new students, both of which put a strain on cooperative efforts and, as we shall see, reduced most cooperation programs to mere mechanical schemes for remediation.

A second progressive movement for cross-curricular language instruction came in the 1930s and 40s with the "correlated curriculum," led by Scott's brilliant student, Ruth Mary Weeks. Influenced by gestalt psychology as well as by Dewey, the movement attempted to restructure the curriculum radically (particularly at the secondary level) with team-taught interdisciplinary courses, control of curriculum by teachers, and a student-centered pedagogy founded on the notion of the school as democratic community. Correlation of English with other subjects would mean, Weeks said, "an educational home-coming for English," which but two generations before was "taught in no other way than in relation to the classics, philosophy, and history." But it would also mean "recasting the whole educational program in the mold of a central purpose, so that not only the parts but the whole will have a meaning, a meaning which will tie part to part by a recognizable bond"—the shared language and values of a democratic community (10).

The reformers launched a massive eight-year experiment in 30 secondary schools (several of which cooperated with local colleges and universities). Despite some clear successes, the movement failed to make headway with educational administrators and professional associations—notably the NCTE, which firmly rejected correlation as "too broad in scope and too shallow in depth" to

preserve the role of literature in the curriculum, as one reviewer put it (though the same reviewer praised correlation for revitalizing instruction in the subject areas) (Applebee 145; see also 122–23 and 142–46). The movement was swept away by the massive changes that came with World War II.

Those changes brought about a third major reform effort, the communications movement. Sparked by wartime programs designed to save instructional time by teaching officer candidates speaking and writing as part of their other studies (Malmstrom 21), the movement was launched in 1947 when the NCTE and Speech Association of America sponsored a joint conference on freshman programs (which led the NCTE to found the Conference on College Composition and Communication the next year). The movement amounted to a crash program for initiating into academia a host of GIs from radically different social backgrounds. The interest in semantics just before and during World War II—aided by I. A. Richards' extraordinary synthesis of linguistics, classical rhetoric, and the pedagogical concerns evident throughout his career—contributed a theoretical basis to the movement. Richards, Korzybski, and others argued that good communication was central not only to all areas of schooling, but also to the future of democratic society itself—as Hitler's propaganda machine had dramatically pointed out. In practice, the vast majority of communications programs were simply combined speech/English courses for freshmen, with little attempt to incorporate faculty from other disciplines or courses at other levels. Iowa's rhetoric program is perhaps the best-known and longest-lived of the postwar communications programs. Housed in a special administrative unit, it employs teaching assistants, primarily from English and Speech, to teach freshman rhetoric courses that combine instruction in writing and speaking.

A few institutions made a conscious effort to develop writing across the entire curriculum, not merely during the "freshman experience" (to borrow the current phrasing) but throughout a four-year program. UC Berkeley's Prose Improvement Committee (1950–64) held regular faculty seminars on writing and set up a program resembling today's "writing fellows" model of WAC to train TAs and graders from several disciplines in writing instruction and tutoring techniques. At Colgate the Functional Writing Program structured writing assignments as part of the core curriculum and helped faculty teaching the core to design those assignments. However, like most such programs, these dissolved when the number of participating departments dwindled so as to make the programs unworkable (Russell, "Writing"). In the face of faculty specialization and research pressures, they could not translate a founder's or a committee's enthusiasm into a permanent institutional structure.

The communications movement itself faded in the late fifties and early sixties. Under pressure from the progressives' critics, who called for a more academically rigorous curriculum (by which some meant more literature and others meant more basics), colleges were becoming ever more selective and no longer felt pressure to systematically integrate students through cross-curricular language instruction (Applebee 185–89). The communications caboose of the CCC became unhitched, and the organization chugged on toward rhetoric and other more glamorous destinations.

Cross-curricular writing instruction, both in the general education programs and in the several manifestations of Deweyan progressivism, almost always wore an egalitarian face. Its promoters claimed it would assimilate, integrate, or (in the current phrasing) initiate previously excluded students by means of language instruction. And it is not surprising that the greatest efforts came as the pressure for access increased: the general education and cooperation movements began just after the turn of the century, when middle-class, rural, and immigrant students were clamoring for admission; the core curriculum experiments at Chicago and elsewhere, as well as the correlated curriculum movement, flourished in the thirties, when economic pressures forced students out of the job market and back into school—and when social agitation for egalitarian reforms was at its height in modern America; the communications movement and the postwar reforms in general education responded explicitly to the massive influx of GIs into higher education; and the current WAC movement emerged in the early seventies, when open admissions transformed the university.

And as one might expect, the rationales reformers put forward always invoke social unity. From the teens to the eighties, proponents of cross-curricular writing have argued that coherent and effective language instruction is necessary for the preservation and growth of democracy (though of course that “god” term has been used in many different, and often conflicting, senses). But unity is an elusive goal in a pluralist institution, an aggregate of discourse communities which reflects, in complex ways, an equally pluralist society. And despite many efforts over the last century, shared responsibility for teaching—or even using—writing across the curriculum never developed from a series of intriguing experiments into a tradition.

This is not to say that writing instruction did not go on in many individual courses and universities over the last century. As Toby Fulwiler recently pointed out, “Writing across the curriculum has always existed,” primarily at many small, private colleges with low student-teacher ratios and selective enrollment (116), institutions which have preserved aspects of the nineteenth-century academic community: the liberal arts emphasis, student-teacher contact, and, most importantly, an upper-class clientele. (It is no accident that the current WAC movement began at such colleges, Central Carleton and Beaver.) Moreover, dedicated teachers at every level and in every discipline have used writing in their teaching, as scattered reports in professional journals over the last ninety years attest. But concerted efforts to promote writing in the whole curriculum are at cross-purposes with the modern university’s compartmentalized, bureaucratic structure, its diverse missions, and its heterogeneous clientele. And where writing infused a curriculum, it did so through the determination of individual faculty or at the insistence of maverick administrators.

### **Community and Exclusion**

Within the American university, that other, less pleasant dimension of discourse communities—the tendency to exclude others on the basis of their linguistic performance—has been as important as the tendency toward inclusion and unity for

cross-curricular writing programs. Universities and departments have used writing instruction (or its lack) to restrict access to coveted social roles, the professional positions which modern academia helped to create a century ago and still credentials today. Through many means, university-wide writing programs have shifted responsibility for integrating students into the institution's discourse communities from those inside the communities to those outside them—in effect limiting membership in the professional communities which carry the greatest status and rewards. Since the modern university was created in the 1870s, two of these exclusionary means have become traditions: remediation and abolition. Both means were employed “across the curriculum” and involved faculty from all disciplines.

The most common means of shifting rather than sharing responsibility is remediation. Students who do not speak or write the language of an academic discourse community have been subjected to a probationary or purgatorial term, during which they were taught by those outside of—or on the fringes of—academia (graduate students, part-timers, tutors, etc.). Though remedial writing courses were usually housed in the English department, the programs themselves crossed departmental lines in their creation, administration, and use. University-wide faculty committees charged with enforcing writing standards across the curriculum, common since the teens, have often supervised remedial programs. In a 1925 study of the movement for cooperation in writing instruction, Margaret Vose found that the most common model was a campus-wide system of faculty referrals to a remedial course. For example, at Harvard in 1914 a faculty committee on student writing concluded that writing skills declined after English A. But instead of asking faculty to share responsibility for improving student writing through their own classroom instruction, the committee became in effect the writing police, requiring faculty in all courses to hand delinquent students over to the English department for correction in a “writing hospital” as it was called, or “lab” as we call it today (preserving the medical terminology). About half of the six hundred students reported yearly were put into the “hospital,” a course called, significantly, English F, employing methods which were admirably described as “ceaseless, brutal drill” (“Harvard Plan”; Vose 5–6; and Campbell 36; see also Rose 343–55).

Interdepartmental remedial programs assume that students must learn the linguistic forms of a community before becoming a part of it. But without being immersed in the discourse community they wish to be a part of, without listening, speaking, reading, and writing with others in it, students have great difficulty learning the conventions of the community, its characteristic ways of using language. And it is the students' knowledge of those (primarily linguistic) conventions which allows them to enter or remain within a community—to succeed in a degree program or, ultimately, a profession. Faced with this hurdle, many—in some situations most—students do not enter a degree program or, once admitted, flunk (or drop) out because they are not taught (only expected to know) the conventions. Before the massive increases in higher education during the sixties, higher education found uses for this hurdle. By weeding out students who were not “college material,” exclusionary policies in language instruction allowed

universities and departments to achieve selective admission *de facto* though they may have been forbidden it *de jure*. But with the massive growth of higher education in the last two decades, competition for resources (often allocated on the basis of enrollments) and concern for those traditionally excluded from higher education have made many institutions conscious of the need to initiate and retain students.

However, universities today, like their predecessors, have all too often ignored the importance of conscious, discipline-specific writing instruction from faculty within the professional community the student wishes to enter. The old exclusionary attitudes remain, and these are particularly strong in regard to language, which is a crucial indicator of a student's fitness to enter and remain within a community. Today, many universities carry on the tradition of writing police and remedial lab; faculty prescribe treatment (often high-tech), administered by a staff member or tutor—but rarely by a tenure-line faculty member. Responsibility remains outside the community, drop-out rates are high, and the status quo is preserved.

A second means of shifting responsibility for initiating students into academic communities—also with a long history—is to abolish composition courses and raise admissions standards, thus shifting responsibility to the secondary or primary schools. Calls for abolition began shortly after composition courses were introduced. Samuel Thurber, head of the English conference for the 1894 Committee of Ten, which set the secondary curriculum and influenced college admissions standards for decades, argued that in colleges—and even in secondary schools—composition should not be taught as a separate course, or even as a designated part of language and literature courses, but should rather “accompany every subject in which English expression is practiced, as an ancillary of instruction” (472). The committee eventually compromised, giving composition a place in the English curriculum, though small and subordinate to literature. But as Albert Kitzhaber pointed out in his classic 1963 survey, *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*, there were always “a few English departments, nearly always at small colleges with highly selective admission policies, [who] have declined to accept responsibility for the course.” The chair of one such department summed up the position: “Students entering college should have acquired this skill in secondary school and application and development of this skill is best handled in terms of the disciplines in which they actually have to do their writing” (1–2).

The abolitionist argument is appealingly simple: writing cannot be formally taught (only gradually acquired). General composition courses are therefore a waste of time and money. If a department wants its students to write competently it can itself help them to acquire proficiency or refuse to admit those who have not already acquired it. Over the decades, the abolitionist argument has particularly appealed to advocates of more selective admissions and to advocates of literary culture who wanted composition courses out of English departments or general education programs (see Greenbaum; Russell, “Romantics”). For example, in his often-quoted study, *The Reforming of General Education*, Daniel Bell writes of Columbia College in 1965:

Students are, of course, required to write papers in different courses and more of this is necessary. But one has the right to assume that by the time a student enters college, he can write clearly enough to make a course in freshman composition unnecessary. . . . English A is extremely costly to the college. . . . It is entirely the responsibility of [secondary] schools to assure the proficiency of their students in English composition. (234)

And he goes on to suggest uniform admissions standards in composition at Ivy League schools to force the issue, echoing the Committee of Ten's debate almost a century earlier.

Abolition reached its peak in the late sixties and early seventies, when almost one-third of four-year colleges dropped or severely reduced composition requirements (Ron Smith 139–40). Many of today's WAC programs grew out of (or reflect) abolitionist policies. Some of the first WAC programs at public universities (Eastern Oregon and Colorado, for example) began when the faculty abolished required composition courses. Faced with the abolitionist's sink-or-swim dilemma, most departments did not attempt to reform their pedagogy in any systematic way to improve their students' writing. In lieu of teaching writing, they were forced to deny students admission who had not already acquired the necessary conventions, flunk those who did not quickly acquire them, or pass students with the hope that they would acquire those conventions on the job. Rather than accept these alternatives, many (perhaps most) faculties have in time reinstated composition courses, either within the English department or in special departmental writing courses.

Today's WAC programs often incorporate more subtle forms of abolition. Writing-intensive courses across the curriculum (with writing taught in varying degrees of intensity) often substitute for one or more semesters of composition. Indeed, writing-intensives, sometimes supported by a remedial lab, are perhaps the most common curricular model for WAC. But writing-intensive courses again concentrate responsibility for initiating students into the discourse community in a few professors or TAs, while freeing most faculty resources for activities which the community views as more important than initiating new members. As Brown's WAC director Tori Haring-Smith points out, when a few courses are labeled writing-intensive, students object when other courses require writing. Writing is viewed as a punishment, not an accomplishment which the community values—a requirement for full membership. And writing-intensives do not necessarily provide students with more writing (as a recent survey of such courses at Cornell showed), since faculty are not always held accountable for writing instruction in these courses (Haring-Smith, "What's Wrong"). Unfortunately, faculty tend to retain traditional attitudes toward the role of writing instruction, since those attitudes reflect the priorities of academia and are reinforced by its structure of rewards (see Fulwiler 120). As we shall see, a central theme of one version of WAC today is the transformation of these faculty attitudes toward writing, attitudes manifested over the last century in cross-curricular efforts which shifted responsibility and excluded students—remediation and abolition.

**WAC Today: Demythologizing the Myth of Transience?**

What then is the significance of WAC in historical context? The most important thing to realize is that WAC is more than a means of improving pedagogy: it is and always has been part of a complex dialectic which forms curricular, institutional and, ultimately, social policy. Cross-curricular writing programs, past and present, are negotiated by many competing interests, which have a cultural, economic, or political stake in the expansion (or restriction) of advanced forms of literacy. While Americans certainly agree that all citizens have a right to an education which will teach them to recite the alphabet and sign their name (nineteenth-century definitions of literacy), there are deep divisions over advanced literacy (or literacies) in our modern industrial society, over who will teach what forms of discourse to whom and for what purpose. But these disagreements have all too often been masked by the misconception that literacy is a single, unitary attainment to be acquired independently of its social matrix by some quick fix.

From one point of view, today's WAC programs perpetuate the myth of transience, the convenient illusion that some new program will cure poor student writing, that there is a single pedagogical solution to complex structural issues. Because current programs grow out of the same institution and the same society as their predecessors, they are in a sense merely new variations on the two themes announced a century ago with the rise of mass education and the modern university. The first theme has been very alluring but elusive: the return to a homogeneous academic community and a common learning, which will unify society and bring the benefits of democratic citizenship—economic and cultural—to more and more Americans. It is this idea of reviving or creating a unified academic community which inspires many WAC supporters, Kinneavy, Maimon, and others (see Barbara Smith, esp. 14–16). But it is worth remembering that such programs go against the grain of our mass education system and indeed of our modern society, with its specialization, fragmentation, and competing demands. Under these pressures, earlier attempts to restore unity by systematically incorporating writing instruction have almost always succumbed to the subtle unraveling effects of academic politics. And programs today are subjected to the same pressures. Charismatic leaders leave; money for faculty development goes to other, more fashionable uses; granting agencies fund sexier—and less politically sensitive—projects; faculty loads and class sizes remain high; rewards for using writing in teaching are not forthcoming; interdisciplinary efforts become entangled in turf battles intensified by competition for limited university resources. Under these pressures, progressive reforms are all too easily transformed into measures which bring the university back to the other recurring theme of cross-curricular writing programs—exclusion.

That second theme has been more common: shifting responsibility for language instruction to achieve the goals of a particular educational policy. When, in the name of WAC, writing courses are abolished or redefined as remedial, when high schools are handed the burden of teaching students the discourse conventions of the university, when remedial writing labs are set up and faculty

called on to fill them by policing student writing, when one course among many in a department is classified as writing-intensive to the exclusion of others, a university or a department is influencing (or in some cases deciding) how and on what terms students will be admitted to an academic discourse community and, beyond academia, to a professional role in society. WAC is thus inevitably a means of forming and implementing institutional policy, a political activity (as anyone who has worked in a WAC program can attest). If nothing else, the history of cross-curricular writing instruction in America shows that interdisciplinary efforts to shift responsibility are much easier to organize and maintain than efforts to share responsibility, and some of the typical forms WAC programs take today—writing-intensive courses, remedial labs, WAC courses taught by temporary faculty or staff—point to the continuing difficulty of achieving lasting reforms and to the survival of the myth of transience.

However, the current WAC movement, from another point of view, is more than simply another manifestation of the myth of transience, a means of protecting the status quo. Unlike its antecedents, the movement has gained acceptance and support in institutions of all kinds and among reformers in many fields, both within and outside of academia. I believe that WAC has evoked this unprecedented interest because it responds in complex ways to three profound shifts: in composition studies, in the American university, and in the wider post-industrial society. I will suggest a few of those ways as a prolegomenon to a fuller interpretation of the current WAC movement.

In composition studies, there is for the first time research into rhetoric in the disciplines and, beyond them, rhetoric in the professions students will enter. The idea that language and learning are linked has been a cornerstone of progressive theory—in Dewey, Scott, Richards, and many others—but only recently have composition studies begun to explore the implications of that idea for the modern educational system and for modern society, where knowledge is compartmentalized and public discourse split into professional communities. As these researches mature, teachers may, as Steven Weiland recently put it, “assemble the rudiments of rhetorical interpretation and instruction in composition on a field-by-field basis” (816). We would have, at least, a theoretical basis for discussing composition in academic discourse communities—something we have not had since those communities evolved a century ago—though there is certainly no guarantee that those researches will prove useful in the classroom, much less that the American university will put them to use in a systematic way to reform curriculum and pedagogy.

In the university today, however, there are some signs that the structural resistance to cross-curricular writing instruction is weakening. In many institutions there is a genuine effort to transform faculty attitudes toward writing instruction—and toward undergraduate instruction in general. This is most visible in what Richard Lanham describes as the “consciousness-raising” or “revival meeting” approach to WAC, where faculty meet in workshops or retreats. But at some institutions, administrations also fund (at times with hard money) programs which bring faculty members together to discuss writing, pedagogy, and, in a few places, the faculty’s own writing on a regular basis, or which structure a

general education core around sequenced writing activities (George Mason). WAC programs sometimes house full-time consultants to faculty on writing instruction (Kansas University), or train and fund peer tutors to encourage writing instruction in large classes (Brown) (see Haring-Smith, *Guide*; Connolly and Vilaridi). Today, as in the past, WAC easily becomes part of administrators' curricular and pedagogical reform initiatives. As one administrator recently remarked to me, "WAC is the cheapest faculty development program you can buy." Such support for WAC reflects the growing realization that the university has changed in the last twenty years. As I noted earlier, the success of many institutions is no longer measured by the percentage of students weeded out, but by the percentage retained or, in the current phrase, initiated during the freshman experience. At the highest levels, the research and granting agencies in higher education (NIE, NEH, Carnegie, Ford) have also lately advocated reforms that are conducive to WAC—the emphasis on student involvement in learning, on faculty/student contact, on critical thinking and higher-order skills. All of this is in many ways unprecedented, and it bodes well for the future of WAC.

Finally, composition studies, the university, and writing itself exist in a changed and changing society. The industrial society which gave birth to composition instruction a century ago—with its compartmentalization of roles and knowledge, its alienating bureaucratic management, its separation of mental and manual labor—is evolving, some say, into a post-industrial society, where new knowledge is created through interdisciplinary collaboration, where competitive advantages come through more effective communication, often written, among workers in all levels and roles, and where new management structures replace the rigid hierarchies of the past. Writing instruction may be part of this shift, as it was part of the shift a century ago. For example, collaborative writing and student writing groups may reflect (and support), more or less consciously, collaborative management and worker productivity circles. WAC may also reflect and support a post-industrial society in subtle but crucial ways. Writing instruction is potentially a way of making connections between disciplines—either directly, through the contact many WAC programs encourage among faculty, or indirectly, through research into the discourse of various disciplines—which open their central assumptions, methodologies, and rhetoric to examination and invite useful comparisons, even interactions, with other fields. Unlike many of their predecessors, most versions of WAC today do not posit a unified structure of knowledge, a "theology of education," as did Hutchins' neo-Thomism. But WAC may nevertheless forge links between disciplines without attempting to create and impose a single overarching discourse community on academia. This interdisciplinary exchange, some say, is becoming ever more important since new knowledge is so often created at the intersections between disciplines (see Williams 213–26).

WAC also may have profound implications for preparing students to enter a post-industrial economy (as granting agencies acknowledge, more or less explicitly, through their funding of it). Those who study employment trends generally agree that in fifteen years most jobs will involve information processing, in one form or another, almost always with computers. But in the electronic office

of the Information Age, computer literacy will mean much more than mechanical or clerical skill. The productive capacity of America—and perhaps its social cohesion as well—will increasingly depend on rhetorical skill, the ability of an ever-growing portion of the work force to communicate in writing, both within and outside an organizational unit, not only from one person to another, but also from one community to another (see Anson 6–9). WAC is one way to prepare students for the complex new roles many of them will play in professional communities. Ideally, cross-curricular writing instruction would initiate students into the discourse of a professional community and give them extensive experience in negotiating the discourse of other communities, other disciplines. Not surprisingly, many professional associations and accreditation bodies, as well as private-sector granting agencies, are paying attention to WAC.

There is indeed much that is new in the current WAC movement, but it would only be reinforcing the myth of transience to assume that these differences, important as they are, will guarantee WAC's survival. When cross-curricular writing programs seek to modify the attitudes and compartmental structure of academia, when programs seek to broaden access to professional discourse communities, they become forms of resistance, threats to the institution (or to the century-old conception of it). Thus, as with all movements to extend literacy, WAC has political, economic, and social consequences. The empowerment that literacy affords demands power-sharing. In composition studies, the identity of the field—perhaps its existence as an academic discipline—is negotiated in WAC. Will writing specialists be tenure-track faculty, members of a department, or will they primarily be administrative staff consultants, temporary instructors, support personnel? In the postmodern university, how will various kinds of knowledge and instruction be organized and funded? It is worth contemplating the fate of Great Britain's "new universities," founded in the 1960s as innovative centers of interdisciplinary teaching and research, but now suffering from a bureaucratic malaise caused in large part by budgetary and administrative strictures of the present government, which discourage the intellectual risk-taking interdisciplinary innovation requires (see Bouchier). And finally, WAC has its implications for the wider society. If the educational system teaches more and more students to enter academic discourse communities and, through them, coveted professional roles, there may be increased competition, economic dislocation, and political conflict. If, on the other hand, the system frankly acknowledges that it is excluding students on the basis of their language rather than committing its resources to teach them the linguistic forms of those communities, the results might also be painful. The recent rioting in France over access to higher education (determined there largely by written examinations) might give us pause. In any case, there are powerful reasons for preserving the myth of transience, and equally powerful reasons why reformers should construct WAC programs consciously, deliberately, with some attention to their historical precedents and with great regard for their long-term consequences.

For in historical perspective, WAC is not a single trend or movement. It offers no panacea, but it need not support the myth of transience either. Seen in its full dimensions, WAC can become a convenient tool for focusing our atten-

tion in a very practical way on the contradictions of American undergraduate education, for examining rather than skirting the deepest problems. With WAC, the old battles between access and exclusion, scientific and humanist world views, liberal and professional education, all come down to very specific questions of responsibility for curriculum and teaching. WAC ultimately asks: In what ways will graduates of our university use language and how shall we teach them to use it in those ways? And behind these questions lies a deeper one: What discourse communities—and ultimately, what social class—will students be equipped to enter? That is an extremely complex question in our heterogeneous society, a question which Americans have consistently begged because it forces us to face painful issues of opportunity, of equality, of democracy in education. But underneath the buzzwords and the bustle of programs, that is the question we will inevitably answer by pursuing WAC.

I hope that the future of WAC will bring more ways of sharing responsibility, not shifting it, that it will bring new ways of integrating students, instead of excluding them. But the history of cross-curricular programs suggests that reforms will require deep changes in language policy to overcome a century of institutional inertia. To effect such changes we must first see WAC in its historical and social context.

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