
Chapitre 14 | Chapter 14

Faculty Workshops in WAC Pedagogy

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Workshop 1: The Conversations of the Disciplines and Writing Across the Curriculum (A WAC Primer)

We have all, I believe, had the experience of walking into a party or a bar at a conference, perhaps, and joining an on-going, intense conversation on issues important to us as sociologists, philosophers, economists, etc. At first, it is wise to remain silent until we figure out the issues, positions, and personalities. Once we have established the context, it becomes easier to nod assent to the positions with which we agree and shake our heads in opposition to alternative points of view. After an appropriate period of time, we can begin joining in the discussion with first, perhaps, points of information and later with fully elaborated arguments supported by evidence acceptable to our peers.

Commentators such as Richard Rorty (1979) in philosophy, Stanley Fish (1980) in literary studies, Thomas Kuhn (1970) in the philosophy of science and Bruno LaTour (1987) in the sociology of knowledge tend to view disciplines as discourse communities involved in the on-going construction of knowledge through the complex conversations carried on in journals and through teaching activities. What counts as «valid» information, insight, evidence, or argument is what is acceptable to a specific discipline at a certain time.

An analysis of teaching in our various disciplines from this perspective should give us pause for thought. How many of our students

pass beyond the barrier of listening silently to one discussant explaining his or her view of the issues? How many pass with comprehension into listening to the interplay of voices in our journals? How many can nod assent to the positions with which they agree or note in the margins the arguments with which they disagree? How many can actually join in the conversation in even a modest way?

Much of the theory and practice associated with Writing (or Language) Across the Curriculum (WAC) is designed to provide faculty with the confidence and expertise needed to introduce students to the ways of thinking, speaking, and writing characteristic of various disciplines. In this short introduction to WAC it is impossible to summarize the almost two decades of research that lie behind the movement. But two points are central.

First, James Britton's (1975) and his colleagues' extensive review of writing in the British School system in the 1970s revealed that what little writing was required served perfunctory examination functions and was not truly communicative. Using the work of Jean Piaget and L.S. Vygotsky, these researchers developed the concept of *language as a way of knowing*. They argued that language is not a passive tool for transcribing information. Rather, «the very act of writing ... forces a person to reconsider and reorder his or her thinking» (Tchudi 15). This position has two consequences. It suggests that students learn content, the ways of thinking, characteristic of the discipline by writing. It suggests, too, that students learn to write by exploring the content of various disciplines. In other words, *content is at the center of the writing process*.

Secondly, writing is a process. Researchers as diverse as Janet Emig at Rutgers and Linda Flower at Carnegie-Mellon recognize the recursive nature of writing and the futility of teaching students how to write by simply looking at their written products. Many researchers suggest the process consists of the following steps:

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| 1. Preparation for Writing | 4. Revising |
| 2. Organizing to Write | 5. Proofreading |
| 3. Writing | 6. Presenting |

Each of these steps presents instructors with an opportunity to intervene effectively and briefly to assist students in developing a product

which reflects a growing awareness of the topics, arguments, and evidence required in their discipline. Instructors can discuss with their classes appropriate topics, can ask for preliminary bibliographies, can require a five minute presentation of a thesis statement prior to the final draft, or can create peer editing groups. Many other interventions are also possible depending on the type of assignment. Journals, for example, are useful for courses integrating theory and practice. The intent of all such practices is to reveal ahead of time the ways of thinking needed to master communication in a discipline. The consequence for instructors should be papers, reports etc. which are easier to evaluate, more reminiscent of the kind of writing we expect from our peers.

As a final note, instructors at Laurentian should be aware that WAC programs are not new, nor particular to this University. Extensive WAC programs are in place at major American universities such as Carnegie-Mellon, Michigan Technological University, the University of Michigan, and Rutgers to name only a few. Canadian universities lag behind the American system, but important programs have been established at McGill, Waterloo, the University of British Columbia, and Winnipeg. In fact, however, with its emphasis on WAC courses in the junior years, Laurentian University is ahead of many other universities in this country as far as this important initiative is concerned.

Workshop 2: Interactive Teaching and Group Work

1. Interactive Teaching

George Hillocks in **Research on Written Composition** (1986) conducted a meta-analysis of sixty studies with seventy-five experimental/control treatments. The focus of all studies and Hillocks' meta-analysis was the interaction of teaching and writing improvement. Hillocks identified four modes of instruction:

A. Presentational

This mode is characterized by specific objectives, lecture and instructor-dominated discussion dealing with facts and

concepts, specific assignments which involve imitating a pattern, and summative (end-product) rather than formative (in-process) evaluation.

B. Natural Process

In this mode the teacher functions as a facilitator who aims to assist students in developing their own ideas and assignments. The mode is characterized by «generalized objectives ...; free writing ... as a way of exploring a subject; writing for audiences of peers; ... and high levels of interaction among students» (119).

C. Environmental

This mode, like the presentational, is characterized by clear and specific objectives but also requires materials and problems selected to engage students with each other in specifiable processes. In this mode, both instructors and students are expected to contribute to the generation of knowledge, and formative evaluation is encouraged.

D. Individual

In the individualized mode of instruction «students receive instruction through tutorials, programmed materials of some kind, or a combination of the two» (126). Formative evaluation also plays an important part in this model of teaching.

Hillocks' results suggest that one of these modes produces far better results as far as writing is concerned. Which mode do you think produced the best results? Which generated the worst results? Try to generate a consensus in your group. If you cannot, then develop a majority and minority response.

2. Group Work

In a recent study of a veterinary college, I was struck by the dominant pattern of teaching and learning that I observed. In most classrooms and in many labs, the instructors did virtually all the talking. Students might ask a few questions, but the responsibility for the development of knowledge rested with the instructor. Who was doing the learning here anyway I asked myself and the faculty at the college.

There were other symptoms of a malaise. Many faculty were unhappy with the quality of students' written and spoken language and were dissatisfied with students' level of problem solving skills. Students were also unhappy. Many did not appreciate the competitive (excessive according to both faculty and students) nature of the program and felt excluded from the profession of veterinary medicine.

As a researcher in rhetoric and composition, I perceived that an interrelated set of problems existed. Essentially, a lack of fit had developed between the pedagogy and the goals of the program. The faculty wanted to produce students capable of critical thinking. Yet the teaching practices treated students as if they were empty vessels into which ever increasing amounts of information had to be poured. The students' task was to memorize this information. The program was also language-based to an extraordinary degree. Students had to learn a vast array of medical terms based on their conceptual understanding of body and disease processes, yet they were given little opportunity to practice using these terms in context or to apply them to diverse cases.

Together faculty and I developed some alternative responses. One alternative was the incorporation of more group work — both as a pedagogy to facilitate learning and as a technique to improve writing and speaking. Group work derives from theories and research related to collaborative learning. M.L.J. Abercrombie (1960; 1974), for example, in her studies of medical students demonstrated that medical students working together in groups made much better diagnoses than when they worked individually. Kenneth Bruffee (1972; 1973; 1978; 1984) suggests that group work not only allows students to master the language and conventions of a discipline more efficiently but also enhances critical thinking skills. Group work also has the added advantage that it can be used in large classes. At the veterinary college, group work was successfully incorporated into courses with a hundred students and

became one mechanism wherein instructors could start shifting responsibility for developing knowledge and improving language skills to students.

Although the situation here at Waterloo is somewhat different, some of the problems are the same, and faculty might find group work, when it is used effectively, useful for their courses. Certainly, we share the problem of student writing and speaking skills. Some of us have large classes. Some of us would also like to include more interactive teaching methods in our courses. Group work can be one way to accomplish these ends.

However, for group work to succeed, faculty need to become aware of the teaching strategies that enhance collaborative learning. In essence, students can work effectively together «when the instructor prepares students with models and guidelines for group standards and procedures and then allows groups to proceed largely on their own, interfering only for post-group evaluation» (Gere 51). This means that instructors need to work with groups to develop a good working atmosphere, a clear sense of the task at hand, and an understanding of the criteria that will be applied to the task.

The workshop that follows this account of the development of group work as a pedagogy will concentrate on teaching strategies useful for promoting effective group work. The focus of the workshop will be peer group revision and editing although some discussion will be directed towards using group work to facilitate other types of learning as well.

Advocates of group work derive much of their theory and practice from research into collaborative learning and research into the psychology of language development. Collaborative Learning research suggests that learning is inherently social and interactive. Using the work of the psychologist, Lev Vygotsky and the philosopher and scientist, Michael Polanyi, group work advocates such as Ken Bruffee and James Britton stress the dialectical relationship between thought and language and between the individual and his or her social setting. As Britton suggests, «the relationship of talk to writing is central to the writing process» (29). Other advocates go even further and suggest that collaborative learning in groups is essential to the learning process as such activities allow students to learn by «‘talking it out’, assimilating their ideas and information through interaction with others» (Golub 1).

Some Useful Practices in Running Groups

A. Management

Students do not come prepared to work effectively in groups. Some management and preparation are needed. The following includes some useful tips.

- * Begin with small, carefully defined tasks and build towards larger, more complex tasks.
- * Create groups carefully with concerns for gender, ability, and interests. After a class has worked together for a period of time, you could allow them to self-select group members.
- * Create specific roles for the group — recorder, chair, reporter, challenger, summarizer etc.
- * Ensure that resources are available for the group — on reserve in the library, material in texts, resource people (yourself).
- * Try to provide some reporting time or opportunity — a handout for rest of class, oral report etc.
- * After a report, provide some feedback both to the group and the class.
- * Vary the size of group (from 2-5) according to the assignment.
- * Try to make the task useful not only for the group but for the rest of the class so they have the opportunity and responsibility for actually teaching the class.
- * As you circulate among the groups, try not to dominate any of the discussions.
- * On occasion, if you observe a particularly effective group, ask them to analyze what they are doing right and explain it to the rest of the class.

B. Trust

Students have no reason to trust each other automatically in group situations.

Try to model effective evaluation behaviour. Sarcasm, for example, is inappropriate. Listening carefully to each other is appropriate.

C. Evaluation

Grading is the most difficult activity of any teaching situation. Essentially two types of group work exist and require different evaluation strategies.

i. A task which concludes with a group project

This kind of assignment does lessen the marking in a course as at least 5 students contribute to one project. Several strategies are possible. All students could be given the same grade. Students could share the same 50% of the grade for the product, but could be assigned an additional 50% based on their participation. Many instructors now ask for a self-evaluation and group evaluation in projects such as this.

No matter what the end-product evaluation system, however, instructors should ensure that students understand the criteria on which they will be judged and have as much opportunity as possible for formative evaluation.

ii. A task which concludes with individual evaluation

Group tasks can be designed which help students understand a concept, develop ideas for a paper, conduct research, or revise and edit their papers. Many times the rewards of participating in such a task are immediately

evident to students. For example, by conducting and developing a joint library search, they can improve the data base of their papers. To improve participation, some instructors grade the quality of a student's participation on a pass/fail basis (usually a percentage of the total grade of the assignment).

3. Advantages and Disadvantages: Problems and Solutions

A. Responsibility

Interactive teaching and group work require that both the instructor and students assume responsibility for the activity within a course. Instructors will lecture less, but will spend more time designing and managing assignments. Students will spend more time preparing for class rather than reading up afterwords and more time actually interacting in class.

B. Content

This mode works best when instructors are interested in the development of concepts and/or in mastery of a process.

C. Class Size

Group work can be used in large classes, but only in a limited way (unless the instructor has an extensive network of resources — teaching assistants, tutors, etc.). I have run small group projects through classes as large as 300 students. Normally, I would design a task, and then ask them to solve it either with their neighbour or in a «buzz» group (a group of 4 students — two in front and two behind).

In my view, the methodology works best in classes of 20 - 35 where the instructor can build in reporting time for each group.

Workshop 3: RESEARCH PAPERS

What students sometimes think

Surveys reveal that students believe that they are asked to write research papers «to learn more about a topic; to learn how to use a library; to show how much they know» (Schwegler and Shamoan 818). When asked to describe how they wrote research papers, students reported the following process:

You usually don't get around to it for a while, but when you do you start out with a little bit of an idea: then you get a lot of books and put the information on note cards: you keep the note cards and bibliography sorted out: then you put together the pieces of information that are related, start on a rough outline, and finally write the paper. (Schwegler and Shamoan 818)

What faculty think

Surveys reveal that academic writers see research papers as a way to «test a theory, to follow up on previous research, or to explore a problem» (Schwegler and Shamoan 819). They describe the research process as follows.

The original focus begins with getting interested in an idea during reading...and getting a sense of where the field stands theoretically and methodologically — and jotting down notes about problems...There is a continuous degree of uncertainty through the process...but when you write the paper you really have an obligation to state your views and to state what you have perceived or concluded in strong enough terms so that there is some validity to the statement. (Schwegler and Shamoan 819)

PROCESS

1. Topic Development

- * analyze the available topics
- * think about the nature of the task — explanation, comparison, evaluation?
- * select a topic of personal interest to you
- * frame the topic into a question that attempts to capture something problematic about the topic

2. Exploration

- * identify what you already know about your question
- * identify what you already believe about your question
- * develop an hypothesis i.e., identify what you think is the answer to your question

3. Library Exploration (Listening to the Conversation)

- * check the Reviews e.g. **Annual Review of Psychology**
- * check the card catalogue, library computer system — books
- * check for journal articles
- * move from Indexes through Abstracts to specific Journal articles, e.g. ERIC to RIE to **Child Development**
- * develop a system to keep track of your research i.e., the information you locate **AND** your reaction to and assessment of that research.

4. Data Exploration (Discovering what you want to say)

- * ask yourself exploratory questions as you read
 1. Is my hypothesis still valid?
 2. Do I see a pattern (explanation or rationale) emerging from the literature?

Most importantly decide What you think and why you think that way.

5. Sketch out your paper

- * develop a sharp focus — clearly express **what** you think
- * divide your paper into major arguments or sections — segments derive from the **why** part of your analysis

6. Write your first version (Joining the Conversation)

- * try writing your paper in segments
- * concentrate on clearly explaining your ideas to yourself
- * at the end of each segment stop, review what you have said, and then begin planning the next segment
- * try to make sure that you are using your evidence honestly and effectively
- * keep track of all your sources (notes in the margins)
- * leave yourself «thinking» time

7. Write your second (or subsequent) version

- * revise your paper so that it will all make sense to your reader
- * ask someone else to read it for sense

8. Final Version — Final Product

- * edit for adherence to convention and to remove all surface errors