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Writing Across the Curriculum: A Possible Waterloo Model

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Writing Across the Curriculum programs (WAC), where students write about the various subjects of their programs, have become, in the United States, large scale operations involving over 47% of four-year colleges and universities. For the most part, Canada has yet to implement Writing Across the Curriculum programs, and Roger Graves has found in his recent survey of Canadian university writing practices that, with the exception of a few universities in the East like Dalhousie, Laurentian, and Western Ontario and a few others in the West like the University of British Columbia, University of Saskatchewan at Regina, and the University of Winnipeg which require of all students courses with varying combinations of writing and literature, writing courses are not a mandatory part of the curriculum. This absence of a requirement in writing for every student does not mean that most Canadian students are wholly adept at writing. It means that we have some distance to go in addressing the problem.

That a problem of some sort exists we could probably all agree. But the nature of the problem and the solution will undoubtedly vary from institution to institution. At Waterloo the problem is a significant one, even though the vast majority of students come into the university with an A average. Many of these students have not been required to write essays in high school and do recognize their need for some training, but their access to writing courses is limited. The *Literature and Rhetoric and Professional Writing* honours streams in the Department of

English at Waterloo have grown so rapidly that we have not been able to consider the campus-wide problems in writing. Since our number of majors has risen from 159 in 1981 to about 1000 in 1990-91 with no new faculty resources during that period, our solution has not only been to bar non-majors from many of our upper-division courses but also to cut back on campus-wide access to our entry-level courses so that in our first-year writing courses we have only 800 spaces for a total campus population of 25,000 students.

The paucity of substantial resources does not mean that the University is unconcerned about the value of writing skills. It pioneered the writing proficiency or competency examination in Ontario, which certifies that a student is able to meet at least elementary writing standards, though it does not test complex skills. Because Waterloo has had increasingly high standards of admission, fewer students now fail the examination than a decade ago, and in 1990 56% of those who failed were students whose first language was not English. Our means of assisting the most difficult cases is to have a Writing Clinic available where undergraduate students receive one-on-one tutorial assistance. But only 150 students gain access to the Clinic in each of two terms, more than half of whom are foreign students. Spaces in the Clinic plus those in writing courses give a maximum of about 950 spaces in writing for Waterloo's students over the academic year. Thus it is that only about one twenty-fifth of the students have access to writing courses in any given year. Another 1100 have access to first-year literature courses that contain some writing, but this is specialized academic writing on literary topics. Still another 600 could take writing courses through the correspondence division, but the Distance Education department discourages on-campus students from enrolling. The number of total spaces available in writing and literature courses in relation to the campus population means that fewer than half of the entering first-year full-time students are able to take a single semester course in English. Moreover, it is almost impossible for an upper division student not in English to take a writing course. The problem, then, is a large one.

How do we begin to address this problem when government deficits, provincial cuts to university budgets, and increased enrollment at all levels make it almost impossible to implement or expand writing opportunities in the University? On the face of it, the problem is really

insurmountable. We must try, however, to seek a solution, for our failure to address writing problems within the academy jeopardizes not only the progress of undergraduate students who have inadequate composition skills but also their postgraduate careers, whether in graduate school or in the labour force. In the case of the University of Waterloo, where 60% of the full-time students (about 9000 students) elect a work-study or co-op program with five academic terms in business, industry, and teaching, it also reflects badly upon the university to send into the market place students who are not able to communicate adequately. So, despite the inherent problems of funding such programs in this economically recessionary climate, the failure to implement them is irresponsible and, I would argue, unethical.

The reality of tight university budgets has a serious impact upon what a University can do to address the literacy issue, for it can be extremely expensive to implement writing programs. To require 2 semester courses in English per student would, at a minimum of \$4,000 for each group of 30 students, annually increase costs at Waterloo by \$800,000. Even this sum, as substantial as it sounds, would depend upon hiring sessional instructors and teaching assistants rather than fully enfranchised tenure-track faculty members. Since Ontario universities are not at present funded according to enrollment increases, and since other academic units, whether at the department or faculty levels, are unlikely to share their own financial base to support an expansion of English, our administration would most likely be unwilling to consider this new expense.

Even if my university were willing to absorb this million dollar cost, it is arguable whether this requirement would be wholly positive, for it is not clear how well students learn and how seriously they take writing when they perceive such requirements to be an imposition of the English department, outside the context and discourse community of their own disciplines. James L. Kinneavy speaks for those who favor a return to university-based over departmentally-based writing programs because «the responsibility for writing by the departments of English since the nineteenth century has led to its neglect in many of the other departments of the University» (360). If a university attempts to improve students' writing abilities by housing them only in English departments and by using underpaid sessionals who have little background in and understanding of the theory of writing across the curriculum, the results are likely

to be problematic. In addition, studies now suggest that writing taught only within English departments often does not lead to a positive linking of writing and learning, which seems to be the case when writing is included as part of the work of all disciplines (Tchudi 16). Writing, by many accounts, is more effective when taught within home departments and faculties instead of within the English department. In most instances the faculty members often feel that they benefit even more than the students in studying and teaching the relationship between writing and learning.

Various universities have provided models of instruction for university-based programs, which generally can be classified as either mentor or collegial. The University of Michigan model requires one freshman writing course plus an upper-level writing-intensive course in the student's major field. This program is not housed in the English department (Robinson 482). Beaver College in Pennsylvania requires two writing courses in the English department with at least one in four assignments drawn from work in other disciplines. Both of these models depend upon instruction carried out mainly in English departments with lectures and tutorials—the mentor, hierarchical, or apprenticeship model. At Michigan Technological University English WAC faculty members give counsel to other departments through workshops and seminars on the practice and teaching of writing. This collegial, non-hierarchical, or consultancy model, that first seeks to influence faculty members from other departments before attempting any instruction of the students, places the responsibility for writing outside the English department, giving each discipline more autonomy in the teaching of writing. As Fulwiler freely admits, this approach is not without its problems, though it tends to result in a better informed, more literate student body and faculty (122-123). In both the mentor and collegial models an interdepartmental Writing Center usually serves as the administrative focal point for all the writing activities and provides valuable resources for writing within the academic community. It often is, but does not necessarily have to be, located within the English department. The center sees that writing is taught in certain designated courses in every department and ensures that faculty members from those disciplines take responsibility for writing instruction in them. But, while the mentor model often operates in large lecture courses, followed by small writing tutorials, and depends

on graduate teaching assistants to mark the papers, the collegial model operates in specially designated writing-intensive courses of various sizes taught by professional faculty and sometimes marked by teaching assistants. Clearly indicated in the calendars and designated on transcripts by a «W,» these courses must be passed with a respectable mark.

In both of these instances specialists trained in writing across the curriculum and located primarily within the English department facilitate the instruction by helping to plan the course of instruction, set assignments, discuss pedagogical strategies, and provide guidelines for marking. A special problem with both of these models is that they require certain instructors and teaching assistants in English to be well versed in the various kinds of writing undertaken not only in other faculties, but in such diverse Arts departments as Psychology and Accounting. In the initial stages of program development, a lack of knowledge about the varieties of writing and the nature of departmental discursive practices could be considerable, but this problem should be minimized over time as the professors and graduate students gain experience.

An alternative approach, using features of both the mentor and collegial models, that might suit many universities, would provide a focus on a particular form of writing best suited to the needs of most students. While English departments a decade ago might have assumed the most representative writing to be the expository essay, at Waterloo this almost certainly takes the form of corporate, scientific, and technical reports, a variety of writing popular in the marketplace but still relatively marginalized within most academic contexts.

In a university where every faculty has a work-study component, all co-op students write reports about their work terms. These reports are designed to help them assess the nature and value of their work experiences and to demonstrate the links between work and academy. The reports often describe work experiences and comment on how they could have been altered or improved. Students discover that this form, which is sometimes felt to be ideologically neutral, can have different purposes and uses and calls for all kinds of ethical decisions. Reports are reviewed by three agencies: the students' employers, their co-op co-ordinators (those who find them jobs, keep track of their programs, and visit them on-site), and their faculty advisors—or, most likely, graduate student markers. Although this structure for writing reports

appears to be nicely elaborated and firmly established (see Appendix), it seriously lacks grounding in the theory and practice of writing, in the *process* of arriving at the *product*, or even in spelling out in any satisfactory way the nature of the product. What, after all, can be accomplished in ten typed pages of recommendations and ten more of examples? With the exception of students in the English department's Rhetoric and Professional Writing option, no other students are required to take a course in report writing or in scientific and technical communication. This means that only 2% of the students have any theoretical underpinnings in the structure, conventions, and procedural analysis of reports. As importantly, while the student reports are evaluated by employers, co-ordinators, and teachers, commentary and opportunity for revisions are almost nil. Students, then, have neither the benefit of theory nor appropriate commentary and guidelines for first drafts or revisions.

This university requirement can, however, form the structure of an effective WAC program, not only because of the students' perception of purpose but because of significant administrative and staff involvement.

The most important step in any writing program is to convince the students that writing is an especially important skill not only for their development within, and safe passage through, the university, but also for advancement in their professional lives afterward. From their work experiences students see the necessity of writing in the workplace. Their jobs typically entail the writing of letters, memoranda, and internal and external reports as well as grant applications and contracts. Not uncommonly they are involved in advertising and marketing in addition to software development. Because these students are in university, they are often expected to know about documentation standards, appropriate choices in layout and design, as well as conventional usage. Students may be forgiven for not knowing some of these technicalities, but if their writing is generally inadequate, if the product is poor, they will not be invited back to that firm and will likely receive poor recommendations. Neither the university nor the students can afford this kind of reaction and adverse publicity. Students at Waterloo consequently feel a great deal of pressure to write well, both at work and back at the university. Theirs are products which circulate as public documents and must demonstrate control over matters of conventional structure, format, and usage. Many

students consequently try to enrol in English writing courses, only to discover that they cannot gain entrance.

Other than the students themselves, perhaps those most aware of the problems and hopeful of solutions, are the co-op coordinators who act as the liaisons between the professional community and the university. These individuals are aware of the students' and employers' frustrations, and commonly they are the ones to experience employer hostility and student anger over inadequate communication skills. They are also the ones who usually do not have the training to offer advice on writing.

The recognition of significant writing problems by students, employers, co-op co-ordinators, and faculty members from both English and other university departments means that the political question of instituting a Writing Across the Curriculum program may not be so controversial as it was, for instance, at Berkeley or Colgate (Russell, 1987: 185). It also means that an administrative structure with wide involvement and support could be established relatively easily: two faculty members in English trained in WAC with a group of 6 English Ph.D teaching assistants might constitute the basic teaching complement. In addition, a minimum of 5 teaching assistants from outside Arts could assist in the writing-intensive courses in those other faculties. Ideally, co-op coordinators and representatives of the professional sectors who hire co-op students could also contribute to this endeavor and create an even stronger community of writing.

The course of instruction might proceed along these lines. In the term before their first co-op term (this will vary from faculty to faculty), each student will either take a course on report writing or will have a portion of a given course in his/her home department dedicated to the writing of reports. As preparation for this, the instructors who volunteer to designate their courses as writing intensive will meet with English WAC professors, teaching assistants, and co-ordinators for a series of workshops on such topics as the development of syllabi; use of analysis, evaluation, and judgment in essays; variations of styles; possible structures and formats; standards of design; and usage. While features of format, organization, and usage will be of interest to faculty and students alike, a fundamentally important function of these workshops will be to discuss writing as a complex developmental process linking knowing and thinking in ways that are relevant to the entire community. For instance,

students may be asked to consider what factors in the field of engineering seem to necessitate a certain report structure and whether, given different understandings of the discipline, the intended audience, and the gender of the writer, a different structure and format might be appropriate. Even discussing the differences between the expository essay and report might well assist faculty and students in thinking out the strengths and limitations of writing strategies and models within their own disciplines. Issues of how we know and how we present our knowledge can be effectively considered both by using and questioning the seemingly fixed constraints of the report.

Workshops and issues can be adapted to the special requirements of each discipline, while questioning the bases of assumptions about writing within those disciplines. Workshops will not only deal with disciplinary considerations, the reasons for unity reports, and with reports as reports, but also with the pedagogy appropriate to teaching these materials: these could include team teaching and tutorial instruction. The nature of assignments and methods of formative and peer evaluation will have a special place here. For each of the academic terms following the next two work terms, students will again concentrate on the form of reports in conjunction with their disciplines, but specifically on exploring issues that involve revision and editing: plain language, various discursive practices, pictoracy and literacy (the relationship of designs, graphs, and visual symbols to writing), and collaborative versus individual writing. An emphasis upon revision will address an aspect of writing frequently undertaught, though in theory highly valued, for major issues will almost certainly be the complexities of audience and voice. With three groups designated to evaluate work term reports—employers, co-ordinators, and professors—co-op students quickly become aware of the slipperiness of audience designation.

Within the writing-intensive courses, students would be required to do a fixed amount of writing. A common requirement in other WAC programs, and one that seems fair, is about 5,000 words (Griffin 402). The writing exercises might include a proposal for a report, describing the rationale for its purpose, audience, and voice; a draft of the report at least 10 pages in length; and the final revised report itself. The student would consult with the instructor or teaching assistant at each major juncture.

A writing clinic would continue to form a main part of the support structure. At present, the writing clinic, consisting of a part-time director and 8 part-time staff, exists to address the needs of a special, mainly foreign, group of difficult cases. It might continue to deal with such problems—basic usage, grammatical conventions, and choices of diction, but these might be redefined as more people become aware of the problems of effective writing, and as more people become expert in solving them. It may well be—and this is a highly controversial point—that a fee-for-service should be levied for students who require the use of specialized clinical instruction or that foreign students should automatically be charged a fee to ensure that they have access to specialized writing instruction and also to ensure that scarce funds are utilized in such a way that native English speakers also have an opportunity for clinical assistance.

Pedagogically, *Writing Across the Curriculum* as a university endeavor seems superior in many respects to a departmentally-based model where the responsibility for writing is seen solely as belonging to English, and where writing conforms to conditions and strategies more applicable to the humanities. It is also more economically feasible. Two fully qualified professors and 11 or 12 teaching assistants, at present costs, would run about \$200,000 annually. To organize this writing endeavor around report writing would meet the immediate needs of many of the students, and other writing forms and strategies could be introduced to a broader range of students after this model is up and running. The macro-structure of interested faculty markers, co-op co-ordinators, and employers is in place, and motivation is high. The disadvantage of this structure is, however, that the teaching of writing is significantly dependent upon the good will of other faculties and the availability of willing instructors to teach in those specially designated courses. These are important political issues, but, insofar as this program can meet a real need on campus that would otherwise go unaddressed, the issues may be resolved positively. Certainly, in most other places that have instituted the collegial model, professors who hesitatingly volunteered to serve as co-ordinators of such writing instruction have become enthusiastic advocates. I believe this would also be the case at Waterloo.

APPENDIX

The present «Guidelines for Writing Your Work Term Report,» distributed to all faculties, is only of the briefest sort. Consisting of ten pages of recommendations and another ten of examples, it speaks of the purpose of the report, the selection of subject, choice of audience, stages of writing (initial conceptualizing, prewriting or planning, writing, revising, and completing), and format. The section on format contains attenuated descriptions and examples of the required organization: preliminary pages (front cover, title page, letter of submittal, table of contents, lists of tables, and statement of confidentiality), summary (or abstract), conclusions, recommendations, main section, references, glossary and nomenclature, and appendix. No thought is provided as to why or how this required format meets any goals within specific disciplines or how other strategies might be employed.