

Reliving the History of WAC—Every Day

by Chris Thaiss
Coordinator, National Network of WAC Programs

[This is a version of the talk I gave at the Third National Conference on Writing Across the Curriculum, held in Charleston, SC on February 6-8, 1997. I was part of a panel on the "History of WAC" with Elaine Maimon and Susan McLeod.]

In preparation for this talk I was leafing through old files from 1978, the year we started WAC workshops at George Mason. I ran across the faded original of a typed memo we'd sent faculty announcing a two-day off-campus retreat—our first activity of what we came to call the Faculty Writing Program. ("Writing across the Curriculum" was a known term in those days, but not yet standard parlance.)

A few things about the memo were similar to some workshop announcements of today: among the session topics were assignment design, ways (including peer response) to promote revision of student writing, and commenting on grammar, punctuation, and spelling (for which we relied on advice in Mina Shaughnessy's new book, *Errors and Expectations*). The workshop format was also like what we often do today: varying portions of lecture, writing, small-group "hands-on" with writing samples, and Q and A. Moreover, our workshop then, like those now to some extent, was based on theory and research conducted before the mid-70's: Shaughnessy's in the New York City open-admissions colleges and that of James Britton, Nancy Martin, and their colleagues in the British Schools Council Project.

But some things were very different from today:

(1) In 1978, we brought in an outside speaker, Bob Parker of Rutgers, who had worked with Britton and Martin in England, to show our colleagues that ours was not just some home-grown whim that a couple of English teachers (the term "composition specialist" was not yet used in polite company) were trying to foist on our good-hearted colleagues across the university.

(2) The session presentations, aside from those given by Parker and by my colleague Don Gallehr and myself, were made by local high school English teachers, members of the first group who had gone through the previous summer's first institute of the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

(3) The term "writing to learn" was nowhere to be found in the announcement, nor were "journals" mentioned in the workshop except in a presentation ("Personal Journal Writing") on Britton's concept of "expressive writing." This was understandable: while Nancy Martin's 2-year-old book, *Writing and Learning Across the*

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Curriculum, 11-16, had been all about the links between language and learning, and while Janet Emig's essay "Writing as a Mode of Learning" had appeared the previous year in *College Composition and Communication*, it hadn't yet sunk in to Don and me that our colleagues in other fields might be as much attracted to writing because of its effect on learning as because of typical English teacher preoccupation with writing proficiency. As for "journals," Toby Fulwiler's essay "Journals across the Curriculum" was still two years over the horizon; it would be six before journals became so popular in one WAC program at Mason that students complained of "journal overkill."

I make these comparisons between our first workshop in 1978 and WAC today at my university because I find that, in fact, every stage of WAC history is alive and well today at Mason. I suspect this is true at most schools, and not only at big ones like ours with far-flung geography, lots of faculties, and significant turnover. On a hypothetical WAC timeline, different groups of faculty seem to be living at different points in recent history, differences I and members of our University Writing Committee need to keep in mind as we make policy and publish information. To wit:

"Pre-1978": I still encounter a few faculty who've never heard of writing across the curriculum and some who have heard of it but who reject any responsibility for and any notion of the usefulness of writing in their teaching. In 1978, this was the stereotype in which I placed most faculty. In 1997, I don't specifically address this audience in newsletters or workshop flyers, but I secretly hope that the regular barrage of upbeat essays about successful techniques in actual classes and about writing support services will both inform and win over the die-hards.

"Early 1980's": Another segment of faculty knows some terminology, recognizes the value of students' writing in disciplines, assigns anywhere from a little to a lot, but really hasn't applied writing-to-learn techniques nor writing as revision to their own teaching. This may be the largest single group at the University, as sample syllabi, student portfolios (Thaiss and Zawacki), and student reports suggest. WAC publications and workshops are tacitly addressed to this faculty member. The writing-intensive requirement adopted by the Faculty Senate in 1993 and implemented in 1995 presupposes that a good deal of writing is assigned across the disciplines at Mason (with a few exceptions among fields), but that the process of draft-feedback-revision needs to be mandated.

“Late 1980’s”: Even by 1980, we had a tiny nucleus of faculty across fields whose teaching techniques would have merited inclusion in much later collections such as *The Journal Book* and *Programs That Work*. By the late 80’s this group numbered well over 100; by 1997 it’s the second largest segment on campus: it includes most of the people who teach the WI courses and many of the faculty in our three cross-disciplinary general education programs. These tend to be the folks who write for the newsletter, about whom pieces are written, who present on workshop panels, and whose syllabi are sampled on the WAC home page.

“Mid 90’s and Beyond”: Vanguards are by definition small, but this one grows rapidly, particularly under the impetus of the electronic revolution. They move out in directions that not only could not have been envisioned in 1978—that memo was typed on an IBM Selectric, then mimeographed—but in ways that explode the definitions of “writing” and “teaching” embodied in such notions as the

“writing intensive course” or “the writing process.” These folks teach interactive distance-learning courses, lead multi-disciplinary service-learning courses, serve on the University writing committee, win state “Teacher of the Year” awards, give papers on writing-to-learn at their disciplinary conventions, etc., etc. As WAC “director,” I can facilitate, arrange, and publicize for these folks—I can do some theorizing, too, as I’m doing now—but I can’t lead nor “direct.”

The irony of reliving history each day, as I implied earlier, is that just after I’ve been learning from a group of senior engineering students about the rhetorical difficulties of building a signal processing home page that must seem intelligent to the professor and be interesting to a web surfer into techno flicks, I get a phone call from a teacher who says that he or she would “like to assign writing only the English department hasn’t taught the students APA.” One minute I’m in a cyberspace odyssey, the next I’m back at that Selectric looking for the white-out key. But while I feel for a moment as if I’ve traveled back in time, I quickly realize that I’m not stuck there. Not only do I have lots more to say that can help that caller than I did in 1978, but there are hundreds of faculty at the University who can deliver the message at least as well as I.

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