

Integrating a Writing-across-curriculum Program into a Self-access Learning Center

Jeng-yih (Tim) Hsu

National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology

Abstract

In recent years, several writing centers have been set up in colleges and universities of Taiwan. Almost at the same time, many self-access learning centers are being designed and built on campuses all over the island. Whether these two institutes function jointly or independently, dissatisfaction arises. In order to run the self-access learning center more efficiently, the researcher proposes that by integrating a writing-across-curriculum (WAC) program, a self-access learning center can at least take care of its writing skill component and then further refines the rest. The follow-ups can be achieved by implementing speaking-across-curriculum, reading-across-curriculum, and even foreign-language-across-curriculum, all of which are modeled after the original writing-across-curriculum idea.

The basic ingredients for a WAC program include: (1) a campus-wide needs assessment, (2) an institutional structure for leadership within the WAC program, (3) carefully planned and funded initial workshops with faculty members across academic fields, (4) on-going training and support for implementing WAC, and (5) institutionalizing WAC by writing it into curricular and goal statements. In the researcher's current university, there has been a Multimedia English Learning Center. He discusses the early success of and difficulties encountered by the center. By introducing the WAC idea, he expects problems in hands can be overcome and the original goal of the center, learner autonomy, can be best promoted.

Keywords: writing across the curriculum (WAC), curriculum/syllabus design, self-access learning center, writing center, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Growing out of the idea of self-directed learning (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1995), the self-access language learning center has been constantly built up one after another, mainly in colleges and universities, around Taiwan. Whether it is named "center" (with secured funding) or "lab/classroom" (with limited financial supply), the new institute equipped with a large collection of learning materials is gaining its popularity. Foreign language educators, particularly in EFL, witnessed the most rapid growth of such trend in the past 10 years (Lee, Good, & Chen, 2004). After the first pioneer group, National Chiao Tung University and National Tsing Hua University, dozens of self-access learning centers have been established (e.g., National Taiwan University, Soochow University, National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Chen Shiu University, Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages¹).

Initiated ahead of or in parallel with the self-access learning centers, writing centers (more specifically "English writing centers") are also spreading into major colleges and universities in Taiwan. It is not too surprising to see an English writing

¹ For a comprehensive list of self-access language learning centers, see 楊奕心(2007).

center and a self-access language learning center standing side by side within a university. In some universities, the two institutes are operated jointly (e.g., National Taiwan University, Fu Jen Catholic University, and National Sun Yat-Sen University) while in others they are assigned under different departments and set to function separately (e.g., National Tsing Hua University, Foo Yin University).

It is certainly too arbitrary to judge if one design outperforms the other due to the fact that the budgets, faculty numbers, facilities, purposes of centers, and student needs differ from one university to another. However, the above mentioned leading universities which ambitiously embrace both self-access learning center and writing center actually provide a model for the other colleges and universities in higher education of Taiwan to re-evaluate their current situation (with one or both centers, or even neither).

My university, National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, was fortunate to set up its Multimedia English Learning Center (henceforth MELC) with the grants from Ministry of Education (MOE) and the University, and will soon celebrate its fourth anniversary. Ever since its origin, MELC was designed to support the English courses required in non-English majors' General Education credits (Lee & Chen, 1999). With the increasing demands for adding a writing component to the MELC from students and faculty (of business, finance and banking, engineering, and electrical engineering and computer science colleges²), we need to actually start thinking and evaluating if we need to physically set up a new writing center as an adjunct or simply adjust the original design of MELC. In this paper, drawing partially from the pioneer writing centers of Taiwanese universities and partially from the experiences of American universities, I propose an idea: Writing-Across-Curriculum. I believe it will help the MELC innovate and reform without undergoing dramatic changes or physically constructing a new building to meet the needs of our current students and the expectations of our faculty of business and engineering fields.

MULTIMEDIA ENGLISH LEARNING CENTER AT NATIONAL KAOHSIUNG FIRST UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Background of the Multimedia English Learning Center

The MELC at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology did not sprout at a sudden. Serving graduates from mostly vocational high school and junior colleges in Taiwan, the University has set up its goal to bring up its students' foreign language proficiency to a satisfying level accepted by the global workplace. English, the lingua franca, was then the pre-selected language to be taught to the students of non-English majors. General Education (GE) Program became the ideal place where students had a chance to conduct formal English learning. After a series of meetings and systematic studies of learner needs, a sequence of four-level³ GE English courses and individualized learning materials were finalized for the first group of students enrolled in the 1999/2000 academic year (Lee & Chen, 1999).

Nevertheless, with the growing number of new arriving students annually and the changes of language learning patterns (Hung, 2003; Littlewood, 1999; Rubin & Thompson, 1994), the University has finally decided to acknowledge such needs for

² Beginning from the 2006/2007 academic year, there are five colleges in National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology.

³ Currently, there are 5 levels of GE English courses after we add an "advanced" on top of the fourth level.

self-learning. On the one hand, the number of English faculty was limited. On the other hand, an increasing number of studies had shown that learner autonomy can be fostered and should be encouraged (Benson, 2001; Cotterall, 1996; Dickinson, 1995). The aid from MOE and the University made possible the MELC. Built upon the idea that our students will be better motivated and paced if they can proceed on their own, the MELC opened its door in November 2003. Up to this year, teachers and students from more than 100 high schools and colleges in Taiwan have visited us. It has been the joint work of many administration, curriculum design, and foreign language education professionals (Lee, Good, & Chen, 2004; Lee, Chen, & Good, 2007).

Current Status of the Multimedia English Learning Center

Attaching itself to the College of Foreign Languages, the MELC is located on the second floor of a cooking pan shaped tower. Its interior accommodates for 60 personal computers, 2 service desks, 2 counseling rooms, and discussion areas with sofas and tables. The MELC consists of two major facilities: the self-access program (built onto a campus-wide intra-net system) and the self-directed learning resources (composed by 6 language learning materials), both of which were designed for a threefold pedagogical goals: (1) provide support to GE English classes, (2) make up for limited time to train listening and speaking in large-sized classes, and (3) foster autonomy and cultivate students' habits and positive attitudes toward life-long self-directed learning (Lee et al., 2007).

The first pedagogical goal is clearly designed to reduce teachers' workload. After diagnosed by the placement test, our GE students will be requested to come in and conduct independent learning inside the center (currently one hour weekly) by means of the 2 major facilities. We can then reduce the regular GE English courses to 2 hours per week. An ideal balance is made between teacher-student and student-machine interactions. The second goal is set to compensate possible time loss for listening and speaking practices in a class of 55~60 students. In the MELC, students are provided interactive role-playing dialogues through which they gain additional opportunities to polish their audio and oral skills on an individual basis. As for the third goal, it aims at training students into independent self-guided and self-motivated learners. During the University regular hours, the 2 counseling rooms, hosted by full-time and part-time English teachers, are open to all students who are willing to come in and look for assistance on problems related to language learning. It is the hope of the MELC that our students will gradually internalize the entire self-access learning process and come to the center for their own needs whether they are interacting with the software or teachers-on-duty.

Challenges Await for the Multimedia English Learning Center

Lee and her colleagues (2007) have foreseen that many difficulties were waiting for the MELC to overcome and it might take the reform of GE curriculum, teachers and learners' supports, and the invention of creative learning materials to keep the center thrive. Cheng's (2006) study on the evaluation of the center perhaps warped up the functions of our MELC best as her 217 interviewees ranked the two major learning facilities the most efficient resources and half of the interviewees also found the speaking and listening programs beneficial.

It seems that our MELC is enjoying its sweet success if the first 3 years after its debut is regarded as the first generation. The road ahead of the second generation MELC, however, does not appear to be smooth. The English writing component has

been obviously left out. Our goal to train students into a fluent English user can not be achieved if one essential skill, writing, is always lagging behind. Besides, the needs for providing academic English writing training are becoming severe. The MOE (in press, 2006) is planning to request 70% of college graduates pass certain types of ‘exit’ English proficiency tests, such as GEPT, TOEFL, or IELTS, all of which demand a speed writing test. At National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, in a faculty meeting (personal communication, 2007) at the College of Foreign Languages, we decided to discuss the possibility of offering research writing and business writing courses (i.e., both intensive English writing courses) to undergraduates (and later graduates) of Marketing and Distribution Management majors. With the limited faculty members from Department of English (i.e., presently 18 teachers), the time for MELC to step in and function to its maximum is arriving.

HOW CAN WRITING-ACROSS-CURRICULUM (WAC) HELP?

What is Writing-across-curriculum (WAC)?

Originating from the first language setting in colleges and universities of the USA, a writing-across-the-curriculum (henceforth WAC) program is hardly defined; it is more often described. The goals of most WAC programs are to help the students improve writing and to learn by writing in a wide range of academic areas (Maimon, 1980). Process writing and revision, and perhaps collaboration, become major parts of the writing assignments in the arts, sciences, mathematics, engineering, business, humanities, and literature. Writing includes both formally prepared graded papers as well as informal and in-class ungraded writing. A teacher, Bangert-Drowns, at the State University of New York, Albany, defines WAC program as

WAC seeks three things: to increase the frequency of student writing, to integrate and elaborate writing strategies throughout the different content areas, and to promote the instrumental use of writing as a tool for other academic ends....WAC is more than just writing instruction, more than just making students write more, more than trying to get students to write better. It is the strategic integration of carefully designed writing tasks in any content area to serve the ends of learning, authentic communication, personal engagement, and reflective authorship (Personal communication, cited in Brewster & Klump, 2004, p. 7)

In real practices, WAC could differ depending on the joint needs of students, faculty, administration, program goals, and resources. McLeod and Maimon (2000) perhaps capture the original essence of a WAC program best by defining from two viewpoints:

From the teacher’s point of view, WAC is a pedagogical reform movement that presents an alternative to the “delivery of information” model of teaching in higher education, to lecture classes and to multiple-choice, true-false testing. In place of this model, WAC presents two ways of using writing in the classroom and the curriculum: writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines (p. 579)....From the WAC director’s point of view,

WAC is a programmatic entity made up of several elements, all of them intertwined: faculty development, curricula components, student support, assessment, and an administrative structure and budget (p. 580).

Putting WAC into a program of itemized list, common requirements for WAC may include the followings:

1. A group of cross-disciplinary faculty members,
2. A series of potential changes in ways of delivering information in classroom settings,
3. A collection of writing-related courses, such as writing intensive courses, first-year composition, upper-division writing, senior writing seminars, and field-specific writing instruction,
4. New forms of evaluation, including multiple writing proficiency assessments and student portfolio assessments (Fulwiler & Young, 1990),
5. Systemic and consistent workshops, support, and fund for providing training to faculty as well as services to students (McLeod & Maimon, 2000).

Writing-across-curriculum (WAC) Programs in the New Millennium

Since the beginning of WAC movement, five decades have passed. WAC is currently being interpreted and implemented in many different forms throughout the United States. Many taking a broader school-wide approach by setting up on-campus writing centers (Brewster & Klump, 2004), cross-school boundary projects like middle school-university partnerships (Jennings & Hunn, 2002), or peer and cross-age tutoring programs (Stuckey, 2002). Others make changes at the classroom level via two types of practices: Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Writing to Learn (WTL). Classroom practitioners believe that the former trains students to become better readers, thinkers, and learners by conducting discipline-specific writings while the latter uses writing as tool to translate knowledge (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003; Reed, 2006).

To construct a WAC program in an EFL setting like Taiwan, the experiences of American universities can be valuable. By looking at the historical perspective it is obvious to find many key elements to direct a new program on: 1) conducting a big scale campus-wide needs assessment in order to meet the students' and teachers' demands; 2) establishing and securing an institutional structure for leadership is in place and funded (i.e., a new leader can run the new WAC program without comprising and sacrificing); 3) carefully and consistently organizing and funding workshops with faculty of cross-disciplines to overcome misperceptions, attitudes, practices, and theoretical differences; 4) planning on-going training and provide support for faculty who implement WAC in their classrooms; and 5) preparing to institutionalize WAC by writing it into curricular reforms and mission and goal statements.

BUILDING A WAC-BASED SELF-ACCESS LEARNING CENTER: THE BEST TIME TO LAUNCH A WAC PROGRAM IS NOW!

At present, the student population at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology is at its historical high, totaling around 6,800 (undergraduates

and graduates). Our aim for the optimal student enrollment will be over 10,000. Once we decide to add in a “writing” component (i.e., ‘learning to write’ and ‘writing to learn’ according to the WAC concept) to every student’s curriculum, it is no longer and almost impossible just the responsibility of the 30-plus part-time GE English teachers and the 18 full-time faculty members in the Department of English. By building a WAC-based self-access learning center, we can at least start trying to solve the problems occurring at the very early stage and preparing ourselves for the relatively complicated ones in the future. Physically, the Multimedia English Learning Center is always standing there. It will, however, take the total devotion from the entire faculty, Center for General Education, and the University if we hope to begin test-running the new generation MELC underpinned by the WAC idea. Below I elaborate how the three parties involved can help during the process of setting up a WAC-based MELC.

A Campus-wide Needs Assessment: Understanding Student and Faculty Needs

A campus-wide needs assessment aims at not only the students but also the faculty (Brewster & Klump, 2004). While our college EFL learners fear writing and are worried whether they will be able to obtain an English proficiency certificate, our teacher colleagues are seeing students’ problems of literacy. Simply many of our students do not know how to read and write effectively and efficiently. Emerging in English textbooks and facing English writing assignments in daily routines, students and teachers of non-English majors suffer altogether. Our faculty from College of Engineering and College of Management has made clear that their students need training of English writing. The Department of Information Management had taken one brave step forward as it brought in an on-line English writing program (i.e., My Access 7.1) this March, hoping to enhance its students’ writing.

Interestingly, there are not yet too many dialogues going on among teachers of College of Foreign Languages (to which Department of English belongs), Center of General Education, and the other four non-language colleges. The necessity to conduct a big-scale needs assessment and invite students and faculty to voice out what they need is obvious.

An Institutional Structure for a Funded Leadership in Place: Securing a Director in Charge

We at the University are very lucky as we actually have an English Education Section under the Center of General Education. The former and current directors for English Education are both English specialists and full-time faculty members from Department of English. The director’s duty is to supervise our MELC and take charge of the teacher recruitment and assignment, course design, and fund distribution for all GE English classes.

In fact, the National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology is at a very good position to initiate a WAC program by integrating such idea into the MELC. It is evident that we are ready in many aspects. For instance, the MELC fund can be further distributed to purchase the two most available online writing programs, i.e., My Access and Criterion-ETS. And teachers of business and engineering backgrounds, other than co-teaching a writing intensive course with English faculty, can participate by taking shifts at the MELC counseling students’ writing. A well-financed WAC-based MELC with a funded leader position is in a good shape to kick off here at the National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology.

Workshops with Cross-disciplinary Faculty: Getting Faculty's Involvement

At our preliminary meeting for the Teaching Excellence Project of 2007/2008 academic year, teachers from the Department of Marketing and Distribution Management have expressed their interest to team-design and team-teach with English faculty research writing and business writing to students of marketing and distribution management majors. Starting from the fall of 2006, the Center of General Education also began to offer several advanced English conversation courses to students of non-English majors. This course offering pattern will be duplicated when we test-offer certain English-writing-focused courses in the fall of 2007.

To put it simply, with a WAC program in mind, we plan to involve as many faculty members of different academic disciplines as possible. By holding a group of teachers who are enthusiastic about English, we can then begin our talks, meetings, and workshops on how to help our students in a wide range of fields to become better English 'writers' and ultimately 'users.' The idea of WAC is getting writing experts of cross-disciplines together, using their background of field-specific knowledge and English writing, and creating a course of two-fold purposes: content knowledge and writing skills (Jennings & Hunn, 2002; Maimon, Nodine, Hearn, & Haney-Peritz, 1990; McLeod & Marmon, 2000).

At our University, whether we start from speaking-across-curriculum (as the advanced conversation courses began earlier) or writing-across-curriculum, the concept behind is identically built around WAC. Our faculty as a whole is in action as the involvement is voluntarily promising. It is certainly comforting to see many principles of WAC are being put into practice.

Constant Training and Support for WAC faculty: Safeguarding Funds

A self-running WAC-based self-access learning center can not be possible without consistent funding and supports from the University and Ministry of Education. At the infancy of the WAC-based MELC, we will need to hold constant training workshops and seminars. We may even plan on regularizing all the workshops and seminars in a year-by-year basis.

Currently, the MELC is fortunately being financially sponsored by the University and the Teaching Excellence Project (MOE, in press, 2006) for 3 consecutive academic years (i.e., 2006~2008). It is perhaps at the hearts of all teachers that we hope the fund to come will not be a one-night wonder and will flow in constantly if we can actually prove how our MELC can accomplish.

Institutionalizing WAC: Writing WAC into the University Mission and Goal Statements

It is hard enough whether we are introducing the WAC idea or integrating a WAC program into our current self-access MELC. It is even harder if we attempt to institutionalize WAC by writing it into the University mission and goal statements. Nevertheless, it is a possible dream that we teachers and students at the National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology can have because we have had a good basis to begin and are quite ahead of many others in the country towards the establishment of a university rooted in WAC.

CONCLUSION

It is certainly not the intent of this position paper to force the University or the entire EFL community to embrace the concept of WAC right away, given its failures and unforeseen pitfalls unpredictable to us. WAC is a possible idea of curriculum reform derived from the L1-based American education contexts. We are not certain how it may help or where it will lead us. However, by introducing this WAC, I am hoping to bring back perhaps the most important element of English fluency—writing, the piece cut from the learners due to many unavoidable difficulties and limited instructional manpower and sources when we first started our MELC many years ago.

The road to construct the most efficient self-access language learning center is harsh and as language teachers we all fight to create the best environment and opportunities in order to nurture learner autonomy. The writing-across-curriculum idea offers a new possibility and certainly will stir up many debates on whether it will help us succeed in running a self-access learning center which fosters language autonomy, but it is definitely worth exploring. (Below I provide a figure which helps clarify how I propose to integrate the WAC program into the current MELC in our University.)

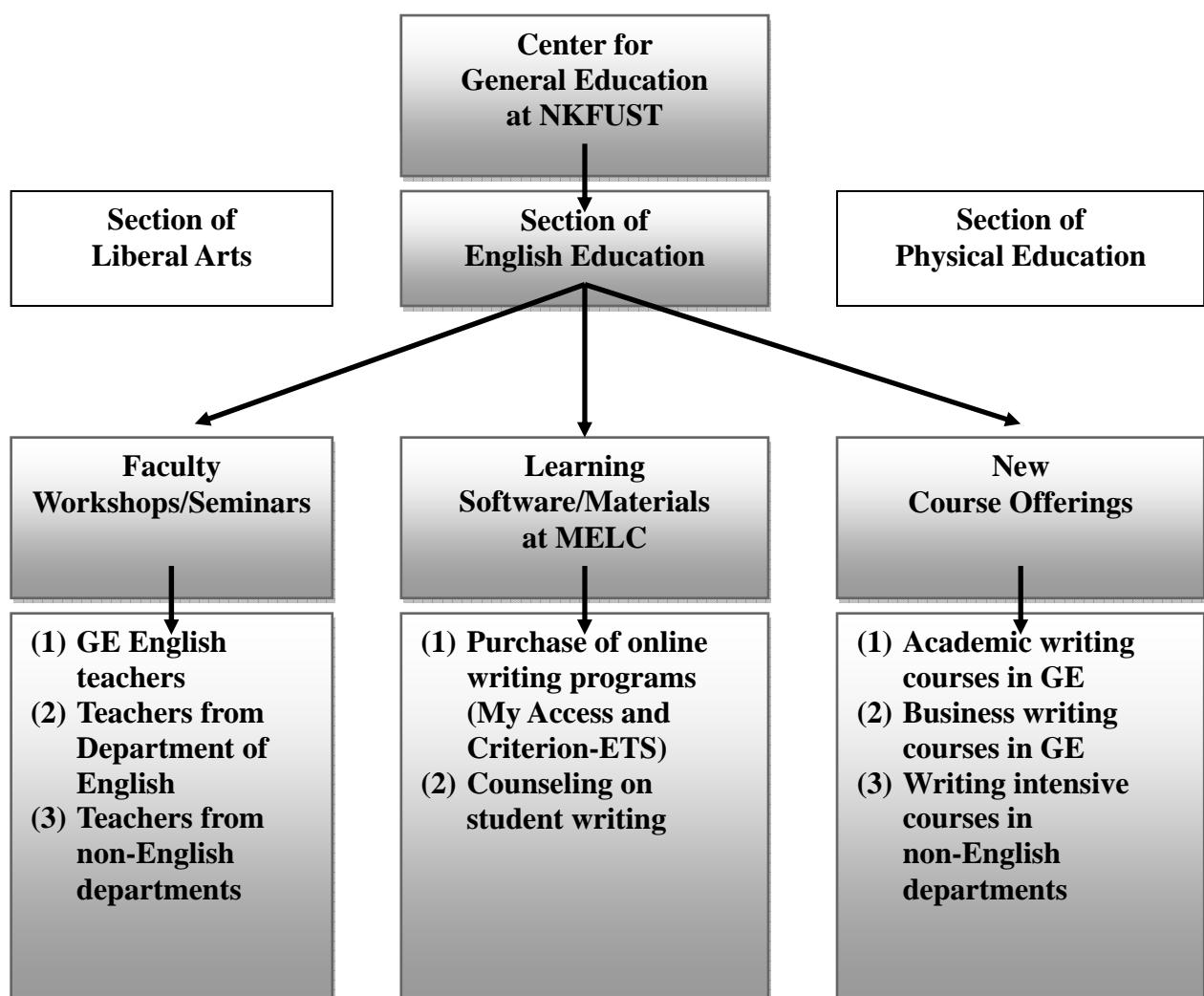


Figure 1. The layout of a WAC-based MELC at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology

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