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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on some of the strategies that were crucial to the eventual success of Writing across the Curriculum (WAC), or, as it is called at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, WTL, Writing to Learn. The paper also mentions some of the pitfalls. According to the paper, the budget for WAC is \$100 annually--when divided by the number of class days in a typical school year, it comes out to \$0.55 a day. The paper pinpoints and discusses the following strategies: (1) surveying faculty about students' writing skills; (2) sympathizing with faculty and administrators' frustration regarding student literacy; (3) suggesting writing assignments with interested faculty; (4) designing and adapting some assignments so as not to burden professors with additional assessment chores; (5) establishing a Writing to Learn faculty committee; (6) setting an agenda for the WTL committee; and (7) holding one seminar per year with only a small additional budget from the Vice-President of Academic Affairs. It also pinpoints these pitfalls: receiving "on high" edicts from the administration; validating the faculty's fear of pedagogical intrusion; placing blame; overwhelming faculty from other disciplines with writing theory, terminology, and strategies; setting oneself up as an authority rather than as an ally; and speaking in negatives rather than positives. (NKA)

Turning WAC Skeptics Into WAC Participants on 55¢/Day

by

Barbara Smith

Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001).

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Turning WAC Skeptics into WAC Participants on 55¢/Day

The title of this presentation, “Turning WAC Skeptics into WAC Participants on 55¢ per day” derives from our budget of \$100 annually. This, when divided by the required number of days in a typical school year, comes out to 55 cents per day. This is our budget. However, we now have, having earned our credibility, financing for one annual one-day colloquium as well. It would be great to have money with which to induce faculty to participate in that colloquium, but we don’t—and we’ve had great turnouts. Dr. Schmalz will tell you specifically about that. My presentation focuses on some of the strategies that were crucial to the eventual success of WAC, or as we call it at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, WTL, Writing to Learn. I’ll also mention some of the pitfalls.

Strategy 1. We began by querying the faculty about students’ writing skills through the use of questionnaires designed to require only minimal response effort, that is, checking off applicable items. (Copies to be handed out.) This helped the forthcoming Writing to Learn initiatives derive from faculty input. Faculty could see that this was something that came not as an edict from on high, but as an effort to address their own **articulated** concerns. They could then appreciate the next request, coming to a Writing to Learn meeting, as a logical consequence of their own articulated concerns. On the flyer, serving as an inducement to come to the meeting, we made sure to enumerate the most often cited complaints about student writing as well as the benefits of addressing these issues together rather than in isolation.

Strategy 2. In hallway conversations, or when sitting next to a faculty member before any sort of meeting was about to begin, or in the mailroom—wherever the opportunity presented itself—I, and later my missionaries, sympathized with other faculty and administrators’ frustration regarding student literacy. We wanted them to know that we were aware of the problem, and in our own classes were taking steps to address it. In a friendly, collegial way, we made it known that we were excited about what we were doing, and for that reason were eager to share our writing “experiments” with them.

Strategy 3. Beginning with those faculty even mildly interested, I suggested writing assignments (based on readings I had done in preparation for this initiative, relying heavily on John Bean’s book). For example,

Dr. Pam Kerrigan in the Chemistry department showed her class a tape called “Radio Bikini” which had to do with nuclear testing on Bikini Island, and with the “classified” information that resulted in death and deformity to the natives and to our military personnel. I helped with designing an analysis assignment having to do with chemical reaction (this part obviously supplied by the professor), propaganda, ethics, etc.

Dr. Kathleen Schmalz, in health education, was interested in peer feedback, and Bro. Michael Sevastakis in the Communications department was intent on focusing on grammar and sentence construction, so we made suggestions for the wording of his marginal comments, referred him to the handbook we all use, to John Bean book, which devotes a chapter to correctness, and encouraged him to require students to avail themselves of the services of the writing center, with which he could become as involved as he deems desirable.)

Dr. Mary Fuller in the Psychology Department and I designed a writing assignment requiring the students to discuss psychological principles such as the identity theories of Freud, stages of development theories of Freud and Erikson, and the concept of “learned helplessness” in terms of the characters’ behaviors in the literary works the students were reading in their Core lit course.

Strategy 4. Designing and adapting some assignments so that they wouldn’t burden professors with additional assessment chores. Introducing faculty to WTL by creating more work for faculty would guarantee their resistance. So we started out with ideas such as one-minute papers, peer group writing in response to a critical thinking question, the results of which are presented to the class by the group’s spokesperson. After the benefits of WTL were clearly established, and as faculty truly believed we were there to support, not to demand, they were far more open to investing their time and effort, and we could get beyond those very short WTL activities.

Strategy 5. Establishing a Writing to Learn Committee, initially made up of a handful of interested faculty, now including 14 faculty members from 11 disciplines. From this WTLC came the eventual implementation of WE (writing emphasis, some institutions call them WI, writing intensive) courses. We set the criteria for these courses, did the necessary consulting with the Registrar so that they appeared as WE on transcripts and with the formatters of the College catalog so that the WE courses were listed as such. We also offered to help departments with designing writing assignments that met their and their students’ needs. As a result 95 courses were designated as WE. Dr. Moliterno will tell you about one of hers.

Strategy 6. Setting an agenda for the WTLC. Initially our agenda was to develop effective WTL assignments for our own classes, then to spread the word, like missionaries, at members' respective department meetings. Shortly after, we implemented another communication method used for sharing our suggestions, the *Writing to Learn Newsletter* (copies provided). This newsletter was where most of our \$100 budget went—in photocopying fees!

Strategy 7. Holding one seminar/year with only a small additional budget from the Vice-president of Academic Affairs, which we got after “proving ourselves,” culminating in the Sharing the Wealth 2000 and 2001 Colloquia that Dr. Schmalz will tell you about. This was so successful that some faculty had to be turned away, resulting in hearty congratulations to us and a promise for a generous budget for next year's seminar.

Maintaining a Writing to Learn Committee and keeping up faculty's interest needs to be continually fueled by initiatives like the newsletter, colloquia, and interactions with WTLC members. Even so, there may be pitfalls. We managed to avoid many of them because we were prepared. As the Director of Writing, I prepared by reading several books (listed on your bibliography) then shared what I had learned with the committee. Here is the gist of it:

Pitfall 1: coming from on high; edicts from the administration. Instead, engineer the initiative so that it is faculty-driven, as with the questionnaire.

Pitfall 2: validating the faculty's fear of pedagogical intrusion. They must believe (and it must be true) that your suggestions are exactly that: suggestions for them to take or leave. You need to do the right kind of publicity. The right kinds include a Writing to Learn Newsletter, informal conversations—and don't underestimate these conversations,

they're very powerful; the right kind of publicity includes WTLC members reporting at their own department meetings about their successes; supplying agendas at department and other meetings. For example, issues like implementing WE or WI courses involve the undergraduate and perhaps graduate curriculum committees, so you have an **audience** there. If you do the right kinds of publicity most faculty will want to get in on a good thing. They'll begin to ask questions like, "What **are** these WE courses I've been hearing about?"

Pitfall 3: placing blame as in "You give only multiple choice tests, how do you expect students to learn to write better?" or "You never ask for drafts of anything. When do you think the students will make the corrections you point out or even think about your comments?" Instead, you might try a Rogerian argument as in "I know that our students need a lot of work to bring up their writing skills. I really do wish we had a quick fix because we're already so burdened with paperwork. But what about this strategy? And you might suggest doing one **shorter** writing assignment than they're used to doing, but **with a draft** which they can require to be looked over for specific content and editing requirements by a Writing Center tutor who will help students address their instructor's comments. My colleagues like to hear that the time they put into commenting on student papers will actually result in something positive. Or, you could just tell them about the one-minute papers in which the students spend the first one-minute of class writing a question that they would like answered in the class or in which they jot down the important points of their readings of the night before. Then the last minute of class is spent summarizing what was learned in that class or what the student still needs to know to understand the material better. These one-minute papers are collected, but need not be

graded. Or you could have a system of checkmarks—or not. But the students will be thinking, they'll be more focused in class because they know they'll have to summarize the important points, they'll be writing enough for you to get a sense of their knowledge both about the course content and about writing, and your assessment time is minimal. Better to have a positive suggestion on hand than to blame, which is always counterproductive in these situations.

Pitfall 4: overwhelming faculty from other disciplines with writing theory, terminology, and strategies. They'll say, "Yes, but at some point I need to teach chemistry." Instead, be concise, focused, limited, and specific in your suggestions or responses—without the use of jargon.

Pitfall 5: setting yourself up as an authority rather than as a colleague and ally. Teaching students effectively isn't only their challenge; it's our challenge. So, we're not prescribing for our colleagues, we're sharing what works best for us.

Pitfall 6: Speaking in negatives rather than positives. Conversations shouldn't sound like "here's what you're doing wrong" or "They should have had this in high school," because the reality is that **you** have them **now** regardless of what they had or didn't have in high school, and there are **lots** of things you can do. Here's what we emphasize:

1. WTL helps teach the course's content. Writing better in general is a happy by-product of WTL exercises.
2. WTL helps students learn the writing conventions of the discipline (how to write like a scientist, an historian, an art critic). It's unrealistic to think that students can learn this in freshman composition. They can't learn it as well even in a WAC course that tries to

be all things to all people, that has students of all majors, all trying to learn the conventions and requirements of that particular major.

3. Your students will be better, more active learners, and when you do get writing from them, reading those assignments will be a more pleasant, less frustrating experience.

That concludes my introduction, now Kathleen Schmalz will focus on what has become an annual event for us, the WTLC sponsored "Sharing the Wealth Colloquium."

Then Arlene Moliterno will demonstrate how she incorporates technology in her WE courses.

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