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From Grammatical to Global: The WAC/Writing Center Connection

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by **Steven Corbett** and **Michelle LaFrance**, *University of Washington*

The role of the writing center in an interdisciplinary environment



Steven Corbett and Michelle LaFrance

In a 1999 essay reporting a synoptic history of writing center theory and practice, Elizabeth Boquet honestly laments her feelings of boredom with writing center scholarship up to that time. Since, it seems, everything has been said and done, she asks the pointed question: "What is being left out of our discussions on teaching writing by our failure to account for the work of the writing center in a critically intellectual manner?" (479). She goes on to suggest that newer, fresher stories wait to be told: "Other stories can be brought to light, stories which write the developments of the contemporary writing center in theoretically sophisticated ways, stories that consider the critical capacities of networking, of linking writing centers with WAC programs, of placing peer tutors in classrooms" (479). If we look to scholarship (stories) on the WAC/writing center connection we will find that strong interdisciplinary connections between writing centers, writing classrooms, and the university at large already exist. In order for these more theoretically sophisticated stories to be told to their fullest dramatic potential, however, WAC/writing center connections need to continue to be investigated, researched, and reported on.

Working with the notion that writing instruction is everyone's business, WAC/WID are complementary approaches to thinking about how students become proficient in the discourses of disciplinary communities.

What Is WAC and Where Did It Come From?

Since their emergence in the 1970s, the Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines movements (WAC/WID) have been motivated by the ideal that "writing belongs in all courses in every discipline" (Anson ix). Writing

has too often been envisioned by faculty on college campuses as an elementary, generic, and transparent skill set that could be mastered in general education courses like first-year composition (most typically housed within an English Department). John Bean explains,

The writing-across-the-curriculum movement [. . .] is largely a reaction against traditional writing instruction that associates good writing primarily with grammatical accuracy and correctness, and thus isolates writing instruction within English departments, the home of the grammar experts. The problem with traditional writing instruction is that it leads to a view of writing as a set of isolated skills unconnected to an authentic desire to converse with interested readers about real ideas. (*Engaging Ideas* 15)

The notion that skill in writing is discrete from “content” or the ways that researchers/thinkers establish conversations within a professional field has led most faculty to think of writing instruction as someone else’s job. This notion has also complicated most instructors’ understanding of where and when students may learn to write within the language conventions of their disciplinary or professional communities (Carroll 60; Russell 22-23). Due to this conceptualization, explicit attention to writing is often perceived as “developmental”–or even “remedial”–work that is disconnected from the deeper intellectual traditions of disciplinary practice and professionalization within disciplinary communities.

Working with the notion that writing instruction is everyone’s business, WAC/WID are complementary approaches to thinking about how students become proficient in the discourses of disciplinary communities. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, they are in fact different approaches. Writing in the Disciplines emphasizes that, due to the differences of convention and purpose for writing in different disciplines, students must learn to write within the specific contexts of their chosen fields if they are to be effective interlocutors within those communities. Writing Across the Curriculum overlaps with Writing in the Disciplines work and balances the discipline-specific nature of the WID approach. WAC stresses that some elements of writing for college courses are indeed generic across differences of disciplinary practice (Bean *Conversation*) and that students come to understand writing conventions as the products of disciplinary communities when they can compare writing tasks and conventions across disciplinary contexts. The core theoretical position held by both fields is that “language, learning, and teaching are inextricably linked” (Russell 41). The fields share the conviction that students most effectively learn to write when writing is both integrated into their course work (that is writing tasks are very closely related to the course learning objectives) and when the disciplinary nature of writing tasks and faculty expectations around writing are made more explicit. The fields also promote the ideals that students benefit from writing in multiple contexts/courses, over the course of all four years of study, toward a variety of authentic purposes, and while working closely with professionals in their chosen fields. Above all, the fields of Writing in the Disciplines and Writing Across the Curriculum argue that learning to write within a discipline is intimately connected to learning to think like a professional in that discipline. This means that even competent student-writers may show signs of struggle in their writing due to the complex and unfamiliar nature of the discipline-specific tasks that they are asked to perform and that writers at all levels of proficiency benefit from thinking about the often unspoken

assumptions of “effective” writing within particular contexts. Since most scholars who talk about connections between WAC/WID and writing centers typically employ the umbrella term WAC, we follow suit in the following sections.

An Examination of WAC/Writing Center Scholarship: Two Collaborative Rationales

We should not blindly (though good-intentionally) lead students to what we think is relevant for that specific discipline. We may be doing the discipline-specific student more harm than good.

Leading writing center theorists/practitioners assert that because writing centers are, *de facto*, cross-disciplinary, writing centers are the most logical house for WAC programs (Waldo, “The Last, Best Place”; Harris, “A Writing Center”; Pemberton). For example, since Purdue University does not have a WAC program per se, Muriel Harris suggests that her Writing Lab functions as a *de facto*, though somewhat limited, WAC program. Even though Purdue’s Lab sits at the head of a massive cross-curricular operation that works closely with undergraduates, graduates, and faculty both in the Lab and in classrooms, Harris believes that because Purdue does not in fact have a WAC program her Lab’s potential effectiveness is not being realized. Harris argues that there is not enough being done at her Lab at the faculty level, in short, that not enough incentive is being offered faculty to care (438). Thus, even within the seemingly ubiquitous reach of her Writing Lab, Harris still sees plenty of room for bridges to be built between WAC programs/writing centers (or, as in her case, for recognition and more resources for the inherent WAC function of many preexisting centers). Harris, along with Kenneth Bruffee, Mark Waldo, and Michael Pemberton, provide two important rationales for why WAC/writing center programs should unite in the effort to improve student writing. These rationales also suggest incentives for closer collaboration.

The first rationale for a WAC/writing center connection involves the perennial problem of time, or more precisely, the lack of time teachers have to assess student writing. Waldo points to the fact that many teachers simply do not have the time it takes to provide quality feedback to students on their writing: “Therefore, offering the university a strong tutoring program, one to which faculty and students can turn to with confidence, is crucial to the success of WAC” (“The Last Best Place” 423). Pemberton argues, with help from Kinneavy, as well as Knoblauch and Brannon, that while WAC demands more writing from students, non-composition teachers “continue to feel a good deal of anxiety” about helping students improve their writing in a helpful way (445). Pemberton goes on to link teachers’ anxiety to the issue of time constraint: “They are also uneasy about spending time on ‘writing’ in their classrooms when there is so much other ‘material’ to be covered in their courses, so the writing center becomes an important resource by default” (446). Therefore, if teachers knew that a dependable aid for teaching writing existed, if they could coordinate their efforts with this source (writing centers) with relatively little out-of-class hassle, and, more importantly, if they could see that improved student writing could make their jobs a lot easier (and less time-consuming), they might warm up to such close classroom/writing center collaborations. But first, teachers would have to be educated, with full support from the administration, to the particular roles that tutors (writing centers) could play in these collaborations.

Hence, in the second rationale for the WAC/writing center connection experts

describe the role of the tutor as generically rhetoric-specific, and the teacher as discipline-specific. However, if Bruffee could have foreseen the complexity to which this polarized WAC/writing center issue would evolve, he might have thought twice about his seemingly (at that time) appropriate assertion:

The tutee brings to the conversation knowledge of the subject to be written about and knowledge of the assignment. The tutor brings to the conversation knowledge of the conventions of discourse and knowledge of standard written English. If the tutee does not bring to the conversation knowledge of the subject and the assignment, the peer tutor's most important contribution is to begin at the beginning: help the tutee acquire the relevant knowledge of the subject and the assignment. (213)

The first part of Bruffee's claim is a widely practiced underlying component of writing center theory. Scholars who argue for a WAC/writing center connection use this argument as evidence for the urgency of choreography. Pemberton, however, hints at the inherent problem with this reasoning when he points to research on the double standards that some discipline-specific teachers enact concerning their assignments: "Even though instructors in the disciplines may give assignments that enable students to fall back on conventional, generic strategies for academic papers learned in high school, those instructors nevertheless may evaluate the papers based on how well they conform to discipline-specific rhetorical standards" (449). Harris reasserts Bruffee's contention when she states: "The collaborative effort is truly collaborative when it is particularly apparent in the tutorial that while the tutor brings rhetorical knowledge to the conversation, the student brings disciplinary knowledge" ("A Writing Center" 432). But Harris also raises the crucial fact that even though tutors are experienced with dealing with writing across the curriculum, there is little a tutor can do when faced with the "Assignments from Hell" (AFHs) that her and her tutors see on a regular basis. Furthermore, our experiences in both WAC and WID programs over the years have made us somewhat skeptical of Bruffee's second point: that we must help the student "acquire the relevant knowledge of the subject and the assignment." If we are not political scientists, then we should not blindly (though good-intentionally) lead students to what we think is relevant for that specific discipline. We may be doing the discipline-specific student more harm than good. Harris recognizes this conundrum and consequently urges that we "dip our toe (or, more likely, both feet) into faculty development" by building stronger, more elaborate bridges between discipline-specific classes and writing centers: including finding "ways to help teachers master the complex art of designing effective writing assignments" (431).

Thus, exists the urgency of offering a close connection between what teachers are doing with their writing pedagogy, including assignments, conferencing, group work, and how their students process and apply this information toward their writing—and consequently—their thinking.

The Explicit WAC/Writing Center Connection: Three Means to Collaborative Ends

Prominent WAC experts offer compelling pedagogical rationales for why twenty-first century WAC and writing center programs should unite. Echoing Waldo above, in their *College English* essay "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities" Susan Mcleod and Elaine Maimon argue that "although it is possible to run a WAC program" without a writing center, learning center, or writing fellows

program, “our experience is that to sustain a WAC program, a writing center is crucial” (581). They go on to describe how students need a reading audience outside their teacher and in-class peers, and how the most successful writing centers work closely with faculty across the disciplines. We would like to offer three ways these goals can and are being realized.

The old idea of the writing center as a paper fix-it shop must be definitively buried.

First, an analysis of similarities between WAC and writing centers should rightfully begin at the conference. Conferences take center stage every day in writing centers. The one-to-one exploration and negotiation of the writing process between tutor and tutee, through conversation, allows students to verbalize their thoughts, consider alternate points of view, and determine gaps in logos, pathos or ethos. The concerned ear of a knowledgeable peer—who may be less intimidating than an instructor (who ultimately must assess and assign a grade to their students)—offers the student a chance to talk more openly about problems, to ask questions about the texts, the class, or the instructor’s expectations.

Second, WAC and writing centers work closely with students’ writing process to try to develop inquiry-based writing. Composition and writing center theory and practice recognize the primacy of process over product (Flower and Hayes; J. Harris; North; Bruffee; Lunsford; Boquet). Learning to write for academics takes time. One cannot become an expert writer in a one- or two-term course, just as one cannot learn to dance professionally after taking an introductory dance class, so one of the goals of WAC and writing centers stresses inculcating students into the realization that good writing is an art that takes time to master. Writing Fellows programs have done much to cultivate this type of cross-curricular awareness (see Corbett, “The Give and Take”). Emphasis is placed on the revision process: once a draft is finished it is not really finished, but can always improve. In this process of taking drafts to successively higher levels, the student learns to analyze her own writing style, both problems and strengths. This process approach mirrors the rigors of revision we value and expect among our own peer academic discourse community. Moreover, the process in which students are coached to generate themes and gather evidence centers on inquiry. If we help the student approach the assignment searching for a way to incorporate his own interesting interpretation of the text and applying this interpretation quizzically, he will create a richer, more complex composition. The conference, however, is only one way in which this generation of inquiry develops.

Third, students can further develop process-consciousness and inquiry skills during class discussion and peer-critique workshops. Co-author Steven has been involved in research and practice into course-based tutoring for the past ten years (see for example Corbett “Bringing,” “The Give and Take”). We agree that if a tutor can have a major impact on student writing one-to-one, then these same types of fruitful interactions can be mimicked in small-group classroom peer-critique workshops that efficiently awaken more students to the potential power of peer critique. Group work focused on analyzing each other’s papers allows students to practice what to look out for in their own papers.

Students can learn to analyze peer writing, and consequently their own writing better, however, if knowledgeable peers (tutors) circulate among the groups during these workshops. Tutors can help the instructor listen for how the

students talk to each other about their writing and can offer advice or strategies for communicating ideas as productively and helpfully as possible. These interactions can lead to connections between individual tutors and students in which students see the benefits of talking about their writing. Students may feel more comfortable with a peer because the tutor is not directly responsible for the student's ultimate grade in the class. Instead, the tutor functions more as someone who can help the students negotiate teachers' expectations as well as find their own questions to pose and investigate.

Conclusion

For years, in almost every college and university in the US, tutors have heard students voice their concerns about their writing, their teachers, and their place in academia. They've heard horror stories about scary, unapproachable teachers; lecture classes where the student sits and listens and rarely has the opportunity to talk; assignments and readings that are too tough to interpret, let alone write about; apprehensions about how to start a paper, how to make a conclusion, how to bring a specific rhetorical problem or thesis to a prescribed assignment; and we'll spare you further listing because too many issues exist. These are all symptoms of students who have not been initiated properly into the world of academic discourse and writing. Notice that we don't talk about grammar or typos? The old idea of the writing center as a paper fix-it shop must be definitively buried (North; Harris, "Solutions and Tradeoffs"; Waldo, "What Should the Relationship?"; Boquet). Instead, the new idea of the writing center as a *cross-curricular way of learning*, and not a central, autonomous "center" must continue to be cultivated—in the fertile soil that already exists—to its fullest potential. Only then will we be able to continue to tell the stories that make people want to listen.

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Steven J. Corbett is Assistant Professor of English and Co-Director of Composition at **Southern Connecticut State University**, New Haven. He received his Ph.D. in English Language and Rhetoric from the **University of Washington, Seattle** in 2008. His teaching and research interests include course-based tutoring, Writing Across the Curriculum, and ecocomposition and

environmental rhetoric. His essays have appeared or are forthcoming in **The Writing Lab Newsletter**, past issues of **Praxis**, the award-winning collection *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*, and **ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment**. He currently lives near the beach in New Haven with his very happy dog Madison.

Michelle LaFrance is a Doctoral Candidate at the **University of Washington, Seattle**. Her teaching and research interests include Writing Across the Curriculum, how students develop as writers, and Scottish Gaelic Language Learners in the U.S. Her publications include a forthcoming chapter in **E-Research: Transformation in Scholarly Practice** and a number of creative pieces and review essays. She loves to spend time with her two best buddies, a mischievous Chihuahua and a ball-crazy Lab.

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