



Theory in WAC: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?

CHRISTOPHER THAISS
George Mason University

First, a rationale for this chapter: Why talk about “WAC theory”? After all, every chapter in this book deals with “theory” in some fashion since theory provides reasons, based in scholarship and teaching practice, for the methods it describes. The focus of this chapter, however, will be on first principles: the assumptions behind the reasons—the theories beneath the theories, if you will. Moreover, in the almost three decades since explicit workshops on writing across the curriculum began, the shape of WAC has undergone significant change. It is therefore reasonable to attempt to define both (1) a core of consistent WAC principles over that span, and (2) the theoretical influences that have worked changes on the concept.

I proceed as follows: in keeping with the notion of first principles, I work toward extensive definitions of the three terms—“writing,” “across,” and “the curriculum,”—that make up the operant phrase. Each term is defined historically within the context of WAC programmatic and teaching practice; changes are explored and trends emerge. Where appropriate, I cite other essays in this volume that further illuminate my observations. I close by speculating, in the spirit of this millennial volume, about a few further developments in WAC theory. (For suggestions of further reading, see the brief annotated bibliography of major texts in WAC theory that follows this chapter.)

And so . . .

“Writing”

The public, including many academics, talks about writing as if it were a simple concept and as if everyone meant the same thing by it. Sweeping pronouncements, usually negative, are made: “Students can’t write,” “The writing is poor,” and so forth, and generalizers rarely specify, nor are asked to specify, exactly what the trouble is. Nevertheless, anyone who studies writing is familiar with the surprise of reading allegedly “poor” and “good” samples and wondering on what bases the evaluator reached the judgment. When I conduct discussions of standards with my colleagues, we routinely fill the chalkboard with criteria for successful writing of experienced-based essays; we disagree about priorities, even though we are discussing, mind you, only a single—though varied and complex—genre.

Writing does appear simple to define: the use of graphic characters, “letters,” to render language. This illusion of simplicity and consensus may explain the consternation of the faculty at Harvard who after 1870 felt it necessary to make composition a required, remedial course in its own right (Berlin, *Writing*; Halloran) and thus set in motion the U.S. composition industry. The illusion is also responsible for the easy acceptance of “good writing,” an equally elusive term, as a virtue and as a goal of education. Most pertinent to this chapter, this illusion helps to explain why writing across the curriculum has gained such widespread acceptance—at least in concept—in colleges and schools. Faculty and administrators readily pay lip service to the “need” for students to “write well,” and they tend readily to pass motions and even earmark funding for various forms of faculty inservice training and curricular mandating. Yet, as always, the devil is in the details, and programs bog down when the significant differences in real definitions become apparent. (I would speculate that schools that have faced the most difficulty in even starting WAC programs have been those that have addressed the definitional question at the outset, and the resulting conflict of definitions has stalled any initiative.)

What most safely can be said is that “writing” in writing-across-the-curriculum programs has been many things, not all of

them compatible, exemplifying Naisbitt's theory of the "trends and countertrends" that he saw as characteristic of the movement of ideas in a society (Naisbitt and Aburdene). Even within one institution—even, I would argue, in the deliberations of a single teacher—we can almost perceive definitions and goals of writing moving in opposite directions.

Conformity versus Originality

I will label these opposite directions the "drive to conformity" and the "drive to originality." These are certainly nothing new—the basic yin/yang, tree/serpent of the cultural anthropologists—but how they are played out in the teaching of writing, and especially in WAC programs, helps us understand the variety of meanings given to such spin-offs of "writing" as "good writing," "learning to write," and "writing to learn."

First, the drive to conformity. Some faculty and governing boards are attracted to WAC because it promises greater conformity: to these advocates, "learning to write" means learning correct usage of Standard English, the learning of modes and formats characteristic of a discipline, consistency of documentation, and consistency of application of disciplinary research methodology.

Conversely, others see in WAC the potential for the student's growth as thinker and stylist; this direction is toward the more individual, less easily defined or prescribed, more evanescent development of style and confidence characteristic of insiders in a discourse. David Bartholomae's notion of "inventing the university" involves this more profound theory of "learning to write" ("Inventing"), similar to Kenneth Bruffee's adaptation of the age-old notion of university education as allowing one to "join the ongoing conversation" of ideas. Several common aspects of "good writing" exemplify this trend: among them, (1) the ability to integrate the writings of others into one's own vision, (2) the ability to envision how one might adapt one's writing to the needs of diverse readers, (3) the ability to take a writing project through an unpredictable "process" that encourages revisioning and re-shaping, and (4) the ability to cross conventions—reinvent them, as it were—in order to make connections with styles and genres

of other fields. Genre theorists (e.g., Bishop and Ostrom) explore this process, and this growing research field clearly will have more and more impact on WAC development in coming years.

It is in this less-conformist sense of “learning to write” that the definition of “writing” includes that other epigrammatic notion popular in WAC: “writing to learn.” Although “writing to learn” has been frequently isolated from “learning to write” in workshops, often by means of a split between so-called “formal” (“learning to write”) and “informal” (“writing to learn”) assignments, conscientious workshop leaders try to keep the connections before the minds of participants. Certainly the work of the theorists who were most influential in the rise of WAC integrated these ideas. For example, Mina Shaughnessy’s (1977) developmental progression from “fluency” to “correctness” saw the conformist goal of “learning to write” as dependent on the use of writing as a tool of thought, as did James Britton’s earlier formulation (1975) of the “expressive” mode of writing (for the self, as an exploratory tool) as the “matrix” out of which grew the ability to write “transactionally” to others (Britton et al.). I count it one of the failings of theory in recent years that our sense of the connectedness of “writing to learn”/“the expressive”/“the informal” and of “learning to write”/“the transactional”/“the formal” has been lost to some extent in the drive of some scholars to stress the distinctions between theories more than their connections. This loss may have been best illustrated by the 1995 “debate” between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in the pages of *College Composition and Communication*, but this focus on the disconnect, rather than on the profound links, between concepts is played out continuously in uninformed, off-the-cuff critiques of the expressive as “soft,” “touchy-feely,” and “self-indulgent” and of the transactional/formal as “rigid,” “formulaic,” and “superficial.” While it has been useful analytically for composition theorists to specify differences between, as Patricia Bizzell described them, so-called “inner”- and “outer”-directed theories, the loss of a unified theory has not been helpful to teachers trying to plan a coherent course.

While I have characterized “writing to learn” as related to the growth of the student as thinker and stylist, I should also point out opposing trends in this aspect of WAC. On the one

hand, “writing to learn” includes the conforming goals of recall and memorization, manifest in note-taking and journaling exercises directed to better performance on standardized tests. This “lower-order” thinking (Perry) contrasts with, and to some extent runs counter to, “higher-order” uses of writing, also often pursued in some form of regular writing such as a journal, including doing synthetic or divergent writing, thought experiments, metaphorizing and other creative invention, and what cultural studies theorists (see Berlin and Vivion, for example) call “critical work”—examining and questioning (“deconstructing,” if you will) those very terms and concepts that one strives so conscientiously to memorize and assimilate. The annual symposia on “Writing and Higher Order Thinking” at the University of Chicago in the 1980s have been thus far the most explicit attempt to relate WAC theory and practice to these theories of psychological development, but they are played out tacitly in the variety of assignments arrayed under the “writing to learn” umbrella.

Overall, what we mean by “writing” and by “learning to write” and “writing to learn” varies from school to school, teacher to teacher, class to class, assignment to assignment, even from thought to thought within a teacher’s response to a group of papers or to a single paper.

Dominance of the Transactional

Nevertheless, the concept can be narrowed to some degree. The “writing” that is most often meant in the phrase “good writing” can be safely, if nebulously, defined as what James Britton and his colleagues called “transactional” writing, or what Janet Emig in 1971 termed “extensive” writing: “the mode that focuses upon the writer’s conveying a message or a communication to another; the domain explored is usually the cognitive; the style is assured, impersonal, and often reportorial” (*Composing* 4). Further refining the term to the school context, we can accept Bartholomae’s definition of successful academic writing in “Inventing the University”:

What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces,

set phrases, rituals and gestures, *habits of mind*, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that determine the “what might be said” and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community. (145; emphasis added)

The conformist vision clearly dominates in this definition; however, in the phrase “habits of mind,” which I have italicized, lurks the drive toward originality. Bartholomae later in the essay explains one of the key “habits” of the successful academic writer: “The key distinguishing gesture . . . is the way the writer works against a conventional point of view, one that is represented within the essay by conventional phrases that the writer must then work against” (152). Nevertheless, since this type of originality marks the successful academic, it too is an expected part of the transaction.

This greater emphasis on the transactional has been consistent in WAC. Even though the informal and the expressive have received considerable attention in WAC programs, as best illustrated by Toby Fulwiler’s early work on journals (e.g., in *The Journal Book*), the earliest impetus to WAC was signaled by the 1970s furor created by concern about correctness. The 1975 *Newsweek* cover story, “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” is typically cited as epitomizing the mood at that time; “Johnny’s” explicit shortcomings were in syntax, spelling, vocabulary, and organization. Moreover, the assessment/accountability fashion of the 1990s, part of the many-faceted reaction to the free-spending 1980s, has made “transaction” far more emphatic in WAC programs than “expression.” Certainly, the increase in the number of writing intensive requirements illustrates this trend. Where “writing to learn” exists as a key element of the definition of “writing” in WAC, more and more it exists as a stage of student progress toward that transactional “good writing,” rather than as an end in itself.

Technology: Changing All the Rules

But if traditional concerns have kept the definitions of “writing” and “good writing” somewhat narrow, the force of technological advancement is expanding those definitions and will no doubt

continue to do so. When Janet Emig wrote “Writing as a Mode of Learning” (1977), which helped conceptualize “writing to learn” as theory, she carefully distinguished between writing and three other language modes—speech, reading, and listening—in order to support the “uniqueness” of writing. But the “writing” she assumed was of words as conventionally defined; to wit:

Making such a case for the uniqueness of writing should logically and theoretically involve establishing many contrasts, distinctions between (1) writing and all other verbal languaging processes—listening, reading, and especially talking; (2) writing and all other forms of composing, such as composing a painting, a symphony, a dance, a film, a building. (7)

Emig’s formulation antedates the emergence of other tools, such as the computer monitor, invisible storage on disks, and the mouse, that have changed in still undetermined ways the relationship between writer and text. (One question, for example: does the operation of the hand on the mouse, as one imports text from one source into another or moves text around in a document, still reinforce learning to the extent claimed by Emig for the physical act of writing using old tools?) Even more profoundly, Emig’s definition antedates the virtual fusion—at least hybridization—of talk and writing by means of e-mail (Spooner and Yancey). Anyone attempting to define first principles of WAC must confront the e-mail explosion. Some practical questions, for example: In determining the prevalence of WAC at a school, does one “count” the e-mail exchanges between student and professor regarding answers to test questions or ideas for a presentation? Does one count—and how might one count, even if one wished to—e-mail exchanges between students preparing for that same test or presentation?

When WAC was new in the 1970s, surely no one foresaw the difficulty of distinguishing writing from other modes of communication that exist today. Talk was talk and writing was writing—indeed, it can be argued that the concept of writing across the curriculum grew up in this country precisely because writing seemed so clearly different from talk. Interestingly, the British, our predecessors in identifying both writing and talk as subjects

for study across the curriculum (Martin et al.; Martin), persistently linked the two in the term “language across the curriculum.” In the United States, however, where the preeminence of multiple-choice and short-answer testing had devalued both writing and speaking in curricula (Russell), most teachers had little practical experience of the mutually reinforcing effects of the two, and so their differences were much more obvious than their connections. In the late 1970s, a few U.S. writers (e.g., Goodkin and Parker) argued for synthesis, but “language across the curriculum” or “communication across the curriculum”—the sense of a reformed link between speech and written composition—has yet to take hold in institutions, except in rare instances (Thaiss and Suhor; Sipple and Carson), whereas WAC has flourished. Hence, e-mail poses a conceptual difficulty for WAC planners, a difficulty that will disappear in an integrated language-across-the-curriculum (LAC) environment, one which, I predict, technology is forcing us to conceptualize and eventually accept.

The Multimedia Swamp

If e-mail muddies the definition of writing, consider the swamp created by multimedia composing. When I try out different colors for the background of a Web page and ask one of my sons, a visual artist, to design a logo, am I “writing”? If another son, in tenth grade and a guitarist, attaches an alternative rock music file to an e-mail message to a friend in order to illustrate a point about that rock group, where does the “writing” end and something else take over? If the final product in an electrical engineering course that meets a school’s writing intensive requirement (see Townsend, Chapter 10 in this volume, for definitions of “writing intensive”) is a multimedia (video, sound, words) Web page designed by a six-person team of students from three universities, how and how much does that work count, how does the teacher evaluate it, and is it “writing”? Should the university WAC committee question its validity and demand something different, or does the entity demand new theory? (See Chapter 3 in this volume by Reiss and Young and the volume by Reiss, Selfe, and Young for more on this issue.)

If we define “writing” conventionally as words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and so forth, then multimedia composing creates problems for the teacher/evaluator and the administrator. If program guidelines say, for example, that for a course to be writing intensive every student must write four thousand graded words, then the teacher and the committee must do some clever rationalizing to justify the product. But if the definition of writing is broadened to, let’s say, “creative use, for communicative purposes, of the various tools available to the electronic composer,” then the challenges change. The teacher of a dramatic literature course must, for example, weigh the comparative communicative power within a critical essay of a video clip from a production of *Hamlet* versus a written description of the same excerpt. Using the clip may make the essay a clearer, more emphatic piece of “writing”; but if we define writing in this more inclusive, technologically current way, then we are setting up new standards for “good writing” that have many consequences. Among these, “teaching writing” will now include teaching a broad range of computer skills—an issue even now facing all administrators of writing programs; hence, teaching these skills means that all students must have access to sophisticated hardware and software, and teachers must be well-“versed” (to use an old-tech metaphor) in them. The broader definition will now mean that the act of writing means choosing among a huge array of images and forms, only some of which are “words.” Ideas such as “syntax,” “organization,” “accuracy,” “clarity,” “style”—the list includes all the conventional criteria and more—will all come to be defined in multimedia terms. “Style,” for example, would come to mean the distinctive way a writer designs and organizes sound, video, static visuals, spoken words, and so forth. How quickly are we approaching the day when the class of “good writers” will not include anyone who composes only with words, even if that person is a virtuoso on the instruments of “mere” literacy?

A More and More Inclusive Definition

Of course, the broader definition of “writing” may make the notion of “good writing” much broader. Rather than simply raising

the bar, so that only those with the most eclectic, omni-media skills are rewarded, technological choice might allow a much greater variety of “written products” to succeed in the context of the academy. This multiplicity of media already flourishes outside the academy and there is no reason to believe that schools won’t adapt, though they will never catch up to the commercial marketplace in technical or conceptual innovation—unless universities, through corporate funding, become (or become once again) the research arms of industry (e.g., Bleich). Just as printed books, visuals-and-text magazines, radio, television, CDs, live theater, Web sites, MOOs, and so on coexist today as venues for “writing” in the marketplace, so school parameters of “good writing” should broaden as these varied technologies continue to become cheaper and easier to use.

This technological broadening of the definition of writing is helped along, I would argue (as I have elsewhere [Thaiss, “WAC Theory”]), by the hesitancy (or neglect, possibly benign) of program directors and committees to impose detailed definitions of writing on WAC, or to enunciate detailed, narrowing criteria. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, this lack of close definition is largely responsible for the growth of WAC programs. Allowing, even encouraging, different parts of a faculty to maintain divergent, often conflicting, goals for writing does serve the growth of the program, and it also serves the tendency of a concept to grow and change with technology. An intriguing paradox in the history of WAC has been that most programs have been funded because of deep and wide concern about the quality of student writing; nevertheless, few programs have systematically studied just what is wrong and what is good with that writing, nor prescribed in detail what is needed (as Condon, Chapter 2 in this volume, shows). Consciously or not, WAC theorists and program leaders have encouraged almost unlimited variety in terms of what counts as writing and how it is evaluated, and therefore have kept the door open for a vigorous, intimate relationship between technological advance and writing. Walvoord et al. argue that assessment of WAC programs should honor this diversity of teachers’ definitions of “what works for them”; they criticize a potential tendency of program leaders and their supervisors to assess programs in terms of a narrow range of criteria. I would argue

that the relative lack of rigorous assessment of WAC programs (again, see Chapter 2 in this volume) demonstrates that the vast majority of WAC programs already honor this laissez-faire principle, at least tacitly. Almost everyone agrees that “good writing” is hard to find among students, but most program participants also agree that definitions of good writing are best left to them, to individual teachers and members of professional groups trying to achieve meaningful, workable standards within shared contexts.

The Assessment Caveat

Hence, while some powers-that-be (presidents, boards of regents, state legislatures) may be calling for more rigorous assessment, we need to keep in mind that such accountability always carries with it the risk of making programs and instruction obsolete by making them inflexible. As Sosnoski argues in a recent volume about grading writing, the electronic writing environment calls into question all conventional assumptions about academic assessment:

Yet as hazardous as grading in print environments is to the psyche of teachers, how much more perplexing it becomes in electronic environments where teacher/student roles characteristically shift. In computer-oriented classrooms, students often teach their teachers. When boundaries of authority blur, grading can become an arbitrary use of power. (157)

I used the term “laissez-faire” deliberately in the previous paragraph because critics of WAC’s indeterminacy have focused on the relationship between writing and economics. Regardless of one’s views of and desires for that relationship, it is hard to ignore the usefulness of what has been variously called the “social-epistemic” (Berlin, “Rhetoric”), “cultural studies” (e.g., Berlin and Vivion), or “new historicist” approach to defining “writing,” “good writing,” “teaching writing,” and so forth. As explained in Russell’s essay in this volume (Chapter 11), an ongoing element of some WAC research (e.g., by Bazerman; Myers) has been to highlight the ways by which “learning to write” in a discipline means reproducing the existing hierarchies of power.

As Mahala contended, the willingness of WAC directors to allow departments and faculty to define standards of good writing in their own areas actually determined that the status quo would be maintained. To Mahala, the status quo meant that “instead of addressing the most contentious issues, WAC programs have often maintained a political invisibility, tailoring theory to institutional divisions . . . rather than really interrogating prevailing attitudes about knowledge, language, and learning” (773). In a rebuttal, Patricia Dunn argued that, given the diversity of disciplines and teachers, it was inaccurate and reductive to characterize faculty monolithically and as committed to the status quo: “they would not be involved in WAC if they believed they had nothing to learn” (732; see also the rebuttal of Mahala’s arguments by McLeod and Maimon). I would argue that regardless of one’s view of the motives of faculty, and regardless of one’s view of how economic power is held and distributed, “writing” in WAC always is defined in terms of the relationship between what happens in academia and what happens in the “economy” of which it is a part and into which colleges graduate students. Moreover, WAC is a powerful concept precisely because it addresses that relationship.

The Marketplace as Driving Force

To show how WAC-defined “writing” directly addresses the question of economy, we might contrast it to writing as defined in the first-year (FY) composition class. When we seek to define writing in WAC, we should keep in mind that as a political movement, writing across the curriculum in the United States has meant “writing not only in required English composition courses.” Implicitly manifesting awareness of the social construction of knowledge, WAC researchers and planners saw the teaching of writing in the typical FY comp class as disconnected from (1) the disciplines in which students would be writing later on (if not at the same time as they were taking the comp class), and (2) the careers for which, one presumed, the disciplines were preparing them (see, for example, Maimon; Thaiss, “WAC and General Education”). The basic rationale for WAC has always been that writing cannot be the same in an FY comp class as it is in a

course in the major because all the key environmental factors differ:

- ◆ Ways of knowing (hence logic, evidence, organization) differ among disciplines—indeed, we define disciplines by these differences. (I use the term “disciplines” for convenience here; later I take up the difficulties with this term.)
- ◆ Terms are specialized, and even the connotations of familiar words change from discipline to discipline.
- ◆ The purposes of writing are different because of when the student takes the course and who teaches it. Basically, the FY comp class is part of the student’s acclimation to the discourse of the academy only in its most general features; the writing is an end in itself, the teacher usually a specialist in language or literature. Conversely, writing in a course in the major is usually a means to the end of developing and demonstrating knowledge of methods and materials in the discipline; it is not an end in itself. The teacher is a specialist in those materials and methods.
- ◆ Further, even if the course in the major is also part of the student’s acclimation to the academy, it primarily prepares the student for life after school, presumably within the marketplace, in a way that the FY comp course cannot approach.

In summary, then, writing within WAC can be defined historically in contrast to the British language across the curriculum. It can also be defined dynamically and unpredictably in terms of advances in technology, as well as somewhat more narrowly in terms of its distinction from writing in FY comp class. But even this “narrower” definition ineluctably admits of great variety since it is founded on the (antifoundational!) assumption that “writing” and its ethical corollary “good writing” differ from discipline to discipline, context to context.

“Across”

I don’t want to make too much of this little word, but focusing on it briefly can help to clarify some points and make others helpfully cloudier. After all, “across” is not the same as “in” or “throughout” (not to mention “against,” “over,” “behind,” or

other delicious prepositions that conjure up intriguing ironies). The term “writing across the curriculum” has had remarkable staying power,¹ for which I think there are good reasons. “Across” connotes movement from place to place, time to time. It implies coverage, but not necessarily depth. “They moved across the country” means something very different from “They moved through the country.” “Across” need not be profound; it can imply visited but did not stay.

Of course, its connotation depends on subjects and verbs. “The plague spread across Europe” feels very different from “The train sped across Europe.” But even if it’s a deadly disease that is “crossing,” “across” feels less permanent and thorough than “The plague spread throughout Europe.”

Why then does “writing across the curriculum” have staying power even though “across” is not a “stay-put” kind of word? I think it’s because it sounds nonthreatening. Unlike “writing throughout the curriculum,” which implies 100 percent compliance, “writing across the curriculum” implies an even presence, but not control. Variants such as “writing across the disciplines” and “writing across the university” have a similar feel. Note that when governing bodies want to get tough about the idea, the language becomes more aggressive: “writing intensive requirement” is the best example. “Writing across the curriculum” says to faculty, “See how this works in your own teaching and how it might work; no pressure.”

A second connotation of “across” is best illustrated by contrast with “in,” specifically in the phrase “writing in the disciplines.” “Across” suggests a link—“hands across the sea,” “telephone lines across the continent”—whereas “in” suggests presence but not connection, certainly not movement. Writers over the years have commented on the messianic, or at least peripatetic, nature of WAC (see Walvoord), and “across” expresses this dynamic character well. That the signal event of WAC programs has been the multi- or cross-disciplinary workshop, marked by discussions and exchanges of information, also fits with “across.” (“Sharing,” a 1960s word, was the vogue term for this mode until the 1980s backlash. We now “interact,” but we don’t “share.”)

“In,” as in the phrase “writing in the disciplines,” suits well that aspect of WAC which is more concerned with the specific, differentiating features of disciplinary discourse than in their intersections or in the effort to establish a community of interest among faculty. As I explored in my attempt to define “writing,” the notion that each discipline has its own distinctive epistemology and discourse has been a central argument in support of a cross-curricular writing movement. Without the “in” there is little argument for the “across.” Or, to give a different answer to the old question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?”—because there really was another side.

“The Curriculum”

“The curriculum” is not the same as “curriculum”; in fact, these two might be more different than “the curriculum” and “the disciplines,” at least as WAC has evolved in practice. In my first draft of this chapter, I planned to define “curriculum” as the third term of the phrase, but having discovered the resonance of “across,” I became fascinated by the even smaller word “the.” So please bear with me.

I have never heard the phrase “writing across curriculum”; what might it mean? I have heard National Writing Project colleagues who teach K–12 say, “I’m writing curriculum,” as in “I’m writing a plan of study or designing a sequence of courses.” But “curriculum” without the definite article implies tentativeness, a draft perhaps of what might, if all the officials sign off on it, become “the curriculum,” at least until the next batch of standardized test scores comes in. “The curriculum,” particularly in the context of colleges and universities, evokes hallowed halls, festoons of ivy, Greek lettering, and all the other trappings of surety, permanence, even immortality. “Writing across the curriculum,” especially when paired with “writing in the disciplines,” reinforces this emotion. (“Writing across the disciplines” is a nice conflation that captures this feeling and some of the flavor of both “in” and “across.”)

Actually, “the curriculum,” like an unambiguous “writing,” is an illusion, an idyll of some rapidly receding golden age. I’m

not sure for whom we continue to peddle phrases such as “the curriculum” or “the disciplines,” since higher education, like every other aspect of culture, is in flux, and has been as far back as we can study it (Halloran; Ohmann). Even if the definite articles sustain some selling power with parents—usually concerned that the college experience provide at least some stability—and with some prospective students, I assume that faculty, at least those who have been around a while, automatically see through “the curriculum” and “the disciplines” to such fluctuating administrative expediencies as “the departments” or “the majors.”

“The curriculum” is subject to the same destabilizing forces that make the definition of “writing” so volatile. Indeed, if we see “the curriculum” as embodied in its documents and its processes of communication (the postmodern versus Platonic perspective, as Villanueva points out in Chapter 7 in this volume), then changes in “writing” and “curriculum” must go together. Speaking practically, a theory of mutual change in “writing” and “the curriculum” implies, for example, that we should not look for fixity in a roster of courses labeled “writing intensive,” just as we should not try to define our criteria for “writing intensity” too specifically. The theory also implies that changes in curriculum should signal to writing researchers and administrators changes in the writing environment and in forms of writing. Even the smallest change, say approval of a new course, may represent a deep change in faculty feeling about the discipline, about students, about technology, and about the outside community that can affect every facet of “writing” for those faculty, from purpose, to format, to potential audience, and so forth.

The Elusive WID

If “the curriculum” is a misleading term, “the disciplines” is no less so. Although our sense of the social construction of “writing” has advanced from our reliance on the one-size-fits-all composition course to the recognition of basic differences across disciplines, our sense of categorical differences does not yet extend within the so-called disciplines themselves. In the relatively short history of writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) research (Bazerman; Myers; Herrington; Henry; McCarthy), areas of study

tend to be given traditional disciplinary names: chemistry, philosophy, biology, engineering, architecture, and so forth, and researchers continue to seek generalizable characteristics within those broad categories. Certainly WID textbook publishers have reinforced this level of generality (e.g., the several textbooks on “writing in psychology” or “writing in political science”), when they aren’t dealing at an even more abstract level: e.g., “writing in the sciences.” Although researchers have conscientiously explored the great differences from context to context within alleged disciplines, overall theory has basically ignored both (1) the proliferation of subspecialties within so-called disciplines (e.g., composition within English)² that render communication among “colleagues” almost nil, and (2) the rise of so-called interdisciplinary specialties that correspond to emergent professional descriptions in the workplace: e.g., law enforcement, recreation and leisure studies, career counseling. The usual notion of WID, when applied to program design and assessment, fails to question the level of generality that is either possible or meaningful. To cite an absurdly obvious example, if I record that the Department of Modern and Classical Languages has designated ten courses as “writing intensive,” participation by those faculty looks different than if I record that for each of the ten languages taught in that department there is one WI course, different still if the ten break down into five in the Spanish literature of South America, none in the rest of Spanish, and five scattered among the nine other languages. Categorizing the distribution of writing in other disciplines, such as computer science, might not be so easy, and the difficulty points up the shortcomings of our current theory of WID, as well as WAC.

Helpful to our understanding of “the disciplines” would be the comparatively sophisticated theory of research in workplace writing (see Alred). This research has moved beyond such general categories as professions (e.g., writing by lawyers or engineers) and industries (e.g., textiles, aerospace) toward the definition of context based on multiple factors, such as “Electronic Mail in Two Corporate Workplaces” (the title of an essay by Brenda Sims, in Sullivan and Dauterman), in which technology (“electronic”), genre (“mail”), and setting (“two corporate workplaces”) confine the study and its pretensions. The defini-

tion of writing assumes ethnographic limitations: the research does not presume to generalize about whole genres, technologies, or fields (in this case telecommunications and computers) based on the findings, but merely to compare features of the technology and the genre in two specific locales. If readers wish to extrapolate analogies to other contexts, such as to the entirety of “the computer industry,” they may, but it is not the intent of the essay to do so.

From WID to WIC

This is not to say that many WID-type studies have not already adhered to this ethnographic lack of pretension; nevertheless, the fact that the WID category still exists shows that we have not yet moved beyond the so-called discipline as a meaningful marker of difference. More useful in looking at writing cultures in academia might be the notion of “WIC”—or “writing in the course” (analogous to “writing in the workplace”). This concept would allow researchers to observe the richness of each course context without having to fit that context within the arbitrary category of a so-called discipline. Certainly part of the research data might be the teacher’s and the students’ senses of how the course fits within their concepts of the field—which one would expect to differ from one another—but the theory would never assume that the course in any way represents a consensus definition of “the discipline.” By removing the assumption of disciplinary “fit,” the theory also allows other influences to be observed. If, for example, we look at a course called History 130—The New South and do not assume that the prefix “History” is essentially meaningful, then we can more openly question the origins, purposes, and methods of the course. We may find that the teacher draws theory from texts usually categorized according to other nebulous disciplines—public policy, economics, literature, sociology, not to mention popular media—and uses methods drawn from participants and guest lecturers at cross-university workshops. We would definitely not assume that, whatever we find, History 130 represents in any way the methods, purposes, and materials of any other course also prefixed “History.” We might discover,

with further research, that such a link does exist within the particular institution, but we would not be able to generalize about “the discipline”—nor, I should add, about the characteristic behaviors or attitudes of any disciplinary group of faculty toward writing. I have often heard WAC program leaders say things like “English faculty are hard or [easy] to work with,” as if it were possible to make such “disciplinary” generalizations, and I invariably find these generalizations contradicted by the next conversation.

As theory, “writing in the course” operates on an ethnographic basis close to that of another subfield of composition studies, “teacher research” (see, e.g., Goswami and Stillman; Mohr and McLean). Teacher research also sees the relationship between the individual teacher and a group of students as the most meaningful locus of study about writing in the academic context. Teacher research goes further, of course, to see the teacher as the key researcher in the context, because the primary goal of the research is the teacher’s knowledge, with the long-range objective being improved teaching and learning. While I believe that WAC research has benefited—and will benefit further—from applications of teacher research principles (e.g., the studies of Fishman [“Writing to Learn,” “Writing and Philosophy”]), the most useful principle is the primacy of the individual course as the focus of the study of writing in an academic setting, regardless of the researcher.

Although I suggest here that the notion of “writing in the disciplines” has diverted attention from the most meaningful context of “writing across the curriculum,” I would stress that most WAC programs, in their most common activities, support the theory of “writing in the course.” The most common event of the WAC program has been some form of faculty development workshop, usually open to teachers from many departmental units. Even when workshops are conducted within single departments or among smaller units, the preponderance of workshop materials and topics has centered on the individual course, irrespective of discipline. Such common teacher concerns as workload, student motivation, productive feedback to students, and grading dominate both workshop discussion and the most popular workshop materials. Moreover, the typical “genre” of the inhouse

WAC newsletter (Thaiss, "Newsletters"), the "teacher practice" essay (although most of these hardly qualify as conscientious ethnography), is based on the theory of the individual course as a more meaningful locale of study about the role of writing in academia. Though writers of such essays routinely invoke their concept of "the discipline" as part of the rationale for their methods, the burden of such essays is usually to explain methods in relation to the teacher's goals. The audience for these essays is usually faculty across the institution, and the essays are published in order to inform and encourage this heterogeneous group to make individual adaptations, much as the workshop does.

Conclusion: Theory for a New Millennium

In defining "writing," I made some predictions about the future of WAC theory, primarily in response to advances in technology. By changing every facet of what we currently mean by "writing," technology will ineluctably change every aspect of "the curriculum" and what we mean by the dynamic term "across." In addition, I don't see any reason why the trend in higher education to adapt to the career interests of prospective students should be interrupted. As pointed out earlier, new degree programs correspond to emerging careers; why should this trend change? Further, just as electronic technology is bridging the physical separation of "the university" and "the community," so technology will facilitate further interplay between "student," "professor," "worker," and "manager," with blurring and perhaps eventual merger of aspects of these roles. For example, it is easy to see service learning, as explored by David Jolliffe in Chapter 4 in this volume, evolving from a college outreach program to an intrinsic part of education. There is no reason for this not to be so: technology facilitates communication by students working at an off-campus site with other students, the professor, and onsite supervisors. Inevitably, roles and lines of authority will blur and in some cases vanish, just as the concept of "distance education" is drastically changing the notions of "campus" and "classroom."

Theory will both respond to these changes and help to encourage them. I predict that the ethnographic similarity between

“writing in the course” and “writing in the workplace” will enable further blurring of the differences between school and community. As the concept of “writing in the disciplines” gives way to theory that encourages a more open exploration of the influences on what and how we teach, curriculum will be freer to grow symbiotically with changes in work.

Notes

1. In the preface to Martin et al. (1976), the term is dated to as early as 1971.
2. Composition studies, of course, has developed its own rich literature on methods and style in the field itself—Asher and Lauer; Kirsch and Sullivan; Kirklighter, Vincent, and Moxley, etc. I use comp within English as an example, familiar to many readers of this essay, of “disciplinary” subdivisions that appear in all so-called disciplines and that likewise have developed their own literatures of method.

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Walvoord, Barbara. "The Future of WAC." *College English* 58 (1996): 58–79.

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Annotated Bibliography of Representative Works Relevant to WAC Theory

Bazerman, Charles. *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988. This groundbreaking study analyzes the conventions of scientific discourse and its teaching in terms of power relations within the disciplines of science. Bazerman's work has itself shaped much of the inquiry into writing in the disciplines.

Britton, James, et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18*. London: Macmillan Educational, 1975. This influential work of the British Schools Council Project (1966–1975) introduced theories of cognitive and emotional development in writing on which much current writing process theory and practice are based. WAC workshops and writing intensive curricula in the United States and elsewhere continue to be founded on these theories.

Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 28 (1977): 122–28. Rpt. in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Victor Villanueva, Jr. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997. 7–15. Based on Emig's earlier work in cognition and on her readings of Piaget, Vygotsky, Britton, and others, Emig's careful distinctions between writing and other language modes gave theoretical impetus to the nascent WAC movement in the United States.

Fulwiler, Toby, ed. *The Journal Book*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987. Although not primarily a work of theory, this comprehensive collection of practice essays by teachers across grade levels and disciplines fleshed out Fulwiler's earlier work on writing in this mode, thereby providing evidence that popularized the theory.

Martin, Nancy, et al. *Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum, 11-16*. London: Ward Lock, 1976. Another product of the British Schools Council Project (see Britton), this work, which describes and theorizes the effects of writing in different subject areas in British

schools, conceptualized WAC for many U.S. educators, who made it a goal of U.S. schooling.

McCarthy, Lucille. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." *Research in the Teaching of English* 21 (1987): 233–65. This micro-ethnographic study created a methodological model and confirmed theory of the deep distinctions between disciplinary contexts in terms of modes of thought, uses of language, and teachers' expectations for student writing.

McLeod, Susan, and Margot Soven, eds. *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*. Academic Writing Landmark Publications in Writing Studies: http://aw.colostate.edu/books/mcleod_soven/ 2000. Originally published in print by Sage (Newbury Park, CA), 1992. This collection of WAC program development essays, while not primarily theoretical, exemplifies McLeod's "stage" theory of WAC—the evolution of WAC programs in the 1980s from grassroots faculty development efforts to institutional requirements—and explores its many implications.

Reiss, Donna, Dickie Selfe, and Art Young, eds. *Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998. This recent collection of practical and speculative essays takes as its theme the merging of language modes in diverse disciplinary curricula through various uses of electronic technology (electronic mail, distance-learning courses, multimedia databases and Web sites, etc.) by teachers.

Russell, David. "American Origins of the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Movement." *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*. Ed. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran. New York: MLA, 1992. 22–42. Based on Russell's comprehensive history of WAC and WAC-like efforts in the United States over more than a century, this essay, paired with one by Nancy Martin on British "language across the curriculum," shows how U.S. educational politics and theory shaped U.S. WAC.

Thaiss, Christopher. "Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Theory." *Theorizing Composition: A Critical Sourcebook of Theory and Scholarship*. Ed. Mary Lynch Kennedy. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999. 356–64. This recent bibliographical essay explores WAC as a programmatic concept. It explains the rapid growth of WAC over three decades as attributable to the theorists' and organizers' preference for inclusiveness and avoidance of narrow prescription.

Walvoord, Barbara. "The Future of WAC." *College English* 58 (1996): 58–79. This speculative essay interprets WAC in terms of social movement theory. Walvoord envisions WAC eventually disappear-

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ing in many schools as a separate institutional entity and merging conceptually and practically with newer trends in education.