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# Musings on Writing Across the Curriculum

*Russell Lord*

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Since writing is an integral part of many English courses, an English teacher might seem to be in an awkward position in a program which fosters *Writing Across the Curriculum*. Yet many of us in the English Department have found ourselves not only adapting to the concepts of this program, but enthusiastically adopting some of them, and we have been pleased with the results. It shall be the purpose of these notes to recount a few experiences with *Writing Across the Curriculum* concepts in English classes, both those oriented toward "writing," and those whose emphasis is primarily a study of "literature."

First, let me list some of the most salient features of the "new" orientation as I conceive it. Most of these swung into my ken during workshop sessions in May of 1986 with Toby Fulwiler. Here we who had been holding absolute sway over our tiny city-states in Rounds Hall for a not inconsiderable period suddenly found ourselves confronted with the need for self-analysis and an introspective examination of pedestals upon which we had set our rather shaky thrones.

## Freewriting

I had, of course, heard of it, but had dismissed it as a tool a bit too close to a psychiatrist's bag of tricks to be useful in my ever so much more humanistic trade. But here I found myself stooping to try it out myself,

and lo, volleys of thought shot forth from my heretofore sluggish and minutely critical pen, now so apparently novel and fecund that I wondered how they could have come from what was after all a very familiar and seemingly uninspired consciousness. Perhaps a beginner's fluke? No, we tried a number of these ten-minute expressions, and although varied both in structure and in my own satisfaction with what appeared, in every case some unexpected idea arose. Here, indeed, was a device for inclusion in my own classes.

## Journals

Here at least was a tool from my own heritage, although, to be sure, I had not seriously adopted it: too time consuming, and the students were sure to consider it "busy work." I don't recall now to what degree we actually practiced it in the workshop, but I do know that its suggestion set off threads of memory of journals and diaries of Pepys, Evelyn, Swift, James, Woolf, Didion, and so many more through literary history. I remembered too how I had myself kept a diary-journal through high school and college years, not at all conceiving it a task from an assigned course, but rather a labor of love, a record of discovery and a sounding board for critical analysis. I called to mind the first time I was conscious of the wonder of Beethoven: I tuned in late to a radio broadcast (it had to be quietly, since it was by my bedside "after hours") and copied into my journal the notes, as well as I could, of the long melodic lines of the second movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, not knowing what they were, and having to turn the set off before it could be announced. But I had captured them long before the advent of tape recorders and such marvels. Could this labor of love become the object of a classroom experience? I could see at once its pedagogical potential if it could, but I could also perceive its degradation if it became a mere mechanical task.

## Small Group Sessions

Here was a method I had tried a long time before in a class which, I recalled, had not used them to the best advantage. Moreover, the activity might lead to that old bugaboo, *groupthink!* But now, among us who were

educators, the device was certainly valuable. We could exchange ideas readily without formal hand-raising or frustration over not being recognized. And new concepts did follow from the groups I attended at the workshop.

## Revision

One other most valuable attitude remains in memory from the workshop: the idea of writing as process. Revision becomes perhaps the most valuable adjunct to creativity, and for most of us, a precondition to any successful production. Developing a critical sense is a process taking time and exposure to criteria which certainly for us took years to mature. It is perhaps here that the Writing Across the Curriculum concept is chiefly valuable, for it gives at least four years of potential exposure to the criteria needed for critical awareness. A freshman composition course is hardly adequate for such development, and yet that, with perhaps the addition of an advanced composition class, has been nearly the sole source for critical awareness among all but a few writing majors.

## Application

Such, then, are the valued insights from the Writing Across the Curriculum workshop I attended. How have I applied them in my classes since the workshop? I must confess that application has been somewhat varied. In some classes I have been most diligent to pursue them fervently. In others, I have been less zealous to carry forth the torch. Let me begin by relating experiences with the class in which I most successfully followed all the concepts noted above.

In a Freshman Composition course I taught in the Spring of 1988, I worked especially diligently to develop significant journal entries and effective small group sessions. At first, I found the most effective method was to examine journals monthly, not for style or mechanics, but for developed reactions to surroundings and events. I found a primitive grading system needed to maintain student effort: grades of  $\checkmark+$ ,  $\checkmark$ ,  $\checkmark-$ , 0 were adequate to produce daily entries, with occasional examples used as the basis for themes. The results varied, of course, but nearly all became

more verbally sensitive to their surroundings. Although our text suggested loose-leaf notebooks for ease of correction, I found that bound notebooks, dedicated to journal entries, were more effective in making students proud of their accomplishments.

The small group sessions, however, turned out to be the most challenging, and yet the most rewarding aspect of the course. The tendency of students at the beginning was to take the groups too lightly, with the danger that they would become mere social cliques. At the beginning I asked each group of four or five to choose the best work for a particular assignment and read it to the class as a whole. Initial results were not promising, but as I began assigning definite criteria for choice, the quality of submissions improved. At times I varied the tasks, asking each group to improve a given paper, or even to work out the development of some idea. At the end of the semester I did feel that a degree of critical judgement had begun to appear.

Sometimes I had individuals develop class freewriting on a topic at home and then present the results to the group for evaluation and helpful criticism. In all cases, the products of any writing were looked upon as tentative, to be reworked for later submission and grading. In most cases, the third rewriting was the one graded.

Successful? Possibly. But the primary benefit was to achieve a vital classroom environment and a group of responsive and responsible students. My current Freshman Composition class has not yet moved into an adequate critical approach to each other's work, but half a semester is left, and I have hope.

In Introduction to Literature classes, I have introduced a more limited application of Writing Across the Curriculum techniques. Since these courses emphasize reading rather than writing, they are in some ways less free to develop writing techniques than Composition classes; but for that very reason they are closer to other Writing Across the Curriculum courses and offer perhaps more valid examples of just what can be done in the program as a whole. I have so far introduced journal writing, freewriting in response to in-class reading, and quiz questions that approach freewriting in effect. I have not yet introduced group criticism, partly because the size of the class makes it logistically more difficult than

in the smaller writing classes. Nor have I attempted revisions of papers yet this semester, although I plan it as an extra-credit option. It is as yet too early to assess effects, although the journals keep the class actively responsive to readings, and the freewriting seems to make students more alert to what they read.

In summary, I have found these four techniques from the Writing Across the Curriculum workshops substantially helpful in one Composition class, and promising to be so in another. A more limited use of these techniques in a Literature class has offered promise, but needs to be more thoroughly explored before I make any evaluation of its effectiveness.

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*Russell Lord is a professor in the English Department. He is a member of the Writing Task Force, Director of the Writing Assessment Project, and Editor of Probes, a publication of writings from freshman composition classes.*