

Growing Up With WAC

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Now that the 20th century is but a thing of the past, many people are focusing their attention on what the future holds. But peering into the future is at best a hit or miss enterprise, in spite of beliefs to the contrary by tele-psychics, tarot card readers, and Ouija board enthusiasts. Enjoyable as it may be to speculate, perhaps all anyone can really say is that for good and for ill, the future promises changes, and we most often lack the foresight to know exactly their nature and consequences.

Without venturing any further into cliché and leaving the metaphysical hi-jinks to those more sympathetic to them, I wish instead to use this article to tell a story, to an extent autobiographical, about something certainly as worthy of our attention as futuristic conjectures—a look back at the past. Since this is a journal about writing, it is, to no surprise, a story, about our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program—particularly its development at Plymouth State College and its power to effect change both in and beyond the classroom.

The starting point for this story is 1985, a year that, in retrospect, had more than its share of triumphs, disappointments, and tragedies. I'll leave it to the reader to determine which of the following events fit into which categories, but here is a bit of what happened in that year: Ronald Reagan began his second term as President; PLO terrorists hijacked the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and killed American citizen Leon Klinghoffer; actor Rock Hudson died of AIDS; The Los Angeles Lakers beat the Boston Celtics in the NBA finals (4-2); Madonna began her first road show, the Virgin Tour; *The Color Purple* won the Best Picture Oscar; British scientists discovered a frighteningly large hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica; and the makers of Coca Cola introduced "New Coke." Oh, and Plymouth State College faculty put the finishing touches on a new General Education program. That program, now 15 years old and currently under examination for possible modification, created, among other things, Writing (W) courses in each major.

In order to support the W courses and to reinforce the notion that writing is something that ought to be done in every college level course, a team of faculty, headed by the late Sally Boland, initiated a formal WAC program at Plymouth State. To introduce faculty to the philosophy and methods of WAC, Toby Fulwiler, a national leader in the WAC movement, led a two-day WAC workshop here in May of 1986. Having just finished my first year of teaching at Plymouth State, I felt a bit of good-natured pressure from my Department Chair to attend the workshop. Reluctant at first—after all, I had taught for three years prior to coming to Plymouth State, so certainly I knew all about using writing in the classroom—I finally agreed to participate. Fearing the worst going in (a mind-numbing, pedantic journey into a never-never land of academic buzzwords), I left that workshop both humbled and hopeful—humbled at the realization that my prior attempts to engage students in meaningful writing were, at best, old hat, but perhaps worse, stifling and pedestrian—hopeful that armed with a new attitude toward writing and some new and invigorating techniques, I might

finally begin to use writing as a true learning tool and not just another hurdle for students on the way toward a final grade.

As I prepared my classes for the Fall 1986 semester, I cautiously incorporated some of the new (to me) WAC techniques into my courses—freewrites in all classes, peer review in my research methods course. Seeing the usefulness of these techniques first-hand encouraged me, in future semesters, to apply different sorts of writing assignments on a broader scale.

For example, I used journals for the first time in a research methods course. Prior to the WAC training I received in 1986, I'm not sure that I could have possibly imagined why or how anyone would use a journal in a course devoted to statistics and research design. After doing so, however, I couldn't fathom doing the course without journals. Students wrote of their struggles with statistics, their reactions to ethical dilemmas, their ideas for research projects. My workload was increasing as a result, but getting to know my students better more than compensated for the extra time needed on reading and evaluation. Suffice it to say, I was now committed fully to the idea that WAC wasn't just another superficial fad destined to the same fate as "New Coke" or, in academic circles, "relaxed alertness" (betcha never even heard of that one!).

As the 1980s segued into the 1990s and I used WAC techniques on a regular basis, I also began to look at WAC not only as a means of helping students learn, but also as a mechanism for my own professional development. Up until the early 1990s my uses of WAC techniques were primarily reactive—I would hear about or read about a particular writing technique and then adopt it for use in my teaching. Over time, though, the novelty of some of the techniques began to wear off. Fearing that I might lapse into WAC lassitude, I remembered one day a classic line from Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*. At the end of the film Allen's character, Alvie Singer, delivers a monologue to the camera in which he comments on the nature of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, he acknowledges that relationships are like sharks—they have to keep moving forward or they die. I think that statement applies equally as well to teaching as it

does to relationships. If one accepts the premise that teaching is a scholarly activity, then obviously moving forward necessitates not only the adaptation of the ideas of others, but also the development of one's own ideas that others may borrow and learn from as well.

Toward that end I began, in the early nineties, to develop writing assignments unique enough to call my own. Examples of such assignments included having students in my introductory psychology class write short stories and one-act plays to learn about research methods; having students in my history of psychology class write a comparative analysis of modern introductory psychology textbooks with those from different historical eras; and, most recently, using team journals in my beginning level psychology course. Evaluative data, collected to explicitly assess the effectiveness of these sorts of assignments, showed that students found them challenging, yet enjoyable.

Encouraged by students' comments, I have, over the past several years, submitted my ideas about writing to both professional teaching conferences as well as journals that publish works on pedagogical innovation. Reactions to my ideas have been consistently positive. In addition to several recent conference presentations, I currently have two articles in press and a third undergoing a second round of reviews. My intent in pointing this out is not to be boastful, but rather to illustrate with a singular example how WAC can inspire faculty to seek new challenges in the classroom, and how those challenges can subsequently be a valuable mechanism for stimulating professional development.

Preparing this article has allowed me to think carefully about both the history of the WAC program at Plymouth State as well as my own role in it. Truly, WAC and I have grown up together at this institution. I can't begin to speak to all of the ways in which WAC has influenced the people on this campus, but if my own experience is any benchmark, then I am confident in saying that such influences have been only positive in character. WAC, for instance, has altered my interactions with students and my expectations for their learning. WAC has fueled my ongoing desire to improve as a teacher

and contributed to my participation in both local and national dialogues on writing and learning. And last but certainly not least, WAC has provided me the opportunity to meet, collaborate with, and even befriend numerous individuals on this campus whose commitment to and passion for writing enlivens our mission as a teaching institution.

I began this story with a brief review of events that surrounded the launching of our WAC program. Back then the year 2000 seemed far, far away. And who could have anticipated the many changes and events that shape our present world: Y2K here and gone with much fanfare but little in the way of anticipated (by some) catastrophe; certain diet peddlers undeserving of any attention whatsoever nevertheless embedding themselves in our cultural consciousness; President Clinton refuting Freud by showing us that sometimes a cigar isn't just a cigar; and the Red Sox winning a playoff game. At Plymouth State, Mary Lyon Hall is now coed; Lamson Library received a long-deserved make-over; the old gym in Silver Hall metamorphosed into Silver Cultural Arts Center; and where cars once prowled through the heart of the campus we now have manicured walkways completely free of combustible engines.

Looking back at all of the local changes, it is heartening to know that WAC continues to thrive, as it ought to if we are to take our institutional mission statement seriously. After all, academic fads will come and go. General Education programs will evolve. But constant throughout all of that should be a commitment to ensuring that our students communicate effectively, learn effectively, and consequently live effectively. WAC has proven itself over the years to be indispensable for ensuring those outcomes. As the College continues to move forward, WAC will undoubtedly experience its own new challenges. But by its having already survived 15 years in the sometimes trying climate of academia, I dare say that having grown up with WAC and having been changed by it, I look forward now to growing old with it.