

A Shared Focus for WAC, Writing Tutors and EAP: Identifying the “Academic Purposes” in Writing Across the Curriculum

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Abstract. *While we have different methods of teaching, WAC teachers, writing tutors and teachers of EAP share a common goal: to help students learn how to write effectively across the curriculum. To do this, students have to be able to situate each assignment within the larger context of questions and discussions in their course, in order to understand the role of that assignment in inducting them into the discipline. This article demonstrates the importance, for students, of discerning this “academic purpose,” and suggests some ways in which students can be helped to develop routines of interrogating their essay questions to discover the purpose behind the question. It concludes by describing ways of “mainstreaming” this teaching in collaboration with discipline professors across the curriculum.*

Working with undergraduate students in an Australian arts faculty, every day I grapple with the problem of purpose in students’ writing for the disciplines: a problem shared, in universities around the world, by WAC teachers, writing tutors (like myself), and teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) who aim to prepare non-English-speaking-background students “for the demands . . . [of] subject-matter classrooms” in English-medium universities (Stoller 209). The nature of our concerns varies, depending upon our role in the students’ writing

process. A professor who has set a writing assignment may wonder why some students missed the point. A writing tutor reading a student's draft may wonder what was supposed to be the point. An EAP teacher planning activities to support students in writing particular assignments in a "paired" writing course needs to know well in advance what the assignments are for. Whatever our role, however, we would all like to help students discern the purpose behind the writing that is required of them. While general strategies for this have been developed in both EAP and WAC, routines for approaching particular assignment questions remain often at the level of identifying the key content and instruction words. In this article, I would like to suggest that routines developed in individual writing consultations can be transferred to classroom teaching to address the problem of purpose at both generic and discipline-specific levels.

One of EAP's most useful contributions to thinking about WAC is (as its name implies) its focus on academic purposes – not so much the purposes of writers themselves, as the purposes of the discourse community within which their writing will be valued. While EAP teachers are concerned with the challenges facing students for whom English is a second language, there is a sense in which academic discourse is a second language to every student in higher education. This is because it is far from clear to most beginning students what the purposes of academic study actually are. The purposes for which students attend university include getting a degree, pursuing an interest in an area of subject matter, and/or learning how to function in a particular professional career. The purposes of academics in various fields do encompass all of these student goals, but underlying the design of many courses (at least in my area of humanities and social sciences) is a more fundamental purpose: to socialize students into communities in which knowledge is constructed. The characteristic structures of text, and language of argument, follow from this underlying purpose. It is not much use to students to know the language of their discipline unless they have something viable to say in answer to its questions.

What makes an answer viable? Briefly, it must address not just the question, but the context of discussion within which the question has been asked. I would like to suggest, therefore, that one of the most important “academic purposes” for students to be aware of is their discipline professor’s purpose in framing the particular assignment they are working on. Because the disciplines are very different, even within general clusters like “Arts” or “Sciences,” this purpose is not easy for outsiders to discern, and indeed there is no consensus that EAP or writing teachers should engage with it. In the context of helping students with WAC, however, it is crucial, and teachers need to help students develop a routine for discovering it.

EAP has developed, in recent decades, from a general study of academic register to the analysis of genres as both textual forms and “social action” (Flowerdew and Peacock 14–15; Swales 46–47, 59–66). Its methods of teaching have evolved, accordingly, from a focus on text to “ethnographic” approaches in which writing teachers and students are encouraged to find out about the discipline contexts that produce the genres they examine, in order to see what social as well as intellectual purposes are served by particular forms of writing (Ballard and Clanchy; Paltridge 64; Johns “Coherence” and “Text”).

Scholarship concerned with WAC, meanwhile, has followed a similar path. Lea and Street have traced a development from teaching a standard and purportedly transferable set of “study skills” to fostering “socialization” of students into academic culture (159). Academic culture, however, has proved both diverse and unstable (e.g., Bazerman, “Written knowledge” and “Cultural criticism”; Herrington and Moran; Ivanic; Johns, “Text”; Langer; Odell; MacDonald; Saunders and Clarke). Hence the socialisation approach has, in turn, been subsumed within an “academic literacies” approach that “views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities” (Lea and Street 159). Because these differ from discipline to discipline, from one school of thought to another, and even from one classroom to another, WAC teachers and students must, again, rely on ethnographic investigation of specific situations to understand the purposes of writing.

Does this mean that there is no generic strategy that students can be taught to use, in writing centers or in classrooms, to discern the purposes of their assignments across a range of disciplines? My experience of working with student writers one-to-one, and reading their assignments across a broad range of Arts disciplines, has led me to think otherwise. I see patterns in the questions on which they write, and in the comments they get from their discipline teachers, that suggest a similarity of purpose underlying the variety of essay questions. Writing tutors have traditionally been reluctant to engage closely with the content of essays, both because we lack sufficient expertise in the disciplines (Spack), and because we are careful not to “appropriate” our students’ work (though Clark has thoughtfully questioned this position). However, while we cannot *tell* students what their assignments are getting at, we can teach them how to *ask themselves* useful questions about the questions they are given. Working at this level, our involvement does not have to rest on expertise in the subject matter of the discipline, and it is not going to consist of telling the student what to say. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that essay questions are themselves a genre, a way of “getting things done”; and though we usually focus on their content, we can equally well focus on their function. What many of them “get done” is to engage the students in the work of the discipline by asking them to apply a theory to phenomena “on the ground” and test its usefulness. It is this generic function that students need to be aware of, in many cases. A close look at some examples from a range of humanities and social disciplines in my university will demonstrate the importance of working out the professor’s purpose in setting particular questions; following this, I will suggest how we can collaborate with students in such a “working out.”

Earlier this year, an archaeology student brought me the following question: “Discuss the emergence of urban centers in West Africa and the challenge they pose to conventional accounts of the dynamics underlying the rise of complex societies.” The question is linguistically complex, with a number of embedded ideas to be teased out, and

importantly, they must be teased out in the opposite order to that in which they appear! In other words, it is no good starting with a description of urban centers in West Africa and then moving to the conventional accounts of the rise of complex societies. The writer's observations of the former are significant, for the purposes of this assignment, only insofar as they relate to challenges posed to the latter. This is not so much an essay about the archaeological record as an essay about the formation of theory in archaeology, so it is important to begin by understanding that theoretical context. The question must, therefore, be picked apart backwards: What are complex societies (according to archaeologists)? What is meant by the dynamics underlying their rise? What are conventional accounts of these dynamics? What are the salient features of these accounts for the formation of theory? *Then*, what urban centers were there in West Africa, how did they emerge, and how does this appear to contradict the salient features of received wisdom on the subject?

How do students come to understand that they must approach this assignment in this way? They have to get into the habit of asking themselves how each component of the course is related to the overall ideas and methods that course is presenting. They need to look at the course guide: examine the rationale presented in its introduction; look at the sequence of questions tackled in the classes week by week; read all the essay questions, not just the one they have chosen, to see what concerns the topics have in common; identify the overall design of the course to deal with its main concerns; and ask themselves how their own question relates to all the rest.

One of the concerns of this particular course is with evolving fashions in thinking about the distant past. The history of archaeological theory encompasses the development of, and challenges to, a series of paradigms, resulting from the interplay of intellectual fashions and archaeological discoveries, in a global context of changing political relations. In this course, a student writing on the essay question above could not get high marks for a description of early West African cities, no matter how comprehensive. More could be earned

by an account of the factors shaping their development, but this would still not be enough. What is needed here is an understanding of what archaeologists used to think and why, not simply in terms of the archaeological record but in terms of their political position as scholars in the colonial and early post-colonial period, and of their intellectual position in the modernist tradition of grand narrative. The conventional wisdom has been that history is a process of evolution from subsistence communities with diffused authority to complex societies built on surplus and trade, with ever more centralized and hierarchical political organization, and the cultural apparatus of monumental building, conspicuous wealth with its patronage of art, and writing. This is a history with its high points in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, and its apex, so far, in Western Europe; and stories of other places have been accounts of how they came to join in this progress towards civilization. It is a history that has been challenged by postmodern and postcolonial trends in thinking. With this perspective, it is possible to see how West African urbanization is being reconsidered from a position that challenges the narrative of political evolution and gives different meanings to the existing record, from which many of the classic features of urbanization (such as massive temples or defensive walls) were absent during early centuries.

Am I seriously suggesting that writing tutors should know all of this, in order to be of any use to their students? Not at all; what I am suggesting is that writing tutors could model for their students, and practise with them, the routines of trying to identify the purpose and design of each learning experience to establish the context within which each task can be understood. Together they can ask the question: how does this task relate to what has been discussed in this course? Together, they can look at the course handouts to identify the sources of information that may help them to answer this question. And they can think about what other resources may be helpful, including other people, and what questions it may be useful to ask of them. These are the routines that students need in order to approach any assignment. Peer tutor training, therefore, might usefully include a session where

tutors share some course guides from courses they have taken, and try to spell out how the design of those courses, and the assignments required in them, relate to the work of building knowledge in the discipline.

The key to understanding questions like the one above is an awareness that courses in the disciplines share a common purpose of inducting students into the disciplines, familiarizing them with the nature and history of the work that people in that discipline do. They discuss the key concepts and evolving questions in their area, and when students tackle an assignment, however it is framed, they need to show that they have understood how their question relates to the larger questions they have been discussing in the course. The meaning of each question is embedded in the meanings made by the discipline as a community of inquiry.

Students cannot, therefore, afford to settle for understanding the dictionary meanings of the content words in any question (although they have to know these); nor is it enough to understand, as well, the generic meaning of the instruction words (“describe,” “explain,” “analyze,” etc.), defined in so many books and websites where essay-writing advice is offered. They must understand the “academic purpose” of the question: that is, its role in connecting the theory of the discipline with the particularities of its subject matter.

In light of this, we can generate useful questions for students to ask themselves even if we do not know about the ideas referred to in another question from archaeology:

In his recent works, Norman Yoffee has highlighted the limitations of neoevolutionary theory, with particular emphasis on the ‘chiefdom’ concept. Do you agree with Yoffee’s criticism? Are there any problems with the alternative model he proposes?

This can be broken down by means of questions that call on the student’s overall grasp of the course, alternating with questions that lead the student back to the course handouts to search for relevant clues and resources. What, I would ask this student, is neoevolutionary theory? What are the questions in archaeology that it tries to answer?

Does it challenge or replace an earlier theory? Has it been challenged by a later theory? Taking the student back to his or her materials, I would ask, Where has this theory been dealt with in this course? What did the professor tell you about it, and what have you read? Then we would return to what the student has learned (or needs to learn), but with a more specific focus: What does the theory say? What is it good for? What isn't it good for? What does Yoffee say about this? What role does 'chiefdom' play in evolutionary theory? How does Yoffee criticize this? What does he think would be a better explanation? Why? Do you think it's better? Is there anything it doesn't explain very well? Finally, if the student does not yet have answers to these questions, we go back to the course materials, and ask: Has your professor talked about this? If not, how will you find material to help you think about it? Where is the reading list for this course? Which books deal with this? How can you use the books on the list to find relevant books that aren't on the list?

Paradoxically, it is an advantage, when generating questions like these, not to be an expert in the discipline. I am not reminding the students of what I know to be the answer to their essay questions, but helping them to develop routines for working this out for themselves. Whatever the discipline, a similar routine of interrogating the course design is necessary, as we can see by looking (much more briefly) at examples from some other disciplines.

In an English subject, students are asked the question: "Are autobiographies more true than fiction? Does it matter? Discuss in relation to two texts." Students will not get far with this by relying on their own idea of what "true" means. They will need to recall what critics of autobiography mean by truth, and what possibilities their professor has discussed, with reference to various texts throughout the course. They will need to consider what difference it makes to think of truth as accurate reporting, or as an imagined recreation that reflects the author's understanding of himself and/or resonates with the experiences of readers.

In a sociology class, students who had watched a British series of

documentaries following the lives of several children at seven-year intervals from the age of seven were asked to “Examine the role played by class in shaping the lives of key individuals in the 7 Up series of films.” Students cannot tackle this one with a general commonsense idea of “class” as socioeconomic status; they are expected to discuss whether Marx’s ideas about class or Weber’s make better sense of the trajectories of the people in these documentaries. This requirement is not in the question, however; it has to be recovered by the student going back to class discussions and readings in the preceding weeks.

There is a similar expectation lurking in another question from a different course in sociology: “‘If the city was once seen as signaling the end of community, suburbia today provides the point of departure for all those in search of community.’ To what extent does life in the suburbs meet an unmet desire for community in modern society?” Again, this question requires students to contextualize their answer by reference to earlier readings and discussions, this time discussions on the history of sociological ideas about community, especially *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, and alienation. But again, this requirement is not expressed in the wording of the question itself.

In one-to-one consultations, I can ask students the questions they need to ask themselves, and we can look at their course materials together. As the strategies are useful to all students, however, I also try to disseminate them more widely by collaborating with their professors to incorporate a focus on academic skills and discourse into the regular teaching of their courses at first year. For discipline professors, who *could* tell their students how to answer their questions, but want them to work it out for themselves, this kind of collaboration with a writing specialist offers a strategy that can help. One form this could take is for professors to invite a Writing Center director or a WAC director into their classrooms to show how she or he would approach the next assignment in their course. For their part, Writing Center or WAC directors could encourage discipline professors to call on them for this, as I have done in my faculty.

In one of the regular lecture hours, I give a “guest lecture” on

reading and writing for each course to which I am invited. I start by picking out an essay question the students will be asked to write on in the next few weeks, and model how I would approach it, by asking myself “How does this question relate to the overall concerns of this course?” This leads me naturally to ask, “What *are* the overall concerns of this course? And how can I find this out?” I then show the students how to read right through their course guide, starting with the introductory page that sets out the aims and focus of the course, then finding the reading and discussion questions that are asked week by week and the ones on which they will be expected to write. I emphasise that this course (like most others) is designed to develop an understanding of particular problems, themes, and ideas over the whole semester, so that it is worth looking for the design to see how it builds from week to week and from topic to topic. I then suggest how I think the particular question I have chosen is related to the rest, and check my understanding with the professor. Before going on to other points I want to cover, I tell the students that this routine is one they need to develop not just in this course but in all the others in which they are enrolled.

At the same time as raising students’ awareness of how they might question a course design – and the professor who designed it – this kind of session also highlights, for professors, that what they expect of students is quite complicated and is not obvious to many of the students, particularly in their first year. It is rare, in fact, for students to read their course guides through when they get them, looking for a design; most admit, when asked for a show of hands, that they simply take each week as it comes.

Because students do not normally look for a design in their courses – still less, for a common design across all their courses – we have recently gone further in my faculty and included in all first-year courses a focus on academic discourse that has “purpose” at its center. Students are explicitly introduced to the idea that university study is an apprenticeship to a range of disciplines—that is, academic communities engaged in the construction of knowledge through a cycle of ques-

tioning, research, critical reception, and further questioning. Then, as the semester unfolds, they look at how this idea shapes the work done in each course they study, as they mine the primary sources for evidence, construct interpretations, discuss and reference the ideas of other scholars, and enter into current debates in the discipline. Thus, the focus on discourse is simultaneously generic and discipline-specific, and this initiative disseminates the questions developed in one-to-one writing consultations into the regular classroom work of courses in the disciplines (Chanock 2004).

This approach does not look at any kind of writing other than academic exposition or argument, as other kinds are seldom required in an Australian Arts degree. Outside of universities, however, they become more important, as is acknowledged in the United States where composition courses encompass more varied genres to address a wider range of purposes. Where composition is taught, it might be useful to ask the group to collect and compare the assignments they are working on in their other courses, to consider how other genres differ from the kind of writing that builds knowledge in a discipline.

When discipline professors talk about good writing, they praise uncluttered style and generic features such as structure and analysis; but when they grade students' work, the most important criterion seems to be "Does this essay answer the question?" Although many writing teachers have considered this area inappropriate, or simply too hard, for them to deal with, it has been my experience that any teacher concerned with students' writing – whether in writing centers, EAP classes, or WAC courses – could go further in helping students to develop strategies for deciding whether they are "answering the question."

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