

WAC and Beyond: An Interview with Chris Anson

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A question arises periodically at conferences, on listservs, in department meetings: Who can we bring to our campus for a WAC workshop who can really connect with our faculty? Among the first names mentioned in such situations is that of Chris Anson, Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University. For nearly twenty years, Chris has crisscrossed the country—and the globe—to work with institutions of every kind on writing and, more recently, communication across the curriculum. He has a well-deserved reputation for customized, hands-on workshops that provide participants with ideas and products to improve their teaching. In addition, he remembers names and interests, which means that a surprise encounter at a conference will yield an enthusiastic catch-up conversation.

In addition to directing the writing/speaking program, teaching courses at NC State, directing theses, and conducting faculty development activities literally everywhere, Chris publishes regularly, with over 60 articles and book chapters to his credit, not to mention a dozen books, many of them directly related to WAC. He is the current president of the National Council of Writing Program Administrators, and he has served in many roles with the National Council of Teachers of English and its constituent organizations, especially CCCC. These and his many other credentials can be seen at his Web site: www.home.earthlink.net/~theansons/Portcover.html

In the spirit of complete disclosure, I proudly confess to having worked closely with him during my graduate student days at the University of Minnesota. Thanks to Chris, I had opportunities to work

in TA training, a dual enrollment program, and other administrative roles while performing my thesis research under his direction. Now that our paths have diverged, I was delighted to treat Chris to lunch at the recent CCCC convention in San Antonio to explore his relationship with WAC and speculate about future directions. The notes from that conversation have been expanded through correspondence.

CR: Over the 10+ years we have known one another, I've often heard you describe yourself as a creative writer at heart. Is that the case? If so, how did your professional life move into the composition, WAC, and now CAC directions?

CA: I was a born English major. As I was growing up, I loved language, literature, writing—all of it. I wrote on my own and pictured myself becoming an author. Creative writing was the basis of my first M.A. at Syracuse. At that time—in the late 1970s—I also started learning about the nascent field of composition studies. I got some good advice from Bob Schwegler, who is now at URI but was at the time a young assistant professor at Syracuse. I was really interested in medieval literature—I loved unpacking *Beowulf* in the original Old English and got very immersed in other Anglo Saxon texts, but I also sat in on classes about literature of all kinds. Bob advised me away from a literary specialty because the job opportunities were so limited. He predicted that composition studies would soon be a “real field,” and that scholarship would be taking off.

I guess I could be accused of taking a careerist detour, but the kind of work going on in comp at that time was utterly fascinating to me. The creative writing community tends to view writing as this personal, muse-driven, mysterious struggle to produce text. At the time, there wasn't a lot of interest among the creative writers—the students or professors—in figuring out how writing works or how people learn their craft. From their point of view, a writer is at the mercy of her

psyche as well as a host of unpredictable external forces. Interest in analyzing or, God forbid, conducting research on the composing process was almost absent, except for issues relating to form or style.

In contrast, people like Janet Emig, James Britton, Sondra Perl, Mina Shaughnessy, and Donald Murray were looking at how we write—what describes the composing process. Even though Syracuse had no course of study, no composition-rhetoric curriculum at that time, a group of faculty met regularly to read this new research and discuss it. I was fortunate to be included in that group and got hooked. As I finished my M.A., I sought admission to the few Ph.D. programs where a degree with a composition-rhetoric emphasis was available, and I went to Indiana University for the rest of my graduate work. At that time, Indiana had two main tracks in the English Ph.D.—a literature track and a language track. The language track fit best with the specialization in composition, and it was quite interdisciplinary. I think the wisest element of that curriculum was the incentive and freedom to take courses in psycholinguistics, linguistics, education, reading theory, language and artificial intelligence, rhetoric, text analysis, semiotics . . . and at the same time, composition as a field was stretching into these and other areas. I couldn't get enough of it all.

CR: Tell me a bit about what drew you to WAC and, eventually, CAC.

CA: Two things, I think. The first was interdisciplinarity. Composition studies has been an interdisciplinary field from the beginning, borrowing from cognitive psychology, educational psychology, philosophy, literary theory, and other research bases. After some of the initial research was in place, the field seemed to experience a narrowing process—there wasn't as much exploration into other areas, with some exceptions, but there was a good deal of reconnecting with the interests of other English studies scholars, especially in the areas of postmodern theory and cultural studies. That represented not so much a closing off of exploration as a closing off of “outsiders,” researchers in other disciplines. The WAC movement helped—and continues to

help—keep the multi-disciplinary context alive. WAC allows scholars in any discipline to use “writing” as it fits the work at hand. This can make WAC scholarship dicey at times, because WAC crosses so many disciplinary boundaries and respects (and challenges) so many conventions. On the other hand, interdisciplinary collaboration is increasingly an expectation of research in many fields.

The second draw for me was WAC’s strong emphasis on faculty development, which I’d been heavily involved in as a composition director and as I began working with other departments at the University of Minnesota. On many campuses, the WAC program is the locus of faculty development. Compositionists who work in WAC programs tend to be interested in national faculty development movements and organizations, such as Preparing Future Faculty (PFF), American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), and Professional and Organizational Development (POD), all of which lend versatility to programming based in writing and critical thinking. Communication is central, for example, to problem-based learning. That also means closer alliances with centers for faculty development; in fact, the leaders of some such centers are WAC experts who have expanded their interests beyond writing and into other areas of pedagogy.

One can make the argument that composition lost touch with scholarship in communication, but I see technology as the bridge that brings them back together in CAC. All of us in higher education have to learn and theorize about new media, which draw on rhetorical traditions privileged by communication as well as those in composition. WAC is a great foundation, and I expect that WAC programs will extend their reach through various media.

In our Campus Writing and Speaking Program at NC State, we offer a service we call “assisted inquiry.” It’s designed to make classroom research more manageable for faculty. When a faculty member has a classroom-based research question, we help to define the question and decide how to gather and analyze data to begin answering it. We get IRB clearance for the study, supervise the collection and analysis of data, then do the analysis (always sharing our progress with the

faculty member), and finally present him or her with the results. We ask only that the faculty member reflect on the findings and use them to enhance instruction if they so warrant it. We also help the faculty member to find an outlet for publishing the results of the study, either collaboratively with us or alone.

Another example of a CAC application would be helping a faculty member to coach students as they prepare poster sessions with accompanying slides or oral presentation. Students need to think about using multiple media (text, graphics, electronic projection, sound) to engage a transient audience. It's tricky—and increasingly an expectation for prestigious professional conferences in many fields. Our students at both undergraduate and graduate levels will be called upon to demonstrate this kind of expertise when they leave school. WAC and CAC approaches help them practice in problem-oriented, supervised situations.

Although the Campus Writing and Speaking Program had its genesis in a concern for students' abilities, we also see our work heavily oriented toward "communication for learning." Our faculty clients tend not to understand writing and speaking as tools for fuller and more intensive learning in their courses; they see these modes in assessment terms—as formal, high-stakes assignments designed to collect information in order to rank, grade, or evaluate the output of student work, not to facilitate learning. Providing these other perspectives has been one of the most visibly rewarding goals of our work.

CR: You are well known on the workshop/faculty development circuit for using cases in your sessions. Do you write them yourself? Are they based on real situations? Or do they represent the creative writer in you?

*CA: I'll take the last question first. As a creative writer in a certain sense, I like to approach problems through narrative. In graduate school and beyond, I read early books and articles on case theory, noting the way cases were used in business schools and other "applied" educational settings. The whole idea of a rhetorical *situation* appeals to me—*

a narrative of circumstances peopled by characters in various roles responding to exigences of whatever kind. I often refer to cases as a way of using fiction to help people learn. Several of the books I have edited or co-written have been based on cases. [E.g., *Writing in Context* (1988), *Scenarios for Teaching Writing*, (1993) *Dilemmas in Teaching*, (1998) and *The WAC Casebook* (2001).] As a field, composition studies has an affinity for stories. Rich Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu's book *Comp Tales* is a great example of a collection of narratives about teaching writing. And there are others, as we know.

What I have observed consistently is that a story, no matter how fanciful or crudely drawn, combines with discussion and reflection to yield good insights. For example, a case that features a frustrated teacher whose students are not performing as expected may direct readers' or discussants' attention to the confusing assignment that the students just don't understand—reminding them that teaching is not just about what students can or can't do well, but about what we do or don't do well. Faculty are experienced readers who can identify such a problem, offer suggestions, and internalize the problem and its solutions. This process is especially helpful for newer teachers or graduate students who haven't yet experienced the variety of problems and situations that can arise in the classroom (or outside it).

Sometimes I write cases for specific learning goals when I'm preparing a workshop. Probably half of them have at least some anchor in my experience or in a story someone else has told me. I combine characters, redirect the emphasis, or change details as necessary. Some cases work in almost any educational institution, but some audiences respond better to cases that speak to a specific setting.

CR: You visit many campuses each year as a consultant and/or workshop leader. If you had to generalize about the state of WAC on U.S. college and university campuses in 2004, what would you say? Does WAC work? Are some settings more congenial than others? If so, what are the factors that augur well or ill for WAC?

CA: It's interesting that you ask that, because I think there are some differences of opinion right now about the future of WAC, especially relative to the future of composition programs. I've heard a fear expressed that administrators like WAC because they can cut first-year comp., save the money, and then just "expect" faculty across the curriculum to teach writing. I know this has been a real fear in Communication departments as speaking across the curriculum grows. But WAC leaders have never, as a rule, feared the thorough integration of writing into other courses, programs, and disciplines. The more the better—especially when it's well supported. Our goal is to saturate the curriculum with writing and, in the case of my own program, speaking experiences as well, so that students are much more active as learners, so that knowledge becomes something very closely tied to language, both in learning and in telling others about that learning. But it has always assumed a strong base of knowledge and skill provided by a good composition program; WAC is not about substitution, it's about addition.

WAC is still very much alive and thriving; I was just on a small campus which is trying to begin a WAC program—there's been no attention to it in the past, and they feel somewhat "behind." Other campuses are still in the early stages, and some, like the University of Hawaii or the University of Missouri, have had well established programs for many years. There's a wide range of knowledge, experience, and administrative support, but I see no signs of WAC dissipating like an educational fad; in fact, if anything it's growing and extending its boundaries to include technological and visual literacies and oral communication.

The other thing I'm noticing—and this is purely impressionistic; there's a good study here, I think—is that WAC programs are starting to morph to fit their institutions and cultures. One size has never fit all in WAC, but the early programs seemed to have greater homogeneity than they do now. I'm thinking of the differences, say, between what Joe Harris is building at Duke, what Paul Anderson is building at Miami of Ohio, what Linda Driskill is building at Rice, and what

you're building at Carleton. Very different institutions, yes, but you're all shaping them in totally unique ways to match the cultures, missions, structures, administrations, curricula, and students on each campus. And all of you are doing great things with those differences.

As for the factors that lead to success—I think maybe the most important one is buried in that last remark. For a program to work, it has to be tailored to the institution. At NC State, for example, we have a lot of resistance to institutional mandates and top-down administration. Our nine undergraduate colleges like to operate autonomously. In that climate, creating a WI program or some universal requirement wouldn't work well. Instead, we have a unique, outcomes-based approach in which every department defines what it wants to accomplish and then we help them to get there. Plenty of faculty might resist a "requirement" that they do such and such, but no one, having created or endorsed a set of outcomes or objectives for their majors, will say, "I don't give a damn whether any of our students reach those." Because they define and articulate their own goals, they really want to achieve them. A second principle of success reflected in these programs is a lot of respect for other faculty and other disciplines, and for what assets faculty bring to the WAC collaboration. In my experience, some of the least effective programs have been ones that talk to, or down to, faculty, instead of creating intellectual partnerships with them. At Miami of Ohio, Paul Anderson has developed a model in which part of his work involves very tight-knit, relatively small groups of faculty in learning communities whose work is sustained over time. We do something similar at NC State in a faculty seminar, but I'm learning a lot from Paul's experience in these more intensive and interpersonally dynamic collaborations.

CR: If you were to describe the most outstanding WAC success you have observed, what would it be?

CA: I'd have to qualify that and talk about different kinds of success (WI, research-based, saturation, small college, unique college, etc.). I've

alluded to some programs whose leaders and collaborators are doing some very wise and interesting things based on their reading of the campus culture. That would certainly include your program at Carleton, which in addition to the wonderful links you've made between assessment and teaching, has perhaps the all-time record for number of different campus visitors, workshop leaders, and consultants. I'd also want to include places that strike me as visionary—pushing at the edges of WAC and innovating. Clemson is definitely one such place. Iowa State has been a vanguard in the area of college-specific programs with AgComm, a stunning CAC success in the College of Agriculture. There are also other aspects of WAC beyond faculty development or program development that we might include in honorific discourse about the field; for example, the information portal hosted by Colorado State is a fantastic resource nationally and internationally; Chris Thaiss' many years of work on the national WAC clearinghouse have also contributed in important ways to WAC networking; the leaders of the WAC conferences that now appear to be a regular occasion should be mentioned. Oh, and the program led by Gail Hawisher at Illinois. Well, give me another half an hour and I'd just keep going—there are so many good things going on. The CUNY system's recent infusion of WAC across many of its campuses. Bilingual WAC at Hostos Community College, for example. Baruch College's program, which emphasizes partnerships between college and industry. Washington State's program. The summer workshops at Virginia Tech. OK, I'll stop, because someone will always be left out who ought to be mentioned.

CR: Your current position combines writing and speaking across the curriculum. Have you found the combination natural? In what ways? If there are difficulties, what are they? Do you foresee growth in CAC programs? What curricular areas seem most promising?

CA: That combination has been magical in many ways. I've said re-

peatedly that I know it works better for faculty buy-in than either one does alone, but I just don't yet know why. My best guess: first, I think the combination automatically shifts the focus toward learning, because in mixing the modes, faculty don't revert to notions of formal papers and formal presentations used for assessment. Second, I think the combination pushes faculty away from stereotypical associations of writing with "English" and speaking with "Communications/Public Speaking." Partly that may be the result of our events and workshops, which almost never pull one mode apart from the other, and are always co-led by someone from the writing side (usually me) and someone from the speaking side (usually the assistant director of the program, Deanna Dannels, who is in the Department of Communication).

So that's one dimension—the faculty buy-in. Another is more theoretical, and it concerns the ways that writing and speaking are mutually reinforcing, the ways that they can be used in each other's service. It took me a while to get used to thinking of them as equivalent; I'm such a "writing person" that I wanted to privilege writing over everything else. But there are certain intellectual or pedagogical goals that are more appropriately reached through various speaking activities than through writing, or through some combination. We always begin with goals, and then see what sorts of language activities best accomplish those—and then we push for interest, innovation, uniqueness, in assignment design.

I do see growth in CAC. In fact, over the past five years that I've been at NC State, a number of CAC programs have started from scratch, and others are being formed from the expansion of existing WAC programs. It's also entering into conversations about first-year composition, and some programs are already blending speaking and writing. As I said, I think technology is pushing us in the direction of multimodality, and WAC programs can no longer ignore new work going on at the intersections of writing, oral communication, and the visual, all of which are now multiply enabled through new technologies. The next big extension of the Internet may well be in voice

processing and speech recognition—we just need to wait for the bandwidth. Let's face it, text is slower than voice in some ways, and on the horizon is a lot more spoken text at Web sites, on e-mail (e-voicemail?), and so on. That opens up a whole realm of possibility for instruction. For example, in creating Web research papers, students will need to decide what they want to narrate, show in text, show in visuals or graphics, and show in streaming video. Those choices will become crucial for the success of a research project, and we'll need a pedagogy to help students get there.

To sum up, I see a bright future for WAC, with a lot of new possibilities for those interested in what I believe should be a central part of higher education.