

WAC

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**Volume 15 • 2004**  
**Writing Across the Curriculum**

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# **The WAC Journal**

## **Volume 15**

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Printed by Kase Printing

ISSN 1544-4929

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# The WAC Journal

*Volume 15, September 2004*

## **Contents**

### **Interview**

- WAC and Beyond: An Interview with Chris Anson 7  
**Carol Rutz**

### **WAC Techniques and Applications**

- A Shared Focus for WAC, Writing Tutors and EAP: Identifying  
the “Academic Purposes” in Writing Across the Curriculum 19  
**Kate Chanock**

- Writing to Connect through Paired Courses 34  
**Daniel F. Collins**

### **WAC International**

- Orality and Writing: Conducting a Writing Exercise in Kenya 55  
**Jeanne Dubino**

### **WAC Program Strategies**

- WAC Directors and the Politics of Grading 67  
**Robert W. McEachern**

**Reviews**

Review of Kathleen Walsh Piper's *Image to Word:  
Art and Creative Writing* 83

**Ellen B. Cutler**

Review of Mark L. Waldo's *Demythologizing Language Difference  
in the Academy: Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs* 86

**Jacob S Blumner**

**Contributors' Notes** 93

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# Interview

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# WAC and Beyond: An Interview with Chris Anson

**Carol Rutz, Carleton College**

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](http://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.

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*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.

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# **WAC Techniques and Applications**

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

Kate Chanock, La Trobe University

**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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# Writing to Connect through Paired Courses

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Even as teachers must be willing to assume positions of change, they must also be willing to institute change, both in their students and in the institutions in which they work, through the ways in which they construct literacies with, and alongside, students. (Schroeder 180)

## **Introduction: Composition and Interdisciplinarity**

As a composition teacher interested in the inherently interdisciplinary designs of our field, I seek out teaching experiences that tap into the ways in which various disciplines interact and conjoin. I don't want to see students condemned to a series of required courses that have no apparent connection to one another. Instead, I hope pedagogies cross disciplines to engage students and faculty in meaningful, exploratory ways. To highlight the potential of such a set up, I will focus on the recent pairing of two required freshmen courses at Manhattan College, College Writing and The Nature and Experience of Religion, undertaken with a colleague, Stephen, from the Department of Religious Studies. Our classrooms were thematically linked through a common set of texts and a series of writing assignments related to these texts. We chose texts for the ways in which they could illuminate methodological particularities of each discipline and for the interdisciplinary conversations we wanted to model. I hoped that this set-up would make frameworks of meaning more easily understood and available to students, helping them to express themselves more persuasively and self-critically.

## **Project Description: Making Interdisciplinary Connections**

Prior to Fall Semester 2002, Stephen and I decided upon the readings we would share and the order in which they would be taught.<sup>1</sup> Shared texts were to provide a common backdrop for discussions and for subsequent writing assignments. They also contained the disciplinary “content” that students would work with in their Religious Studies course. Respective syllabi were drafted, although specific writing assignments, particularly for my writing course, were left intentionally vague, as we wanted some maneuverability as the semester progressed. Seventeen students enrolled; each course met two days a week, for one and one-half hours, back to back, in the same classroom.

Just as students do not necessarily make connections across their different courses of study (Pobywajlo 10), educators do not, often by design, illuminate such connections. Instead, educators generally follow the disciplinary designations under which they were trained. We wished to change such practice through an explicit pairing of our two courses. We hoped to engage connections across our courses and the disciplines that they represent. We knew that it would take time and attention to prod students to anticipate the goals and practices of each discipline (i.e., students in English work to anticipate the questions and practices of Religious Studies—and vice versa). Strategizing as the semester proceeded, we were aware of the risks involved. These risks may have included differences across disciplines that prove irreconcilable, power imbalances between teachers, unproductive interpersonal connections in and out of the classroom for students and teachers—in short, so much more is going on in collaborative classrooms that conflict is always a possibility (Speer and Ryan 44–46). Still, we wanted to provide students with a different kind of learning experience. Since students and teachers often labor under restrictive conditions, collaborative classrooms offer a “promise of change” to interested parties (Speer and Ryan 48). We hoped to combat student and teacher alienation in the classroom. By making disciplinary designs and interdisciplinary ties explicit components of our teaching, we

sought to minimize the potential for scholastic and pedagogical drudgery. Stated more optimistically, we hoped to offer a well-planned, highly choreographed semester balancing student work between two courses that at first glance have little to do with one another.

I am enumerating these goals in detail to highlight the process-oriented approach to our teaching, an element recognized as key to collaborative pedagogy: “Teaching collaboratively represents knowledge itself as less a set of material to be transmitted—facts and ideas handed over to the students—and much more as a social process involving critical thinking, persuasion, and negotiation” (Speer and Ryan 40). Collaboratively, we sought to provide students the processes of inquiry required to take up rhetorical and religious concepts and questions in the context of helpful peers. Through double exposure to the material, looking at the same texts through multiple perspectives, we hoped that students would learn the material in more comprehensive ways. Aligned with process, then, content was equally important. Pairing our courses, we offered students the opportunity to write to learn/learn to write in particularly active classrooms for freshmen students and their instructors.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Glimpse at One Assignment Block**

What follows is a description of the ways in which I used one common text in my writing course (with passing references to what went on in the Religious Studies course). I will also extrapolate from this particular example various general principles and insights from the writing course as a whole. This overview should not be taken as prescriptive; rather, it represents one attempt at interdisciplinary practice in a specific setting.

I began the writing course with Harold Kushner’s book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner’s text, a bestseller since its publication in the early 1980s, documents his struggle as a young rabbi in the aftermath of his young son’s death from progeria, the disease that causes rapid aging. Devoted to God, torn in faith, Kushner cannot accept his lot in life; he believes neither he nor, more importantly,

his son warranted such a grim fate. Kushner's text documents his line of questioning after his son's death and the answers to these questions that enabled him to reconstruct and reinvigorate his faith.

I used Kushner's text as an introduction to the composition of an effective argument. Various rhetorical elements—including audience, purpose, thesis, evidence, counter-arguments, speculation—were introduced. Structure, organization, and tone were also discussed. Students wrote responses to each chapter; sometimes these responses were open-ended, and other times I asked specific questions on particular areas of the text. I wanted students to monitor and evaluate Kushner's argument: how does an author construct an argument on something as intangible as the workings of God? How, in other words, can a diverse body of readers understand and accept as legitimate an argument steeped in and nuanced by abstract reasoning?

During these first three weeks of the Religious Studies course, students were introduced to the disciplinary study of religion. Specifically, three themes were emphasized: first, all religions change over time; second, all religions derive from and support a worldview; and third, all religions address the problem of theodicy, or the exploration of the workings of God in the presence of evil. Different kinds of religious experience were introduced (e.g., sacramental, ecstatic, prophetic, and mystic), as were certain analytic frameworks (e.g., Marx, Freud, and phenomenology). Students were tested on this material in their Religious Studies course (through multiple choice questions and two short essay questions). They did not begin talking about Kushner's text until this material was completed—around the time that students began writing on Kushner for me.

For their first writing assignment, I asked students to choose one of Kushner's main ideas and use it as the impetus for exploring their own ideas. That is, they were to briefly explain Kushner's position and then elaborate on the ways in which it plays out according to their understanding.<sup>3</sup> I asked students to consider the following questions: How has Kushner changed/reinforced your views on a particular element of religion? How have Kushner's ideas affected you as a reader

and a thinker? What productive questions and important insights have been prompted by reading Kushner's text? What changes have occurred based on your reading of the book? I encouraged students to consider the ways in which Kushner's ideas might be personally and collectively important, and I made it clear that they need not agree with Kushner in order to write a good essay. Nor did their beliefs necessarily have to change or change dramatically; they did not. Instead, the emphasis was on forwarding their own agenda, as prompted by their negotiation of Kushner's argument.<sup>4</sup> I had hoped to use student writing as a way of moving further into their understanding of both their pre-existing ideas about religious matters and about Kushner's text. A balance, then, between existing and new knowledge was sought, along with an understanding of the wider spectrum of ideas in which Kushner's views play out. What did they find meaningful and why? What stood out for them and against what? Where were they, after reading and discussing the book?

Kushner's book is decidedly personal; he acknowledges writing more as a grieving parent than a rabbi. As such, he invites personal reactions from his readers. Advancing alternative images of God and religious belief is tricky work, brushing up against some of the most cherished and unexamined beliefs readers might hold. I was interested in my students' transactions with Kushner's text, and how such contact complicated their existing patterns of belief. These transactions are the pivot points of teaching writing. Through the processes of reading and writing—the materials of any standard college writing course—I wanted students to slow down and suspend such moments, to dissect, reconstruct, and learn from them. Student writing, then, became key points of intervention in their ongoing negotiation with the material. As Bruce McComiskey writes, "Assigned texts in social-process composition courses represent divergent ideological perspectives against which students construct their own perspectives on social institutions and cultural artifacts—these texts are not content to be learned but positions to be negotiated" (3). I was aware of and wished to respect the various beliefs that students brought with them to class,

however tentatively such views were held. Asking students to compose their own positions relative to Kushner's discussion helped me in this regard. Specifically, their negotiation of Kushner's ideas—difficult moments, key insights, lingering questions—became our focus as we wrote about the text.

I explained to students how so much of the work within the academy is textual, analyzing and interpreting texts according to specific frameworks that provide a certain “gaze” on the materials. One of their goals, then, in both courses was to monitor and become familiar with particular positions as readers, to look at a text from multiple perspectives and become aware of their perspectives as readers. I stressed that their work was much like Kushner's, i.e., sifting carefully through an array of challenging and competing ideas to satisfactorily answer pressing questions. No one writes in a void, I explained; rather, all writing is socially mediated by multiple and surrounding texts. “Writing,” McComiskey maintains,

does not occur in a social vacuum, nor is it confined to the universalizing geometry of the rhetorical triangle. Writers invent arguments out of the values and identities they have learned through their engagement with various institutions, and they adapt their prose to the perceived needs of an audience whom they invent and invoke in social and discursive relation to themselves. In these instances, writing is situated in *discourse* itself, in the constant flow of texts produced within the ideological confines of institutions which, according to the rules of their own discursive practices, either validate or reject the texts we write. (134)

McComiskey's post-process framework seems to me well suited for interdisciplinary work; that is, because interdisciplinarity is, by nature, discursive (i.e., of or relating to multiple and often competing discourses<sup>5</sup>), then any student writing conducted in its name must be hyper-sensitive to the ways in which context informs their text.<sup>6</sup>

Student writing, as seen in this context, derives from what Kurt Spellmeyer calls “a radical loss of certainty” (*Common Ground* 112).

For Spellmeyer, writing is the means by which to achieve understanding—students confront texts through their questions, and their writing documents this struggle. Texts such as Kushner’s become secondary, in a sense, as student writing commands more and more attention. Students pay attention to textual nuances; they honor the integrity of ideas. But they do not simply regurgitate this information in writing. They are not charged with “coverage.” Rather, required texts are springboards used by students to develop their ideas. Their writing—intertextual webs of meaning generated from the intersection of pre-existing beliefs and the texts read—reflects and documents their negotiation of the material.

Such work—an exploration of student immersion in their ongoing construction of knowledge—often falls outside the domain of academic work, and yet this exploration is vital to academic success. As Jonathan Mauk explains, “As students enter into academic space, they must, at the same time, enter into its making” (368). As students identified compelling or confounding ideas, their essays became direct responses to Kushner’s text, furthering in idiosyncratic ways the positions that he forwards. Given McComiskey’s social rhetoric, student writing taps into the generative power of their negotiation of the materials. I wanted my students to write about their experiences with Kushner’s text in the attempt to better understand his ideas and, more importantly, their ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Students chose compelling ideas to engage within their essays. Many students discussed Kushner’s belief that God is not omnipotent, that all occurrences are not God’s doing. Again, the overriding question Kushner asks in his book involves why tragedy happens. Very often, people believe that tragedy comes to pass at the hands of God, as recompense for gross negligence or as part of some larger, yet-unknown plan. Kushner cannot accept this logic, and he attempts to sort out its short-comings. In place of God’s omnipotence, Kushner argues that God is not the cause of all occurrences. Instead, some things simply happen for no reason (46). Kushner explains this premise by defining the universe as “random” and not solely a byproduct of

the actions of God. For Kushner, God is present, but his universe is unfinished, still unfolding. As such,

we will simply have to learn to live with it [tragedy], sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident, like the murder, and the robbery, are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of his will, and which angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us. (55)

Students, many of whom were raised Catholic and educated in Catholic schools, bristled at such notions. Question God's omnipotence? Never. Admit that some events, many of them dreadful and capable of sustained trauma, occur at random? Out of the question. And yet Kushner asks us to consider such answers, and as such, his text proves a fruitful ground for exploring current beliefs against other perspectives—in the hopes of solidifying what students know and value against the backdrop of why.

Students treated these ideas (and others) in interesting and challenging essays. One student, for example, recalling her grandfather's death, remembers the comfort that her mother provided her at this trying time. This student recalls how her grandfather often brought her and her family food to eat (she mentions cold cuts in particular). When he died, the student's mother told her that her grandfather was in heaven because God needed him more than they did, and that he would have a sandwich waiting for her when they saw each other again. This student notes that she is acutely aware that her mother offered her simple, consoling words because of her tender age (around eight) when her grandfather died. She also makes it clear that she has long since given up on the story, even as she reminisces about the solace it had brought. And yet she is begrudging of Kushner—she wants to hang onto these memories instead of acknowledging that Kushner may be right, that people die and that is the way it is, that how we cope and grow in strength in the face of tragedy and pain is the measure of our faith and commitment to God. Rationally, she knows this, and she expresses a kind of thanks to Kushner for laying it

out for her. But she will not let go of her previous beliefs, at least not yet, in part because to cede her beliefs to Kushner would be tantamount to acknowledging some kind of shortcomings in her mother's actions (i.e., her mother provided inadequate advice, at least according to Kushner). In short, she explains how Kushner implicitly accuses her mother of being a bad mother.

Whether or not this point is a logical extension of Kushner's text can be deliberated—and I tried with this student—her essay opens up fascinating epistemological questions regarding the construction of knowledge that may not get asked in singular, traditional classrooms. What happens when students are challenged by new ideas? In what pedagogical ways can teachers assist students in coming to terms with new knowledge? Even as students demonstrate a working understanding of knowledge different from their own beliefs, even as they espouse the efficacy of these new ideas, it can be difficult for them to accept them as their own. Her essay surely reflects the kinds of struggles students face when encountering new concepts.<sup>8</sup> Writing such essays, inviting students to intellectualize their learning experiences, is one important way to help them construct useful knowledge (Harris 14). Writing provides a new lens of exploration into themselves as social beings and the discourses that make up their worlds, a kind of reflection that develops productive ways of knowing capable of helping them succeed in our classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

Pairing courses, I believe, can work such a rhetorical agenda into existing curricula outside of the discipline of English; pairing courses can be a way to utilize the social epistemic nature of composition beyond the writing course. Students explore knowledge as constructed, instead of simply accepting whatever they receive from their textbooks. They question what is in front of them; they can disagree with "authorities." In short, they begin to understand the construction of knowledge as a social process, and they involve themselves in its ongoing construction. Specific to our designs, the religious studies course demonstrated how disciplinary knowledge is presented and how that knowledge is used within the service of that discipline. Kushner's text

provided a look into the disciplinary practices of religious studies, its methodologies, its theories of epistemology and argumentation. It gave us a disciplinary base to work from and, when appropriate, against.

In this way, the writing course was not a prep course, servicing the curriculum. Rather, my agenda—informed by a constructivist epistemology—was to enable students to intervene in the disciplinary constructions of knowledge represented by and in the required texts in order to lay claim to specific positions of importance to them. Students were encouraged to make personal connections to the disciplinary materials—to engage them in the conversations of the discipline to monitor what counts as knowledge and to enter such conversations in order to add to the disciplinary body of knowledge.

In another essay, a student struggles to understand Kushner's designation of proper and improper prayer. For Kushner, improper prayer involves asking for things that should not be asked for, such as passing a test or landing a date, events or conditions over which God has no control. Proper prayer, on the other hand, creates and reinforces a community of believers working together to sustain one another in bad times and to celebrate the good. "Prayer," Kushner explains, "when offered in the right way, redeems people from isolation. It assures them that they need not feel alone and abandoned. It lets them know that they are part of a greater reality, with more depth, more hope, more courage, and more of a future than any individual could have by himself" (121). Proper prayer, in other words, allows believers to commune with one another and with God.

This particular student admits to how compelling Kushner's ideas are for him, saying that Kushner makes a great deal of sense, and that Kushner's conception of prayer jives with the larger framework of the book (i.e., espousing the need to explore how we respond to tragedy instead of worrying about its origins). What he finds problematic and fascinating is the widespread acceptance of improper prayer, and he includes himself as a former believer/participant. How will things ever change, he wonders in his paper, if people do not begin to accept their responsibility for their fate and the fate of larger systems, if they

continue to look to God as the source of all? Confronting this large, ever-looming question, he attempts to convey the changes in his worldview, given his newly adopted notions of prayer. Such changes include a greater sense of how religion seeks to create and uphold community, a point he finds compelling because he previously thought of religion only in personal terms (i.e., in terms of his own personal salvation).

His paper, as with the previous example, engages key epistemological negotiations with Kushner's text, in this case, illustrating the difficulty of changing deeply entrenched beliefs and patterns of living, even when new ideas seem more beneficial than existing ones.<sup>10</sup> What is the value of new ideas, this student seems to ask, when the predominance of old ideas pervades the current designs of social institutions? Using Kushner's text in this way helps this student (and others) weigh Kushner's purposes against their designs. This approach is different from simply reading the book as a disciplinary text, gleaning from it a religious doctrine or idea. And one strong feature about pairing courses is that students are exposed to multiple agendas; two instructors address different kinds of questions and issues. In our case, rhetoric-based questions were balanced with disciplinary, content-based questions. This multiplicity and complexity should not be used to confuse students; rather, it should provide insight into how texts are used—i.e., what questions are important relative to the work disciplines sanction.

When students took up Kushner's text in their Religious Studies course, they were well versed with his ideas. Students knew the text so well that Stephen was able to initiate exercises and assignments that he never attempted before. For example, students read an article by Marcus Borg on images of God. Because Kushner is arguing for a "new" image of God in his text, Borg was helpful in tracking and exploring the implications of these changes. The framework of understanding Kushner's text was expanded then, complemented by further investigations into how to imagine God. Students also read the story of Job (Kushner bases part of his argument on Job). After reading Job, students re-examined Kushner's use of Job—what he used

and how he used it, and what he discarded or ignored and why. Through such practices of synthesis and analysis, students further contextualized Kushner's work within the discipline of Religious Studies.<sup>11</sup>

## **Writing to Know**

I was not expecting grand epiphanies in my students' essays, insights reflective of earth-shattering changes in their views, and there need not be any for the assignment to be an effective one. Instead, I hoped that students used their writing to come to terms with their acquisition of new ideas and concepts and articulate the ways in which such ideas and concepts intermeshed with their current understandings of themselves in a wider social world. This goal informed my work throughout the whole semester. That is, I wanted to make evident the rhetorical practices (in the form of reading and writing strategies available to them) that could assist them in working through difficult material and making it their own. Such strategies include isolating concepts, mapping key ideas, exploring nuance, articulating underlying assumptions, and speculating on prospective implications of specific lines of thought. This negotiation of knowledge becomes a chance for students to sort out divergent views in the hopes of engaging their own positions within a broader spectrum of ideas. As Kurt Spellmeyer pointedly explains, "To produce knowledge is to reshape knowledge by transposing it into the specific context of life or lives—transposing it from the past into an uncertain present" (*Common Ground* 196). Writing, used as points of intervention in this acquisition of knowledge, helps students sort out what they know and do not know and how to put what they know to productive use. A complex negotiation, a co-mingling of questions and insights, accepted beliefs and unexamined assumptions, lingering doubts and forward-looking visions, takes place every time students immerse themselves in their studies, for whatever courses they take. Writing helps students manage the process of understanding *and* articulate that understanding in language.

## Collaboration and Learning

Anne DiPardo describes collaborative teaching as “a dance of points, counterpoints, and plans informed by the best each had to offer” and “a series of ecologically aware responses and adjustments” (116, 123). This metaphor articulates the possibilities of such practice: namely, instructors working together to choreograph teaching moments that introduce students to disciplinary practices and seek to move them beyond mere disciplinarity. As a writing teacher, attention to rhetorical practice remains central to collaboration, to examine how written texts fit and are fitted into the practices of students’ lives.

Another way of saying this is to state that collaborative teaching explicitly takes up questions of authority in ways that single-teacher classrooms cannot (Speer and Ryan 40). “One’s ‘canonical’ knowledge,” Tom Speer and Barrie Ryan explain, “becomes blurred when shared with a colleague . . .” (40). This sharing and blurring does not mean we extinguish ourselves—actually, when courses are paired, a teacher presence may seem that much more visible. Nor does it minimize the role and status of one course in relation to the other. Instead, we demonstrate to students the value of interchange and deliberation, across disciplines, while making room for divergent views. Toward such ends we create the conditions to help make students agents of their own learning.

The advantages of working together were borne out in our project. Specifically, I offer four benefits derivative of our collaboration. First, students in both courses were able to move beyond the traditional scope of each course. Reading texts for two classes, writing often on these texts, students were given ample room to thoroughly examine and learn difficult, often highly conceptual texts. Sharing texts across two courses challenged students in new ways, if only by working with two different agendas of two instructors. Greater facility with course materials led to deeper analysis. Students asked more penetrating questions as they began to understand the ways that different disciplines approach the same material.

Second, students wrote more often than in a singular course, and

they wrote for multiple audiences. Stephen and I were aware of each other's assignments, and, in turn, we offered a greater variety of nuanced writing assignments, helping students expand their rhetorical repertoire. Our students wrote with greater sophistication in their papers. For example, students exhibited a greater methodical awareness in their papers. There was a high level of attention to scholarly annotation, with students attributing ideas to specific authors and texts. Students wrote with more methodical awareness: students saw and understood the impact of individual disciplinary practice upon primary texts. They also wrote with a high degree of intertextuality; rarely have I been in a class wherein students were able to synthesize positions and make methodological or content-based distinctions so concretely.

Third, our courses began the building of community among freshmen students. In class together for three hours two days a week, student began to know each other early in the semester. They used each other's names when they spoke in class; they talked during the break between classes. Each course had better-than-normal attendance rates throughout the semester. Whatever the reasons, students came to class. At the end of the semester, almost all students said they would register for other paired offerings, and almost all said they would recommend such paired offerings to their friends and classmates. Retention rates may increase and attendance problems may decrease if paired courses were offered with greater frequency. Pairing required courses is not a panacea, to be sure. Pairing required courses, however, may be one way to address disciplinary disjunctions plaguing the undergraduate landscape.

Last, our courses furthered the building of community across faculty. They provided another forum through which faculty exchanged intellectual ideas and enhanced pedagogical skills. Stephen and I talked often about what to do in class and how to do it. These talks did not have the casual elegance of workshop talk either—we had to prepare for class. Such dialogue builds collegiality; it encourages the implementation of new pedagogical practice. Simply put, interdisciplinary

dialogue promotes *and* implements a wider sense of community across campuses. It offers a model for other interdisciplinary endeavors to be developed as well.

### **The Makings of a Conclusion: A Knowledge Project**

The classroom is that space wherein students' understandings of a topic get muddled, complicated, complemented. From psychology to sociology, economics to ethics, educators immerse students in a series of concepts that help them name the world in new ways. These concepts may refer to elements that are wholly foreign to students, or they may be possible replacements for already familiar terms. In either case, students are asked to reorder their worlds, if only to see, for a time, the concept's efficacy. Students can shut down in the face of new knowledge. Or it can inspire them.

Writing can help make this process more explicit. Specifically, knowledge is constructed against existing social patterns on the basis of questions that do not always go away. This new knowledge cannot come from anywhere, however; instead, it must be composed from extant traditions, disciplinary and otherwise. To acknowledge this construction, to provide them the tools needed to compose their own designs, we offer a framework useful to writing students, namely, the belief that the making of knowledge (meaning) is an active social construction. As such, knowledge is not something empty or transparent, received and accepted without regard. Rather, knowledge is generated and generative, setting up students as agents composing meaning according to the designs of their experiences and in the service of whatever beliefs guide their conduct.

The pairing of courses dramatically changes the kind of education that students receive. Specifically, pairing courses articulates specific connections across academic disciplines. Furthermore, through a well-intentioned blend of assignments, pairing courses also connects academic work to everyday lives of students. Students are, in turn, provided the means to compose their lives according to their own designs. Kurt Spellmeyer writes, "The point of thinking is not just to

change ideas but to change actual lives” (*Arts* 15). And so our classrooms should help students see that ideas are lived; our time together should ask them to consider which ideas will help them to live their lives productively. This kind of work holds much promise for me—and for educators everywhere—in part, because it zeros in on that which we ignore most with our students: the unfinished nature of our knowledge and, by extension, our humanity.<sup>12</sup> I want students to see that the construction of knowledge is incomplete and ever ongoing, if only to invite them into the process. I want them to see the process as theirs to engage, to master. To help them define their niche, to add to ongoing conversations/construction. In this way, writing becomes as much about an unlearning of received knowledge deemed limited (by the student) as it is a forwarding of professed knowledge newly constructed (again, by the student). Ultimately and appropriately, academic and everyday lives—the lives of students and their teachers—are invigorated, both by the ideas students negotiate and by the writing that students compose.

## Notes

1. The following texts were used in both courses: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner; *The Upanishads: The Way of Chuang Tzu* edited by Thomas Merton; and the Gospel of Matthew 1–13. Certain other texts were not shared. Texts used for RELS110 included articles by Freud and Marx, among others. Texts used for ENGL110 included *The Craft of Revision* by Donald Murray and *The Writer’s FAQs* by Muriel Harris.
2. For an excellent overview on collaborative teaching, see Anne DiPardo’s essay “Seeking Alternatives: The Wisdom of Collaborative Teaching.”
3. See Judith A. Langer and Arthur N. Applebee for important conclusions reached regarding writing to learn. Specifically, Langer and Applebee report that writing in response to formal assignments assists students in the growing understanding and extension of complex material.

4. See Schroeder (27) on the distinction between received and constructed knowledge, as it impacts notions of literacy and the legitimacy of meaning-making methodologies across disciplines.
5. See James Paul Gee on discourses, particularly on institutional discourses as secondary discourses—the very discourses that comprise Gee’s understandings of literacy.
6. Johnathan Mauk argues the need to examine student writing in relation to “the material conditions that generate language and the social conditions that give it identity” (377).
7. William Perry’s hallmark study *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* seems helpful here. For Perry, the hardest teaching and learning involves exploring knowledge as relative and contextual. Perry believes that teachers should openly model their thought patterns, lay them out for students to see and, if necessary, critique. Teachers should also openly invite students into the meaning-making process and to apply this process to their lives (213–14). This assignment was a chance rather early on in the semester to do just that. In conversations with Stephen, he understood this purpose and valued the assignment, even as he noted that such work has little currency within Religious Studies (particularly because of time constraints if he was teaching the class alone). Personal response occludes the subject at hand, as students want to explore personal theologies.
8. Perry forwards nine “positions” that identify forms of intellectual and ethical development in college students. These positions outlined development from positions of strict binaries to the ways in which students would take up worldviews of their own and act accordingly. This student exhibits characteristics of positions seven to nine. In this range, students stake out a position or identity as their own. They are empowered by this choice and the meaning it can provide them. They are also aware of the limits of their position as well. Commitment, moving to some form of action, is not far off. Using the

taxonomy of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, this student exhibits signs of the stage of “constructed knowledge,”: a time where the student is self-reflective and passionately articulate about the ways in which knowledge is an ongoing social construction. Specific characteristics that relate to this student include the importance of understanding the ways in which ideas are engaged and employed for specific purposes (146) and the capacity to see beyond difference in epistemology (143).

9. McComiskey’s post-process methodology would serve WAC well if Mary Jo Reiff is correct (and I think that she is) in the need to move to post-process views on writing.
10. This student could also be placed in the same position as the previous student, exhibiting different characteristics of the position, however. He has committed to a new position, and he sees that a balance is needed between “contemplative awareness and action” (161). He also understands that “order and disorder may be seen as fluctuations in experience” (165). Last, he now sees that “[c]omplexity, especially the conflict between value systems, demands a capacity to tolerate paradox in the midst of responsible action” (166). As such, he is perched at the brink of commitment. What separates the two is a certain quality to this position, what Perry refers to as “temporizing.” Temporizing is when a person suspends the position he or she is in, as if to gather resources or strength to move forward (which is the best case scenario) or to retreat or simply detach (177). This student may simply need more time to adjust to the changes in his beliefs.
11. Students were ultimately tested on Kushner in much the same way as they were tested on the introductory materials.
12. As Maxine Green explains, “[N]o accounting, disciplinary or otherwise, can ever be finished or complete” (128). And as E. P. Thompson writes, “[W]e are not the end of social evolution ourselves” (13).

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# **WAC International**

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# Orality and Writing: Conducting a Writing Exercise in Kenya

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In 2002–2003 I was a Fulbright Scholar/Lecturer at Egerton University in Njoro, Kenya. I taught primarily literature classes, but I was also affiliated with the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Analysis. As part of my affiliation with the Centre, I participated in a certificate, two-week long, team-taught course, Gender, Poverty and Development. The course subjects—economics, development, technology, politics, urbanization, poverty, entrepreneurship, and health—were not in my field of expertise. How could I, as a teacher of primarily literature, fit my discipline into the array of topics? I decided I would emphasize gender socialization. How are women and men socialized into the roles they occupy? For my morning-long, three-hour section, I would, for part of the class, use a WAC exercise to get students to think about gender as a social construction through oral literature.

The great Kenyan writer Taban lo Liyong defines oral literature as “the cultural information and values transmitted mainly by the spoken word and received by the ear and responded to by the whole organism in societies where writing was not yet the order of the day” (vi). Oral literature functions in a variety of ways: as indoctrination, socialization, acculturation. It also comes in many different types and genres: “folk tales, legends, myths, beliefs, songs, poems, proverbs, tongue twisters, puns, travelers’ tales, council discussions, traditions, ceremonial activities, and all the other ways of imparting group knowledge to

the young and new members” (Liyong vi). Though oral literature carries morals, typically, the narrators themselves, as Kavetsa Adagala and Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira note, do not moralize (xvi).

Kenyan students grow up in a culture rich with oral traditions, and university curricula reflect these traditions. Every university in Kenya (e.g., Egerton, Moi, Kenyatta, and the University of Nairobi) offers classes in folklore studies and oral literature. By the time I taught my section of Gender, Poverty and Development, I myself had seen many oral tales narrated, sung, and performed. Almost all of my literature students had taken courses in oral literature, and several would tell me about some of their assignments and field trips. I decided to make use of my students’ already rich background and have them connect the stories they heard while they were growing up to the roles women and men play in the economy, development, entrepreneurship, and so on. I would ask them to make this connection through writing.

It is worthwhile to consider briefly the relationship between orality and writing. Walter Ong’s seminal book *Orality and Literacy* provides fundamental insights into both. Where orality encourages “fluency, fulsomeness, volubility” (40-41), writing, on the other hand, promotes, to a greater extent, “sparse linearity” (40). This image of “sparse linearity” gives rise to a skeleton, denuded of flesh, of life. As Kabira notes in *The Oral Artist*,

[t]he written word can not convey the vivid and varied scenes and atmosphere which are often evoked by the spoken word and enactments, especially when the performing artist is a skilled one. Writing eliminates a great deal from an oral performance, and when the material is translated, it is removed from the original performance even further. (v)

Ong reminds us that the written word, bare, alone, lacks the “gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken words always occurs” (47). On the other hand, with writing, as Ong notes, “the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with

and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes” (40). Continues Ong, “[t]he very reflectiveness of writing—enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer—encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious” (150).

Obviously, the dichotomy between the oral and the written is not so clean-cut. Negotiating in a primarily oral culture requires analytical expertise, and writing, as Wordsworth famously pointed out several centuries ago, involves the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (143). However, this dichotomy is useful for understanding the role writing plays in a culture that values orality. This dichotomy is also useful for designing the American-born WAC assignment in a foreign country.

For the day’s assignment, then, I wanted to combine both sets of experiences—the subjectivity of oral performance with the objectivity of writing (and discussion)—inside the space of the classroom, a space regarded, in Kenya and the United States, as a place where, more typically, students are asked to conduct reflective, analytic thinking. The assignment required the students to move back and forth along a spectrum from the analytical to the emotional back to the analytical. I wanted students to write out an oral tale or poem and analyze it, and then to present it, orally. Following the oral presentation, I wanted them to resume the analytical process, but in the form of discussion rather than writing. Writing would start the process of trying to make students realize that the stories and poems they heard when they were growing up contributed to their ideas about women’s and men’s roles in Kenyan society.

The question is, why even ask students to write at all? Why not just perform and discuss? What are the advantages of asking them to put their thoughts first in writing? The reasons lie in the relationship of the English language to ESL speakers who live in a country where orality plays a predominant role. It is worth considering two main differences between assigning in-class writing in the United States and in Kenya. First of all, though English is the medium of instruc-

tion in Kenya, it is not, typically, students' first language. Their first language is more often their tribal language, what they call their mother tongue. As one ESL speaker told me, they feel in their mother tongue. "Mother" is not an accidental word here; the mother tongue is the language of emotions. In Kenya, English holds, to some extent, the same role that Latin used to hold for university students. Ong writes, "[I]earned Latin effects even greater objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium insulated from the emotion-charged depths of one's mother tongue, thus reducing interference from the human lifeworld and making possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism and of the new mathematical modern science which followed on the scholastic experience" (114). In writing and talking in English about a tale or poem they had heard in their mother tongue, students, I hoped, would see it in a new context, and in a new way.

Next, in the United States, as Ong continues, we idealize "reading for comprehension" (116). In Kenya, reading is still very much associated with the oral and the declamatory (Ong 116). For example, a large part of the reading festival I helped to organize in May 2003 involved dramatic performances, several sessions of reading out loud, and speech contests. Those were the more popular events, not the essay-writing contests that called on participants to analyze literature. I wanted my students to see literature as something to be analyzed as well as something to be performed. In translating the oral to the written, students would, at the very least, give consideration to the meaning of the stories and songs they grew up with.

To that end, I asked students to write out a tale they heard when they were growing up. First, however, I modeled in part what I wanted them to do. I read aloud an oral tale, and then I asked the students to tell me what messages it conveyed about gender roles and expectations. Following that discussion, the students wrote out their own tales, and then analyzed them. Their analyses focused on the following question: what did their stories or poems convey about gender roles, work and reproduction, family, and character? The students then broke into groups along tribal lines. I would not have had them do

that, but in this class, they had grown accustomed to talking in small groups arranged according to tribe. As it turned out, in a class of 20 students (about half women, half men), apart from one lone Luyha, there were pretty much an equal number of students from the Luo, Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Borana groups, some of the major tribes in Kenya (estimates range from 40-70+ different tribes). In any event, I came to think that it might be interesting for students in each tribe to compare notes on the tales told to them. Following the group work, we then rejoined as a class. One member from each group was asked to narrate her or his tale. We followed each narration with an at-large group analysis. Again, our main question was, what connections could the students make between each tale and the ideas about gender roles that they had already learned from their other lecturers?

All parts of the assignment went along effortlessly, except for the writing. The students, most of whom were science and agricultural majors, were not used to writing in class, and writing out a story with which they grew up seemed to be particularly challenging. I had to prod and coax them. Many at first sat there and just wouldn't write. I walked around the room during the 25 minutes I had apportioned for this part of the class to urge them to write. Some put their pens down after a few minutes and started talking to their friends. I typically beelined toward them to set them back to work.

I knew ahead of time that I would face this difficulty; I had already encountered students' reluctance to write at the beginning of my literature classes. If some students in the United States initially approach freewriting exercises with hesitation, that is especially true in Kenya, where students are more accustomed to straight lecture classes. In my Kenyan literature classes, I spent more time, at the beginning of the term, explaining my reasons for asking them to write about the literature we were to discuss. I offered a number of justifications, and repeated myself in the first few weeks of my classes. I said that writing allowed them to regroup their thoughts and consequently to jump more readily into class dialogue. Writing ignited discussions, I urged. Writing also allowed them to see things in the text that they would

not have otherwise. They could use their short writing assignments as a basis for their longer essays, or for the research papers that they wrote at the end of the semester. But, returning now to Gender, Poverty, and Development, students, even in this class, eventually set to work.

If Kenyan students are more reluctant to write than their American counterparts, they are certainly more adept at listening and talking. As I noted above, I started my section of Gender, Poverty, and Development by reading aloud a version of the Kikuyu folktale, “The Lost Sister.” I asked students to take notes as I was reading, but, I should note, none of them did! However, when, after I finished reading, I asked them to identify some of the messages—oral literature seldom contains only one “moral”—they got them, very quickly, even if they had not taken notes. They saw the story as an illustration of men exploiting women’s labor. Without a woman—Wachera—, a man—Wamwea—cannot cook for himself. They noted that “The Lost Sister” is about a woman, and a man, coming of age. They could see that the sisters must marry away from the family, and the brothers profit from their sisters’ marriages. The students regarded Wamwea as selfish and demanding, and Wachera as responsible and caring. The men look after the animals, and the women after the crops.

I was delighted after I heard the students’ analyses, and had high expectations of their own stories. I was not disappointed. Indeed, I was awed; not by what they had written, but by the presentations themselves. I had thought the students would simply read or recite their examples of oral literature, but instead, they sang, dramatically read, or performed their tales. We were able to hear five presentations; I will describe three of them here. The first one was a Luyha wedding song sung by the women guests to the bride and groom. I asked the student to translate the song for me:

The first born will depend on you  
 We are delighted in you  
 It is a delight to the family  
 You are the only ones

Bring the cloth you have brought  
So we can dress the first-born.  
We don't have any other  
It is the only one  
After giving birth we will be proud  
Because it is the only child  
When you bear the child  
We will be proud because it's the only one.

The student not only translated the song, she sang it, and though the song is a Luyha one, most of her classmates knew it, and sang along with her. The moment was a powerful one, and I did not want it to end. I let the song wind down, and then asked the students to reflect on its language. What did we hear? I asked. The students emphasized that because only women were singing, that men were excluded from the process of raising children. Just as the men stand passively at the wedding, so do they remain uninvolved in child rearing. I pointed out to the class that the men were singing along with the women. They shrugged their shoulders. They wouldn't have if they were at a real wedding.

The next song, another wedding song, was a Kalenjin one, and is roughly translated as follows:

You are a flower in the family  
Picked on the road  
When you are called by your husband  
Say yes, I am here  
And if you fail to respond  
You will be given a thorough beating  
You will be paid for by cows  
In return you should be submissive.

The mood during the performance—and the sing-along (because the students knew this song too)—of this song was one of positive levity. I could not help smiling, though I had a translation of the words in front of me—“given a thorough beating”? “you should be submissive”? I asked the students if there were any contradictions just now

between the mood of the class, and the message of the song. They immediately did somber up. Yes, they said, women could not play a role in selecting their mates; they were to be passive. The song made wife beating seem normal. Women were bought, like cattle. The discussion of this song went on for some time, as the students compared notes on the similar ways women were socialized to be passive in the different tribes.

The third performance was read aloud by a student who frequently acts in plays. He recited one of the most popular Luo folk tales; I had heard and read this one several times. The student's version accorded with that of the great Kenyan writer Grace Ogot, another Luo, who called her story "The Fisherman." The student's reading was magnificent, and though I'm sure I'm not the only one who knew this story well, the students listened attentively. The students compared this story to "The Lost Sister." Again, it is the women who bring the wealth, and again, we have another instance of a greedy man, except in this story, greed and maltreatment of women are punished. Women seem to have the same status as cows; the more wives, the more cattle, the more prosperous a man is. One student said that women in this story are not altogether passive; Wagai leaves as soon as she is mistreated. That is an act of resistance. Another student noted that one must be mindful of where wealth comes from; Nyamgondho trips himself up by forgetting his past.

After we heard all of the presentations, I asked the students to take out their writing, and to reflect on it, the poems and stories we had heard, and the discussions in which we had engaged. What connections could they make to the issues that were raised by their other lecturers? What patterns could they see? They said that it was clear that women performed the work, and were responsible for the child-bearing. Yet, in Kenyan society, and across tribal lines, they had little voice or decision-making power. How did the students feel about that? What had they noted in their writing? I asked. Two said they were angry. What role, I continued, did the stories that they heard from their families and friends, and the songs they heard sung at wed-

dings, play in their ideas about gender assignments? An unconscious role, a particularly perspicacious student pointed out. It was in translating her song, though, she said, that she became more conscious of what the words were telling her. I ended class by encouraging students to continue to make links between the stories they heard and the expectations they had of men and women, and to use writing as a means to enhance their awareness. Acquiring awareness, I urged, is a lifelong process but one that would allow them to become, to use a phrase I heard throughout this two-week long certificate course, “change-agents.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Ong, who writes that “[l]iteracy [. . .] is absolutely necessary for [. . .] explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself” (15). He states even more strongly elsewhere, “abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading” (8-9).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to not being used to writing, I wonder if students were reluctant to write because writing is such a solitary activity. Orality unites people (Ong 69). In writing, one is alone (Ong 101).

<sup>3</sup> I should note that I had more luck assigning freewriting in class than I did short writing assignments outside of class. Because Kenya is a communal culture, students liked to share their work with each other, and so their papers tended to echo one another’s. I saw short in-class writing assignments as a chance for students to think on their own, and I told them that. I emphasized how the other students and I wanted to hear their own perspectives. Though initially cumbersome, within weeks of each of the four literature classes I taught, students grew accustomed to whipping out a piece of paper when I began class or when I stopped discussion mid-class to start on another tack.

<sup>4</sup> “The Lost Sister” (in Carolyn Martin Shaw’s *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex and Class in Kenya* [1-2]) is about a young woman, Wachera, who lives alone with her brother, Wamwea, a young warrior. At the beginning of the tale, Wamwea looked after goats during the day, and went out at night. In the meantime, Wachera is being pursued by several young men. She warns her brother, whose response is, don’t worry about it. She is kidnapped by these men. Wamwea must live on his own. Because he cannot prepare his own food, he kills his goats and eats them. The goats last him for years. After he kills the last one, he goes on a journey, when he runs into two children, who take him to their mother’s hut. As it turns out, these are Wachera’s children. She doesn’t recognize Wamwea as her brother. He stays at her household for a month. Eventually Wachera realizes that Wamwea is her brother.

But he is angry because she had not given him a cup for his food, but rather a potsherd. To get him to recognize her as his sister, she offers him increasingly larger numbers of goats, oxen, and cows. Eventually he relents, and the brother and sister are reconciled. Wachera's husband finds eight wives for Wamwea, and he lives near his sister for the rest of their lives.

<sup>5</sup> Did I in particular find the moment powerful because I come from a culture in which such moments of spontaneity are rarer? See Ong 136-37.

<sup>6</sup> "The Fisherman" appears in Ogot's short story collection, *The Other Woman and Other Stories*. Essentially, this story starts with a fisherman named Nyamgondho who is unable to catch any fish, to the great disappointment of his wife Achunga (in other versions, Nyamgondho is a widower). One day he hauls in an old woman, whom he reluctantly takes home, and whom Achunga reluctantly feeds. As a reward, the old woman asks Nyamgondho to build an enormous pen to house cattle. He does; when it is finished, a long line of cows, bulls, and calves of all colors comes streaming into the pen. The old woman is transformed—into what, it's not clear—a beautiful young woman?—but in Ogot's version, we do know that she insists on being named Wagai. Nyamgondho takes her as another wife. He then takes on many more, younger wives, and prospers. But then he forgets his past. One night he comes home and abuses and humiliates Wagai. In response, she reverts to her old woman self, and leaves, along with all the cattle. Nyamgondho frantically follows her, to no avail. She and her cattle return to the water. Nyamgondho is transformed into a huge statue; in other versions, he is a cactus.

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# **WAC Program Strategies**

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# WAC Directors and the Politics of Grading

**Robert W. McEachern, Southern Connecticut State University**

As director of my university's Writing Across the Curriculum program, I have had the opportunity to invite some of the field's best known scholars and program directors to co-facilitate faculty workshops. I have valued the insights they have shared with my school's faculty, but even more so, the advice they have shared with me about running a sometimes politically-charged program.

A couple of years ago, I had a conversation with one such scholar as we drove from her hotel to campus for the workshop. I told her about some of the work I had planned for the semester, including an invitation from my own department to facilitate a "norming" session for our sophomore literature course faculty. I would be responsible, I told her, for collecting and distributing sample papers, and then guiding the discussion that would help these twenty or so full-time faculty members reach some consensus on a grading scheme for the course.

"Hmm," she said, with a single, experienced syllable. "Wait until you're tenured."

Her comment underscores something that most WAC directors already know from running workshops for faculty: grading is a sensitive topic. It is also consistently the topic for which faculty at my school want additional workshops, and the topic that engenders the most discussion at our two-day workshops. Faculty are fine with grading, and appreciate topics like grading rubrics, which help them articulate evaluation criteria for students. But it is during those times when they are called upon to justify their grades (such as during the

workshops' group grading discussions and exercises) that they get a little uncomfortable.

In her forward to the collection *The Theory and Practice of Grading: Problems and Possibilities*, edited by Frances Zak and Christopher Weaver, Pat Belanoff discusses some of this discomfort among composition specialists, and urges them to "open up channels of communication with all segments of the public and with our colleagues in other disciplines and share with them what we know about grading and assessment" (xi). While not all WAC specialists are compositionists, we are (or should be) campus leaders in conversations about all aspects of teaching. I want to take up Belanoff's challenge and suggest a way for WAC directors to initiate and facilitate this necessary conversation about grading, by advocating we volunteer our services by leading grading-discussion sessions in our workshops, and norming sessions within departments in our schools.

Such sessions are not difficult to design and lead, but they are, as indicated by my workshop co-leader's comments, potentially sensitive. I will begin by discussing why we as faculty members are often reluctant to talk about and share our grades. I will then describe the norming session I led for my department, and review some lessons I learned from the process.

## **Faculty Grading: All Action, No Talk**

As a number of contributors to Zak and Weaver's collection point out, few of us enjoy grading. By that, they don't mean the sometimes tedious process of reading and responding to student writers; rather, they mean the process of evaluating work and assigning to it a letter or number or some other symbol of its quality and success. Our dislike comes from a number of potential sources: our discomfort with the power we have over students' lives (Belanoff, "What"; Boyd); our understanding of the inadequacy of a symbol in summing up a student's knowledge and/or learning (Elbow); and our belief that grades make students complacent, more focused on the symbol than on our comments (Walvoord and Anderson). In short, we don't much enjoy label-

ing our students. However, what we enjoy less (and maybe what we fear most) is how our grading practices label *us*.

While these issues are important, especially if we are to facilitate conversations about grading with our colleagues, they do not get at the political issues surrounding the open discussion of grading. It is in the comparison of standards that my workshop participants get uncomfortable; very few complain about having to assign grades. But having their grades compared to others', even when given the opportunity to justify them, is a different matter. In my experience, there are a number of related reasons for faculty members' reluctance. Recognizing these reasons is necessary in helping to facilitate conversations on grading.

## **Fear of Grade Inflation**

Richard Boyd, in his history of grading practices, shows that there has always been a "moral" dimension to grading; in fact, antebellum grading included an assessment of moral character (7–8). The moral dimension of grading, though, has shifted, so that the measure of morality is of the teacher, not the student. Few of us are worried that our colleagues will think that we are too hard on our students. We don't want to be seen as unreasonable, but we do want to be seen as upholding some kind of "standards." Exposing ourselves as soft on grading opens us up to scorn.

Perhaps the most prominent recent example of this phenomenon is taking place at Harvard University. After a newspaper reported that 91% of Harvard undergraduates had earned honors, faculty members approved changes to lessen grade inflation, including moving to a 4.0 scale and capping the percentage of students who may receive honors. The university's president, Lawrence Summers, praised the changes as an adoption of "higher standards." While one reason that grade inflation is a problem is its effects on students, just as problematic for Summers is its reflection on Harvard's teachers. His well-publicized feud with Cornel West of the university's African-American Studies department was at least partly about West's too-high grades. West left for

Princeton, and “standards” were upheld (“Harvard”).

Certainly, such arguments are made outside of the Ivy League, including at my own school, a comprehensive, regional public university. I recall being part of a weekly faculty discussion group my first year as a professor. During one session, members of the admissions department spoke with us about the university’s plans to increase enrollment by 2% per year. There was a vigorous argument against the practice by one veteran faculty member, who argued that we were already letting in too many students who didn’t belong in college to begin with. No one argued with him. I certainly wasn’t going to, as a rookie faculty member. It didn’t surprise me then that no one else did, given the kind of message any counterargument would potentially send: you’re soft on students.

Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot posit that “our grading patterns construct us. . . . The smarter the professor, the higher the standards, the harder the grader. In our departments, such faculty earn begrudging respect from others. Beyond our departments, our grading patterns are often used to warrant promotion and tenure: they provide a check against student evaluations that are a wee bit too high” (49). Given that kind of pressure, it is no surprise that faculty members are uncomfortable with discussing their grading practices.

## **Objectivity and Subjectivity**

In the workshops I conduct for writing-intensive faculty, participants are anxious for some kind of “magic potion” for grading: a way of objectively measuring the worth of a piece of writing. Our grading-discussion sessions are not actually about coming to some kind of agreement about a grade, but as opportunities for the participants to explore their beliefs about what makes writing good, and where those beliefs have come from (previous experiences with teachers? disciplinary standards? perhaps some universal agreement?). What they come to realize (or admit that they know) is that there is no true objectivity in grading: to some extent, we each must make judgments about what is important.

One workshop topic that seems to help ease some fears about grading is a discussion of rubrics, detailed matrices of grading criteria and their values for an assignment or entire course. Thus, for example, “organization” may be worth 20 of 100 points for a paper assignment; perfect organization will yield 20 points, a lack of a transitions may result in 15, etc. (For excellent introductions to grading rubrics, see Goodrich; Popham.) Many instructors like the objective feel of rubrics; students can see exactly where and why they received the grade that they received. Of course, rubrics are not even close to objective: the criteria and their relative values are determined by the instructor. But the rhetorical effect of assigning a number to a piece of writing is very comforting.

That isn't to say there is not some agreement about “good writing.” Belanoff, in an essay written for students called “What is a Grade?” argues that there is much subjectivity to grading writing, but there is some objectivity, or at least general agreement, among teachers of writing. Within certain discourse communities, Belanoff argues, there will be agreement about what counts as “good.” Certainly, there are some agreements that all of us can make about the worth of academic writing. But much of our disagreements comes from disciplinary standards, an issue that is obviously important to WAC directors who are interested in facilitating conversations about grading. Certain features of writing are easily judged “good” by certain disciplines, and “bad” by others. This idea of disciplinarity was underscored for me in a recent graduate class on the teaching of writing. One student, a former adjunct in the English department, was struggling with assigning grades to student papers. She eventually dropped the class, and didn't come back to teaching writing. She explained to me, “I'm going to go back to teaching computer science. It's [the grading is] easier. If the computer program works, it's right. If it doesn't, it's wrong.”

Certainly, this instructor, and most writing-intensive instructors, understand that grading writing is not a black-and-white issue. And while they crave objective standards for grading writing, they know better than to expect them. But the desire for objectivity, and the

frustration at the lack of it, is another obstacle that must be overcome if a conversation is to take place.

## **Knowledge of Writing**

A final and related issue is a problem as old as WAC itself. Art Young calls it one of “the enemies of WAC”: the belief by certain professors that, since they are not English teachers, they don’t know anything about writing and its teaching.

Unfortunately, sometimes they’re right. Anyone who has participated in a WAC workshop knows the kinds of myths about writing and its teaching that are ingrained in the heads of non-English faculty members (and in some within English as well). Young described and overturns these myths, and while there is some comfort in knowing that people outside one’s own school are experiencing the same kinds of resistance, that doesn’t solve the problem.

My own program made it a point to include in its guidelines for developing and proposing writing-intensive courses a statement that “reminded” faculty that they are the experts in the writing in their own fields, and I have repeated this reminder during workshops, whenever possible. With individual faculty members, I have pointed to research in writing-in-the-disciplines to back up my point (beginning with Bazerman’s and McLeod’s ideas of a “second stage” for WAC, and moving on to more specific studies of writing in particular disciplines). Still, whether used sincerely or as a convenient defense, many faculty, particularly those just beginning to think about how they can use writing in their classes, are reluctant to admit their own expertise with writing. General WAC workshops have been successful for me in getting them started on this recognition. But it is yet another obstacle to overcome.

## **The Politics of Norming**

On my campus, there are few sustained, systematic, school-wide discussions about teaching. Our semi-annual WAC workshops and

follow-up “mini-workshops” are one such means of discussion. And even these are not “sustained”: given limited program resources, and limited time for an overworked faculty, most participants come to a two-day workshop, perhaps a mini-workshop once a year, but cannot commit to any more.

Still, commentators (Fulwiler; Soven) on WAC suggest that WAC directors are ideal campus figures in initiating and sustaining the kinds of conversations about teaching that Belanoff advocates about grading in particular. For me, those conversations have begun in the grading-discussion sessions we conduct in our two-day workshops.<sup>1</sup>

During the workshop, I call this activity a norming session, but that is really a deliberate misnomer. Traditional norming or inter-rater reliability sessions require each participant to assign a grade to a paper and then discuss criteria until the group reaches consensus on a grade. But in the workshop, because the focus is on individual instructors, I am less interested in the grades they give than in the discussion that follows, when participants articulate for themselves (sometimes for the first time) their criteria for good writing. Participants are given three papers written in response to the same assignment. The writing will necessarily have some disciplinary slant, but is understandable to all, no matter the discipline. Participants read silently and grade each paper on the ETS scale of 1-6<sup>2</sup>. We then post and compare grades and discuss particular features of the writing. At the end of the session, participants engage in some reflective writing about how they design

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Martha Townsend and Martha Patton of the University of Missouri for modeling a norming session for me at several of the workshops we held early in the life of our WAC program. While I have adapted the model to meet the needs of our faculty (at the Martyrs’ suggestion), the basic structure remains theirs.

<sup>2</sup> With the ETS scale, raters assign a whole number between 1 and 6 to each paper. The 1-3 grades are “below average,” and the 4-6 are “above average.” The idea is that participants are forced to make a choice; there are no “average” or “Gentleperson’s C” grades. I use this scale in our WAC workshops, and it is successful, though it takes some explaining (some participants, for example, want a 1 to be an F, a 2 to be a D, etc., until a 6 is an A+. Others will divide the scale into 100, so that a 1 is a zero, a 6 is a 100, a 5 is an 83.33, etc.). For an excellent discussion of the uses and value of this scale, see Edward White.

assignments and evaluate writing, and whether or not that is in line with the values they articulated during the exercise.

In evaluating the workshops, participants routinely point to these grading–discussion sessions as among their most valuable experiences. One reason is probably because of the individual focus: I don't want agreement among participants, and I try to find papers that will provoke some disagreement because of style, argument strategies, surface error, etc. Full agreement makes for lousy conversation. And conversation is the point of the exercise.

The trick has been to carry forth that conversation to other venues. Because the grading–discussion sessions are so popular, I have had several requests from faculty members to conduct similar norming sessions for their departments. I want to encourage WAC directors to be explicit about offering their services in this capacity. Of course, these sessions will likely be true norming or inter-rater reliability sessions, if my own experience holds: requests for my services have not been about getting faculty to consider their individual likes and dislikes about writing (after all, they can come to a two-day workshop for that). Rather, the requests have focused more on getting all faculty to agree on grading standards for some commonly-taught course or group of courses.

Such was my experience with my own department, English – the situation I was warned against by the veteran WAC scholar, as I described at the beginning of this essay. I was asked to lead a norming session of faculty who taught our sophomore literature course, a general education requirement for the university. Nearly all full-time members of the department teach this course, with a few exceptions (including me).

The session was similar to those I conduct in the two-day workshops. The difference was that the participants were trying to come to a broad consensus about grades. The chair provided an hour for the session, and she and I agreed that two papers were all that we could cover in that time. More than two would have provided a better range of writing. The papers' assignment prompt was to argue whether

Hamlet was sane or mad. The assignment was not one that anyone in the room had used before, but it was, they agreed, representative of the kind of argument that students in a general education, 200-level literature course would be asked to make. The participants were asked to grade each paper on the 1-6 ETS scale, and to make notes on why they would grade as they did (though not to provide full written comments as they would for a student in one of their classes). I then asked each to state their grades aloud, and recorded them on a chalk board for all to see.

The results surprised everyone: on the first paper, each participant gave a below-average grade of 1 or 2. On the second, each gave a below-average grade of 2 or 3. While I won't get into the statistical analysis, I can say that someone leading an inter-rater reliability session would have likely been very pleased at the result. I personally was further surprised at the low grades. I had chosen papers that I thought were, respectively, above and below average.

The conversation that took place after the grades were listed, during which participants justified their grades, also showed much agreement from participants. They spoke of common writing issues like lack of a clear thesis, organization problems, thin evidence, and an absence of direct quotes from the play. The agreement bears out the argument that Belanoff makes in "What is a Grade?": while there were some writing issues that were mentioned by only one participant, most that were mentioned would elicit nods and verbal agreements from the group. Though some grading is subjective, much is quasi-objective in that they are tacitly agreed upon by members of a discourse community, in this case, the group of literature faculty who teach 200-level courses at a particular school, though I wouldn't be surprised if the community extended beyond such a local community. I should note again that I do not teach this course, and thus am not part of this community, which is probably why I was surprised at the low grades that both papers received.

There are probably a number of reasons for the surprisingly agreeable outcome that have nothing to do with me (which should be an

encouragement to WAC personnel who are considering taking on the kind of leadership role that I am advocating here). However, I also believe that the norming session ran very smoothly because of some of the administrative steps that I took:

*I understood how norming/inter-rater reliability sessions work.* This seems intuitive, if not obvious. But there are small details and ways of behaving (when listing criteria for all to see, use the exact words of the participant; remain neutral but encouraging) that I became comfortable with because I had already run a number of grading-discussion sessions in another context. Anyone wishing to learn more about norming and writing, including advice for setting up such sessions, would be wise to read works by White; Willa Wolcott and Sue Legg; and Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy.

*I had the support of the department chair.* This, too, seems obvious. But if an initial invitation comes from a department member, move quickly to discussions with the chair. She will have a better sense of the overall politics of the department, may suggest ways to handle difficult situations, and can generally provide advice. I made sure that all potential participants were given, in writing, a statement about the purpose of the session, a description of the activities, and the role of all participants, including the session leader. I also made an announcement of the session at the preceding department meeting, with the chair's blessing. I didn't want to spend too much time answering questions about the process or purpose, and I wanted any objections to be aired beforehand. At the session, I provided a brief reminder about how and why the session would work, and we were able to get right to business. One change I would insist on for the next session: make sure the chair reads and approves the sample papers.

*I considered carefully the source of the papers to be discussed.* In some ways, having actual papers from an actual class would be the best choice for this kind of activity, since they provide a realistic and accurate sense of the work of the students. There are, however, some potential pitfalls. The first is obtaining the papers; many faculty members are reluctant to show others their assignments and the kinds of responses

they get from them. Second, there is the danger that the assignment, and not the grades, becomes the issue. I expected, and heard, comments such as, “Well, before I give my grade, I just want to say that I never, ever would have assigned a paper like this.” My solution for that session was to provide real papers, but not from any of my colleagues. I found several papers on the same topic at free papermill sites *schoolsucks.com* and *bignerds.com*. They fit my criterion of being “real,” but didn’t present the kind of potential hurt-feelings and political problems that internal papers would have presented. I devised an assignment myself, retroactively, that the sample papers fit. In fact, the “I wouldn’t have assigned this” issue was productive: with no one to get defensive over the assignment (which asked students to argue whether Hamlet was mad or sane, a fairly popular topic in the free papermills), the session expanded into a productive discussion of assignment topics.<sup>3</sup>

*I considered carefully the grading scale to be used.* The consensus reached in my session might call into question the value of the ETS scale. The participants told me afterward that a more traditional A–F scale would have allowed them to more easily compare grades. But I was concerned about the possibility of getting bogged down in discussions about the difference between a B and a B+, for example. The chair and I had discussed the possibility of continuing the discussion, at which time we could have refined the grading scale. (The follow-up session never materialized, since there was a general consensus among the participants.) However, I could see a situation in which the unfamiliarity of the ETS scale would be a help. Perhaps in a politically-

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<sup>3</sup> There are, no doubt, readers who would consider my using such papers to be ethically suspect. That is a subject for another essay (one which I have already begun). But I will say that, at the beginning of the session, I announced that the papers were real, but were not written for a class at the university (though they may very well have been), and that at the end of the session, I would reveal the source, which I did do. I also revealed that the assignment was made up retroactively. I will grant that I had doubts myself about the ethics of the practice, but decided that eventual full disclosure was the right thing to do, and that no actual grades were given, and thus my conscience was clear.

charged department, the difference between a 4 and a 5 may seem smaller than the difference between a B and an A-.

### **Conclusion: Onward into the Conversation**

Ultimately, my workshop co-leader's fears were unfounded. The department did not have the knock-down, drag-out fight that some had predicted. And, I'm happy to report, I was granted tenure the following spring.

Still, not all situations will be so smooth. I credit my departmental colleagues for being reflective teachers who are open to discussion and willing to learn from one another. That might not be the case in all departments, for a variety of reasons.

Despite the success of this session, though, I must confess some failures: While I was invited to conduct three norming sessions for other departments, none of them actually took place. One in a health sciences department and one in a humanities department involved an initial invitation, but never materialized. Another in a social science was scheduled, and then cancelled because of an emergency department meeting, and was never rescheduled. Some of the problems resulted from the kind of poor planning that I give myself credit for avoiding above: not having the support of the department chair, for example. But I think for the most part, the departments backed away because of objections from their members. I'd heard whispered rumors from some department members about fears of exposure of grade inflation, paranoia about lack of knowledge of writing expertise, etc.

Those failures, though, should not dissuade WAC directors from initiating the conversations. If Belanoff is correct, and my experience is generalizable, then there will likely be more agreement than not, once a session is conducted. The difficult part is getting the members of departments to agree that the conversation should happen in the first place. The costs are far outweighed by the benefits: increased exposure for the program, and a strengthening of the mission of WAC—to engage teachers in discussions about their teaching.

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# Reviews

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# Review

## Ellen B. Cutler

Kathleen Walsh-Piper

*Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing*

Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow (2002)

\$39.95 (cloth) ISBN 0-8108-4307-2 160 pp

\$29.95 (paper) ISBN 0-8108-4203-3 160 pp

Writing and art are natural partners in life and learning. There is even a name for this relationship: *ekphrasis*. According to the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, the teachers of rhetoric in ancient Greece coined this term to denote “a vivid description intended to bring the subject before the mind’s eye of the listener.” *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing* by Kathleen Walsh-Piper (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002) uses *ekphrasis* both as an approach to art appreciation and an impetus to creative writing.

This slim book—which includes a CD-ROM with color images of the black-and-white illustrations—is a resource for educators from the elementary grades through the college years. While Walsh-Piper frames her suggestions in terms of age-appropriate grade levels, the activities also seem potential-laden for educators working with students struggling with reading and writing, and with individuals for whom English is not the first language.

Walsh-Piper concentrates on ways to use creative writing as a means of formal critical analysis, but also as the doorway to aesthetic experience. In other words, writing creatively about art becomes a way to tap into the creative expression that constitutes that work of art. Creative writing becomes a way to look at the world more deeply, thought-

fully, and imaginatively. Through its focus on expressive vocabulary and the deliberate engagement of all the senses, *Image to Word* is also a means by which teachers in a variety of disciplines can craft a learning experience that validates each student's unique perceptions while helping them acquire the writing and critical thinking skills essential to successful communication.

That *good* writing requires *creative* writing is at the heart of this enterprise: creative writing is "writing that springs from the heart and surprises us—writing that reveals something we know but had not fully realized or expressed before, writing that is inventive in its use of language." Walsh-Piper is also convinced of the "special synergy between writing and looking," the interplay between the images and the words they inspire. While most of the examples in the book take the form of poetry, Walsh-Piper suggests that students also explore prose fiction, autobiography, play-writing, and even expository writing.

The chapters are organized thematically. Each outlines a series of activities that act as points of departure on which teachers can model their own approach.

After a general overview of the project, Walsh-Piper focuses first on vocabulary, starting with the words that evoke and describe sensation. Students, for instance, might compile lists of "sounds and movements" related to a particular work, lists that the students subsequently explain and share. One expects that this is also the moment to familiarize students with a thesaurus, teach the differences between denotation and connotation, and connect these concepts to effective communication.

She also explores the roles of imagination in learning. On the one hand imagination encourages invention and originality, and she uses both modern art and African objects to explore irrational and nonlinear modes of thought. On the other hand, imagination is a means through which the recognition and assimilation of information can narrow the physical and cultural gap between the object and the viewer.

While most of the activities seem best suited to the upper elementary grades through high school and beyond, Walsh-Piper sug-

gests several techniques that compensate for the less developed verbal skills of younger students. Children can, for instance, start by drawing a picture that shows their story and then use words to tell the same story. Teachers can also provide sentence fragments that refer to specific features of a work of art for children to complete.

In avoiding formulaic and detailed instructions, the book focuses on the development of skills and intellectual growth rather than the manufacture of predictable products. Walsh-Piper says, "Writing about works of art breaks down barriers to looking by asking viewers to *pay attention* to what they see and how they react." Replace the word "looking" with "learning" and her thesis seems even more valuable.

The ideal setting for Walsh-Piper's project is, from her point of view as a museum professional, the museum gallery, because "real works of art have a presence, a power to act as a catalyst for ideas and emotions." She points out, however, that original art in the form of murals and sculpture are available in government buildings, offices and churches, parks and cemeteries. There is even a reminder that coins are "miniature sculptures that contain a wealth of images, words, and symbols." For this reader, newspapers, magazines, billboards, websites, even teeshirts might also be sources of imagery. Educators who focus on *ekphrasis* as "a vivid description intended to bring the subject before the mind's eye of the listener" will find many applications for Walsh-Piper's ideas and techniques in a variety of subject areas and existing curricula, as well as a way to move upwards and onwards.

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# Review

**Jacob S Blumner, Eastern Michigan University**

Mark L. Waldo

*Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy: Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs*

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum (2003)

\$49.95 (cloth) ISBN: 0805847359 210 pp

\$22.50 (paper) ISBN: 0805847367 210 pp

Seldom does an author attack the writers of the bible on the second page of a book, but most authors are not Mark Waldo. But Waldo has a point, and he presents it with a missionary zeal to counter the “crusadelike thrust” of expressivism and writing to learn he decries throughout his book. *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy* is a passionate, lively, thought-provoking argument advocating the specialization of language within disciplines and housing WAC programs in autonomous writing centers. The book can essentially be broken into three sections: an argument for specialization, an argument for housing WAC in a campus-wide writing center, and a collection of helpful materials for developing a successful WAC program.

*Demythologizing* is a revision of Waldo’s 1993 article, “The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum,” and this book-length project affords Waldo the space to fully elaborate his argument for combining WAC and writing centers. But locating WAC is not the only thrust of this book. Waldo spends over half of the book making his argument that specialization is vital to solving complex problems and attacking what he terms process-expressivism. The crux of this

argument is a good one. Faculty from all disciplines need to commit to teaching writing because without the commitment student education will suffer. Poor writing is only a symptom of deeper problems for students because, as Waldo argues, learning the language of a discipline is also learning to think within the discipline. Here is the book's strongest argument. Drawing on the works of David Russell, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Kuhn and others, Waldo makes an impassioned case for specialized language. His point is that we need specialized language to solve complex problems, such as global warming and storing nuclear waste, and only people in highly specialized disciplines will be able to provide the answers.

Waldo begins in chapter 1 with an examination of how students become immersed in a discipline and learn to "think" in it. This is the foundation for Waldo's theory, and it is well supported by scholarly research. Also, at this point, his second argument is clear: process-expressivism doesn't work at best and is detrimental to writing instruction at worst.

So in chapter 2, entitled "Saving Wordsworth's Poet," Waldo explores the problems with process-expressivism in WAC. He examines some of the historical context behind the process-expressivist "fervor" by explaining the rise of composition as a discipline and its intent to nurture the "inner self" with an either/or mentality that was founded in the works of Wordsworth – either one nurtures the self or one suppresses it. Waldo admits to evangelically supporting such ideas early in his career, but he also claims to have learned that the passion with which process-expressivists were preaching was equaled by the passion other academics had for their own disciplines. Here Waldo introduces one of the most provocative parts of the book. In an unorthodox, conciliatory fashion, Waldo attempts to reconcile disciplinary specialization with the Romantic notion of "inner self." In essence he posits that the inner self can be reconciled with disciplinary specialization by claiming that individuals choose a specialization that nourishes their inner self.

The next two chapters explore the problems created by composi-

tion, heavily influenced by process-expressivists, who, according to Waldo, proselytize writing instruction to other disciplines. Waldo challenges the notion that composition scholars are in the best position to provide writing pedagogy to faculty, something he likens to the Friereian “banking” model of education. The drawback I see in Waldo’s argument is his seeming unwillingness to consider that writing-to-learn activities can be pedagogical tools that aren’t expressivist. One might extrapolate then that computers are only good for computer science. But Waldo’s concern for the expressivist influence on WAC is worthy to note and should serve as a cautionary tale for WAC directors.

In chapter four he challenges two traditional models of WAC: 1) a model in which the English department teaches all of the writing courses, and 2) a writing-intensive model in which select courses fulfill a student’s requirement for writing in their curriculum. Waldo admittedly simplifies WAC models for convenience, as evidenced by the fourth chapter’s title, “WAC Administration Reduced to English-Only, Writing-Intensive, or Discipline-Based Models.” His intent is not to try to address every permutation that sprouts up on campuses across the country, but his simplification neglects strides WAC has made toward discipline-based models, like those at Iowa State University or the University of Toledo, and the scholarship written about them. Of the three models he addresses, he advocates a discipline-based approach in which participation by faculty and departments is voluntary.

Then, after thoroughly drubbing the process-expressivist movement and arguing for a voluntary, discipline-based approach, Waldo makes a powerful case for the autonomous writing center’s being the “last best place” for the WAC program because of what he considers its rhetorically neutral placement in the university. His argument, as he made it in 1993, is a very strong one. His writing center is uniquely situated in a university, and both the WAC program and writing center benefit from the symbiotic relationship. Interestingly (and to the chagrin of writing center directors, I’m sure), he argues writing cen-

ters “are not disciplines yet,” in essence claiming that their specialized use of language has not reached an unnamed threshold for discipline status. Still, his point is well taken that autonomous writing centers do not have some of the conflicts that arise from having traditional departmental status (e.g. colonization, faculty and course “turf wars,” etc.). In this section, Waldo claims his survey done at the University of Nevada, Reno showed that eighty to ninety percent of courses at UNR include writing. He surveyed “full-time faculty,” and I wonder if he can extrapolate that to all courses, including those taught by part-time faculty, from that data. I also wondered if the eighty to ninety percent was for courses or sections of courses. Despite questions about the survey data, the autonomous writing center is a strong choice for housing a WAC program, and he extols the benefits well.

Chapters six and seven represent a much lighter, yet equally compelling section of the book. In these chapters, he details how he has built the University of Nevada, Reno’s program to be so successful. Building off of the theoretical footing of the first six chapters, Waldo describes his process for running workshops and an unusual, yet powerful, way to perform large-scale writing assessment. The workshop approach is not unique, though the text does provide some excellent ideas that WAC programs should consider incorporating. The assessment plan involves a discipline-based portfolio project. What is special about this approach is that each department looks closely at a small, yet representative, number of portfolios from their students, and uses those texts as a focal point to address program strengths and weaknesses. In Waldo’s program, the writing center facilitates the project so faculty aren’t overwhelmed by the task and drop it. The results will benefit the departments and university while satisfying some calls for outcomes and assessment.

Waldo’s concluding chapter approaches his argument for specialization differently than in the previous chapters. He provides current examples of environmental issues, like global warming and nuclear waste storage, as evidence for why specialization is so important. But for Waldo it is more. He argues that there needs to be a greater em-

phasis on ethics when initiating students into disciplines to solve these problems. His plea here is heartfelt, and it is a powerful way to end the book. This is an argument not frequently heard in WAC scholarship, and Waldo's call to arms should be heeded and pursued by WAC administrators and scholars as an integral part of working with faculty.

*Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy* is a compelling read for those involved in writing across the curriculum and writing centers. It argues for the importance of disciplinary specialization and strong ethical foundations for students who will have to solve complex problems in the world. Finally, though the argument at times can seem overly aggressive, the book is a strong argument for a partnership of programs that benefits an entire campus community, and the book will therefore be an asset to all who read it.



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## Contributors' Notes

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