

WAC Practices at the Secondary Level in Germany

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In his overview of the history of the WAC movement in the U.S., Russell (1994) describes the separation of writing instruction from content instruction within U.S. education. In the 1870s, he writes, a perceived literary crisis led to the creation of “uniquely American” composition courses, and writing instruction became separated from instruction in other subjects. By the 1940s, trends toward objective tests caused even less writing to be assigned in subject-area classes and thus a further separation of writing from content.

In the last several decades, educators in the U.S. have become interested in re-integrating writing into the curriculum. For secondary-level educators in the U.S., advice abounds regarding implementation of WAC practices (e.g., Duke & Sanchez, 2001; Farrell-Childers & Gere, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Ruddell, 2005; Zimmet, 2000), and published case descriptions of teachers using a broad variety of creative approaches and techniques are available about the use of WAC in the sciences (Franks, 2001; Keys, Hand, Prian, & Collins, 1999), the arts (Jager, 2000), math (Artino, 1997; Horn, Zamierowski, & Barger, 2000; and McIntosh & Draper, 2001), history, geography, social studies (Acuff, 1997; Walker, 1996; and Wilson, 1996), and foreign languages (Brauer, 200). However, while individual teachers, schools, and programs in the U.S. have achieved success with WAC programs (see, e.g., the descriptions in Farrell-Childers & Gere, 1994, and Tchudi, 1993) as Ostrow (2001) writes, existent WAC practices at the secondary level “often seem to be the result of the efforts of a few like-minded colleagues rather than the outcome of any school-wide or district-wide commitment to WAC philosophy” (p. 38). While such local, individualized work allows for a high degree of creativity, it can also cause teachers to feel isolated and contribute to teacher burn-out.

In Germany, separation between content instruction and writing instruction has been less pronounced. Writing has long played a significant role in German education, especially for students attending academically rigorous secondary schools. Because school writing in Germany thoroughly integrates writing instruction and content instruction, school writing practices in Germany can serve as a valuable source of ideas for WAC approaches.

In order to learn more about the use of writing across the curriculum at the secondary level in Germany, I spent six weeks investigating WAC practices at a German *Gymnasium*. The German *Gymnasium*, composed of grades

five through thirteen, is the most academically rigorous secondary school-type in the German system and is attended by students who plan to pursue higher education. The last one or two years of the *Gymnasium* are often compared to the first years of university in North America. The *Gymnasium* where I conducted my research is located in a suburb of Kiel, Germany, a city of approximately 245,000 inhabitants in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein. This *Gymnasium* is located in a middle- to upper-class community, and most of the students who attend the school live in the surrounding neighborhood. It has a reputation for being especially rigorous. Prior to my study of WAC practices at this *Gymnasium*, I had conducted two previous research projects there, including a ten-month ethnographic investigation of German-language and English-language writing instruction (Reichelt, 1997, 1999) and a three-month investigation of understandings of “good writing” there (Reichelt, 2003).

As part of my research into WAC practices at this *Gymnasium*, I interviewed a total of nineteen teachers from the following subject areas: art, biology, chemistry, economics, French, history, Latin, math, music, philosophy, physics, physical education, religion, Russian, and social studies. (I had conducted extensive interviews with teachers of German and English for earlier research projects.) Interviews took place in the school library, lasted twenty to forty-five minutes, and were conducted in German. Teachers were asked about the purposes of writing in their subject areas, the types of writing tasks they assign, writing-related classroom practices, and their evaluation of student writing. I used open-ended interview techniques, which prioritize participants’ responses and interests and which allow the content and order of interview questions to be revised depending on the direction taken by the interviewee (see Preissle and LeCompte, 1984; Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte, 1999). In previous research at this secondary school, I had recorded interviews on audio cassette (with interviewees’ permission). However, I was better able to establish rapport with interviewees and elicit freer responses when I dispensed with audio recording and used note-taking as my sole means of recording. In order to analyze my findings, I transcribed my interview notes into English and sorted them according to subject area and the sub-topics of *purposes*, *writing tasks*, *classroom practices*, and *evaluation criteria*. In addition to interviewing teachers, I also attended classes, took notes on my observations, and collected writing prompts and student writing samples.

I found that in all subjects except physical education, teachers use writing as a means of both teaching and testing students. In general, the purposes of writing-related homework and in-class activities are to reinforce course content and to help older students learn and practice the methods and vocabulary of each particular discipline. In each subject, older students take in-class exams two to four times per academic year. Exams last one to three class periods, depending on grade level.

In most subjects, student writing is evaluated on content, linguistic correctness, and style, with these three criteria receiving varying emphases, depending on the subject. Most teachers emphasized that content is weighted much more heavily than linguistic concerns, except in foreign language writing and the writing done by younger students in German class. Teachers mentioned organization infrequently and were not familiar with the concept of “thesis statement.” In all subjects, students receive a grade on their exams, written comments, and perhaps oral feedback from their teacher addressed to the entire class. Teachers do not typically read students’ out-of-class assignments. Instead, in many subjects, students volunteer or are called on to read their writing aloud, which counts toward an oral participation grade. The teacher and class members provide oral feedback when a student reads aloud such an answer, and despite the fact that critique is quite direct, students are eager to read their work aloud and to receive feedback in order to prepare for exams.

Before the 1970s, writing assignments for German classes typically consisted of interpretations of literary texts or responses to quotations, either free-form or in the shape of an *Eroerterung*, an essay involving development of a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Educational reforms during the 1970s encouraged teachers in all subject areas to assign tasks with clearly observable goals that encouraged critical thinking. The goals of these reforms were operationalized through a curriculum encouraging a close link between reading and writing about discipline-specific texts, and the development and implementation of a three-task format used in written exams given in grades 11 through 13 in most *Gymnasium* subjects. Based on an unfamiliar reading and/or visual, students answer a series of three or more questions requiring them to 1) summarize or describe the new material, 2) apply what they have learned in class to the new material, and 3) offer and justify an evaluation, comparison, or personal opinion regarding the material. (A *Gymnasium* teacher who developed *Gymnasium*-level English curricula in the late 1970s told me this three-part format was based on Bloom’s theories about cognitive development. See Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl, 1956.) Teachers use the three-part format as a template for developing questions for homework practice as well as for exams. The emphasis on critical, close reading of texts and writing tasks that call for application of discipline-specific methods to new materials plays itself out somewhat differently in each subject area, but the three-part format provides students with continuity and ample opportunity for developing writing skills across the subject areas. The following is a description of specific ways in which writing is used in various *Gymnasium* subjects.

German

German is required in all grades of the *Gymnasium*, and writing is an important part of this subject. In grades five and six, students engage in a variety of writing tasks: they respond to questions about a story or short text they have read, they recapitulate in writing a text which is read aloud to them, they write text summaries, and they do creative writing, especially narrative writing. Students focus primarily on writing clearly and conforming to written conventions. In order to begin preparing students to write the text interpretation required by the *Abitur*, an exit exam students take at the end of the thirteenth grade, teachers incorporate writing that requires students to read texts closely. For example, they may ask students to read the beginning of a story and to compose an ending; to write a letter from the perspective of a character in a story they have read; or to read and then rewrite a story from a different character's perspective. In grades seven through nine, students continue with creative writing tasks and begin writing text summaries and recapitulations, which are intended to encourage close reading and to help students determine which aspects of a text are most important. Students also write informal analyses of short stories and other texts, often focusing on the relationships between characters, and they compose essays about controversial subjects. In grades nine and ten of German class, students begin writing the text-based *Eroerterung*, a persuasive paper in which students recapitulate the author's arguments, add reasons of their own both for and against the author's position, and then state and support their own stance. They also begin writing the forms needed for exams in the upper grades and for the *Abitur*. In grades 11-13, explicit writing instruction recedes in favor of discussion of the literary works under study, although teachers may discuss conventions for structuring assigned writing tasks. For homework and in-class exams, teachers draw on the three-part format typical of the *Abitur*. For example, one exam required students to compare the form and content of two poems they had not read before; to discuss what philosophy of life each depicted; and to attempt to identify the literary epochs from which each came, justifying their judgment.

In evaluating student writing, teachers are guided by the criteria delineated in the curriculum guide for German: linguistic correctness, content, organization, and style. Teachers agree that unless linguistic errors are particularly egregious, content is the most important of these criteria, and organization is the least crucial since the guiding questions students receive provide an organizing schema. (For more on German-language writing instruction at this *Gymnasium*, see Reichelt, 1999.)

Foreign Languages

Gymnasium students not only engage in a substantial amount of writing in German, but also devote considerable time to writing in one or more

foreign languages. Students start English in fifth grade and must continue it at through at least tenth grade. In seventh grade, they must add either Latin or French and keep that second foreign language through the eleventh grade. Students have the option of adding a third foreign language—either Latin, French, or Russian—in the ninth grade, which they can drop at any time. In the twelfth and thirteenth grade, only one foreign language is required. Teachers commented that writing in one or more foreign languages, especially at the advanced level, trains students' overall linguistic sensitivity and often helps them with writing in German. Instruction in foreign language writing provides a "second chance" to students who failed to master the skills of reading critically and writing emphasized in the lower grades of German class.

In Latin classes, students translate Latin texts into German and write answers in German to questions about those texts. For English, French, and Russian classes, students write their homework and exams in the target language, and writing serves as a means of developing, reinforcing, and testing students' target language communicative abilities, grammatical accuracy, and use of vocabulary and idiomatic language. For students of Russian, who are faced with learning a third foreign language considered more challenging than the others, writing serves as a means of preparing for oral participation and for practicing the Russian script. In all foreign language classes, writing also serves as a means for teachers to check students' comprehension of assigned reading, including students' familiarity with the cultural and historical issues relevant to those readings. Students also learn to write texts for reasons unrelated to school. For example, students in English classes compose letters or e-mail messages related to travel or tourist arrangements, addressed to native English speakers or other non-native English speakers in Europe; students of Russian learn to write personal letters because many of them have friends or family in Russia with whom they want to correspond.

Beginning students writing in the target foreign language write dialogs, dictations, letters, texts about themselves, and narratives. As is the case in other subjects, many foreign language writing tasks are based on something students have read. For example, students may compose full-sentence answers to questions about an assigned reading, write outlines of such texts, compose a letter that could have been written by a character in a story they have read, or re-write a narrative passage in the form of an interview. Advanced students write text summaries and answer analytical questions about short stories, poems, essays, and newspaper articles. In the eleventh through thirteenth grade, foreign language instruction focuses on preparing students to write tasks like those that will appear on the *Abitur*. For example, one thirteenth-grade English class I observed wrote an exam based on the story "Three's Company, Four's a Crowd," (author unknown), a science fiction piece about a family who has two children in a society where only one is allowed. The family's older son is killed

in a struggle that ensues when government officials invade the home and attempt to seize the second child. Students responded to the following prompts:

1. Write a summary of the story and explain the expression “social conscience.” (20%)
2. How do use of language, imagery, and narrative technique create atmosphere and influence the reader to sympathize with the parents? (30%)
3. Do the parents deserve the readers’ sympathy? Discuss. (20%)
4. Overpopulation is only one of the problems mankind [sic] has to deal with. Name others and discuss how you think they might be solved. (40%)

Foreign language writing is evaluated on content, style, and linguistic correctness. The content of beginning students’ writing is graded based on communicative success. At advanced levels, the content score is based on students’ ability to compose a succinct summary of a text in their own words, to analyze the structure of a text (using discipline-specific terminology), and to express a well-reasoned opinion. Beginning students’ scores for linguistic accuracy are awarded impressionistically, and advanced students’ scores are awarded based on an error quotient (number of errors divided by total number of words). Writing for Latin class, which is done in the German language, is graded based on the same criteria used for German classes.

Geography, History, and Economic Policies

Writing is used in geography, history, and economic policies to check students’ learning, to help solidify what they have learned in class, and to prepare them for oral participation in the next class session. Students in upper-level courses are given writing assignments intended to help them develop a deeper understanding of course materials and to examine authors’ ideas critically and independently.

In geography and history, students are taught how to read and interpret secondary texts through annotating and taking notes or creating written outlines, which their teachers check. For tests, younger students usually answer an essay question that requires them to summarize what they have learned, or they receive an unfamiliar map or diagram (e.g., climate- or economy-related) and demonstrate their comprehension of the information it conveys by filling in missing words on a chart or writing one-sentence answers to questions posed about the material. Older students write about the discipline-specific texts or visuals they receive, completing homework assignments designed to prepare them for in-class essay exams and for the *Abitur*. For example, for a twelfth-grade history exam, students were asked to summarize and answer several analytical questions regarding an excerpt of a speech about the future of Poland, given in 1848 by a representative to the German National Assembly. For a twelfth-grade exam in economic policies, students were asked to

answer the following questions, based on nine graphs, charts, and political cartoons they received:

1. Based on Germany's trade with the U.S., describe what effects variations in monetary exchange rates have on the import and export of goods and on the development of wage costs per unit in both countries. Include a discussion of the current situation. (Refer to figure 1.) (25%)
2. Describe, explain, and discuss the debate being held in our country about the "place of Germany" and the challenge of the globalization process. (50%)
3. Discuss whether globalization will lead to the fall or the advancement of humankind. (25%)

One particularly creative geography teacher at this *Gymnasium* had his advanced class write collaboratively and publish an article about the Panama Canal in a geography journal; they also composed and sent a critique of their geography textbook to the publishers, who later offered the new edition of the textbook to the *Gymnasium* free of charge. Additionally, this teacher requires his upper level students to write ten-page research papers similar to what they will write in the university. Such research papers are typically not assigned by *Gymnasium* teachers.

Students' writing in these subjects is graded primarily on content, but numerous, distracting linguistic problems can lower a student's grade. Older students are expected to be able to use discipline-specific terminology and a formal register.

Art and Music

The primary purpose of written exams in art and music is to check students' learning of concepts in the discipline. In class, teachers do not provide overt writing instruction, and students' writing is evaluated primarily on content. In music class, younger students write only short quizzes in which they might answer questions about the origins of a type of music, what it expresses, and what stylistic means it employs. Additionally, younger students compose new verses to old songs and describe music they listen to in class. Advanced music students write exams in which they listen to an unfamiliar piece several times, reading along with the musical notes; they then describe it and answer questions requiring analysis.

Art students do little writing until the eleventh grade. At that point, writing about works of art is considered a valuable means of helping students process their ideas. Students in grade eleven through thirteen write exams in which they are presented with an unfamiliar piece of art and are asked to describe it, explain how it was produced, and discuss what is expressed through it. They may also be asked to summarize secondary texts about art. In a special

advanced art course, students are required to write texts to accompany the works they create.

Religion and Philosophy

In religion and philosophy courses, writing serves as a means of testing students' knowledge of course content, including their ability to grapple with difficult issues and express well-supported positions regarding them. Teachers may use writing in religion classes to introduce Biblical stories and reinforce course content. Students write recapitulations of the Biblical stories they study as well as short opinion pieces about the meaning of Jesus' sayings or about controversial subjects such as shopping hours on Sundays. Additionally, since religion class meets only twice per week, students may take minutes during a class discussion and read them aloud at the beginning of the next in order to help them take up again the topic of the previous class session's discussion. For older students, the emphasis of exams is on expressing one's opinion in a well-supported manner.

In philosophy classes, students undertake little writing before the eleventh grade. At that point, for exams, students typically receive a short text to use as a stimulus for writing on a given topic, such as euthenasia. Students' writing is evaluated on the quality of its arguments and its level of detail.

Science and Math

As in other subjects, writing is used in biology, chemistry, physics, and math to help students grasp course material, to teach them discipline-specific ways of thinking, and to check learning. In science, younger students may write summaries of a text they have read and discussed or a film they have watched. They may also take short tests that require mostly short answers and one essay answer, such as explaining in half a page how a bird flies. Older students write exams that require them to apply knowledge they have learned in class to new materials. For example, for a biology exam, students might receive a text and several visuals related to a specific geographical region, be asked to explain the reasons behind a given population change, and to speculate about how different circumstances might have led to different outcomes. In chemistry and physics, students write about their experiments, including descriptions of background information, hypotheses, procedures, observations, results, and reflections. For chemistry exams, an experiment is demonstrated or described for students, who have to write their observations and then their reflections on it, with numerical calculations and some prose. Students might be asked in a physics exam to describe the elements of a nuclear power plant, draw the plant, label the details and describe their functions, and discuss the risks of nuclear power. Math students might be asked to explain in writing their thought processes regarding solving various math problems.

Student writing in these subjects is evaluated on content, preciseness of descriptions, and clarity. Older students are expected to use discipline-specific terminology appropriately and to demonstrate that they can express abstractions and apply knowledge to a new situation.

Discussion and Conclusion

While many of the WAC practices described above seem different from typical U.S. practices, WAC practices in both countries value the notion of writing to learn. The three-part writing task format used at this *Gymnasium* requires students to read a text carefully and understand it well enough to be able to summarize it, and it provides students with the chance to probe a text with the help of analytical questions provided by the teacher. While the form used in Germany is not typically used in the U.S., its goals parallel the emphasis on writing to learn advocated in much of the WAC literature (see, e.g., Duke, 2001; Farrell-Childers, Gere, & Young, 1994; Gabaldón, 2001; and Maxwell, 1996). There are certainly many different means of achieving the goal of writing to learn. Since the use of writing as an integral part of classroom learning and assessment has a long history in Germany, it is worth considering adapting some German WAC practices to U.S. educational contexts.

For example, because it involves short, manageable writing tasks, U.S. teachers may consider using the three-part writing task as a way to introduce young students to close reading of texts. Instructors may decide that presenting students with unfamiliar material in exams is inappropriate, especially if students lack experience with this. However, teachers may want to experiment with using new texts or visuals for in-class activities and homework exercises since with new material it is easier to ask essay questions that require students to go beyond recapitulation of information to higher-order cognitive tasks, including application of disciplinary knowledge, methods and evaluation.

The first part of the three-part task involves summary writing, to which instructors may want to pay special attention. The difficulty of recapitulating new material in the form of a written summary should not be underestimated. In my teaching experience at the university level, I have found that most students have little experience with summary writing and struggle with this seemingly straightforward task. Because it requires students to determine which information is central to meaning, summary writing both demands and fosters close reading of texts. In my undergraduate WAC linguistics classes, I implement summary-writing as an in-class group activity each time students read a new textbook chapter. Students find summary writing so difficult that, at first, I guide them into it: They first complete chapter summaries I've written by filling in word/phrase blanks or reordering jumbled sentences, and later, they write summaries based on key terms I provide. Eventually, students construct their own summaries from scratch. Writing summaries of textbook chapters

helps students learn difficult course material because it requires them to identify the essential points of the textbook's chapters.

Teachers experimenting with the three-part task format may decide to share their ideas with one or more colleagues in their school, including colleagues in disciplines different from their own. This would provide students with writing-task familiarity across subjects and also provide teachers with a convenient means for generating writing prompts, allowing teachers to invest less time developing new ideas for integrating writing into their classroom instruction. Additionally, it would provide an important self-check for teachers who want to ensure that they are asking questions that tap a range of cognitive tasks, including recapitulation, application of previously-learned material, and evaluation.

Teachers may also want to introduce text-based creative writing similar to that used for younger *Gymnasium* students. Teachers in Germany typically avoid focusing on "free" story writing because they prefer to integrate reading and writing tasks, and they typically avoid personal writing because they want to protect students from having to divulge information about themselves. While U.S. teachers' priorities and concerns may be different, they may want to take advantage of tasks that capitalize on younger students' familiarity with and interest in stories on the one hand, while also requiring students to read texts closely in order to write about them. English teachers, for example, might want to experiment with students re-writing a poem in the form of a short story (or vice versa); history teachers might ask students to describe an historical event from the perspective of a teenager of the time.

Gymnasium teachers make their workload more manageable by responding orally in class to students' written homework, which students read aloud. Because students learn to receive and be satisfied with oral (rather than written) feedback on much of their writing, teachers' work load is significantly reduced, allowing instructors to integrate more writing into their classes. While such is not the custom in the U.S., American teachers might nonetheless experiment with this practice in their own classrooms. In my teaching experience, I have found that students' responses to this approach vary, but that students are more likely to respond well if they have been adequately prepared to give and receive oral critique in a large-group setting and if the instructor models receiving criticism of his/her own writing as well as giving constructive, tactful feedback on student writing to a student volunteer.

In U.S. educational institutions, English teachers have traditionally undertaken the majority of the labor of writing instruction, leaving them feeling overburdened and somewhat alone in their work. At the German *Gymnasium*, the responsibility for writing instruction (and grading papers) is more equally distributed across the faculty, and students are provided a plethora of opportunities to engage in writing for the various subjects offered by the cur-

riculum. Because the educational situation in Germany differs significantly from that of the U.S., wholesale importation of German educational practices may not be appropriate. However, information about WAC practices at the *Gymnasium* level provides a rich source of ideas for experimentation.

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