Committed to WAC: Christopher Thaiss

INTERVIEWED BY CAROL RUTZ

CHRISTOPHER "CHRIS" THAISS has served the writing across the curriculum (WAC) cause for many years in multiple ways. Currently, he is the Clark Kerr Presidential Chair and Professor in the University Writing Program at the University of California at Davis, splitting that appointment with the directorship of the UC Davis Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. During this interview, Chris reviews his personal educational and scholarly history, which I will not repeat here.

Widely appreciated for his scholarship, Chris has personified WAC pedagogy, theory, and ideals through his teaching, research, and publication. With talented co-authors (all of whom are credited as part of this interview), he has been an agent of discovery and documentation. Without Chris Thaiss, the WAC Mapping Project would not exist, nor would the follow-up study by his co-author, Tara Porter, now underway. Without Chris Thaiss, his pedagogical instincts, his collaborative energy, and his eloquence, the WAC world would be a less defined, under-theorized intellectual place. Fortunately, Chris remains engaged in WAC work for the duration—may his commitment never flag.

If this interview seems longer than some others published in *The WAC Journal* in recent years, the reason lies in an impressive range of topics, problems, and ideas that Chris brings to my questions. Among the themes developed: scholarship and pedagogy as mutually informing; collaboration as a positive professional experience; WAC legacy of exploration and innovation (an evocation of the spirit of the Renaissance); international connections for WAC programs and scholarship; healthy prospects for WAC; concern about standardized assessments; surprise at the limitations of much WAC research; and possible connections with MOOCs. All of these goodies were collected through correspondence and a lengthy interview over lunch at the 2013 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC or Cs) in Las Vegas.

Throughout, Chris's enthusiasm for learning as well as his excitement about future possibilities offers a portrait of a senior WAC scholar who is just getting started. That paradox will make sense to readers as you explore with me a tiny slice of Chris Thaiss' world. Read on.

Carol Rutz: Few scholars are as personally identified with WAC as you are, yet you are of a generation that came to writing studies and WAC more specifically through a literature route. What can you tell *The WAC Journal* readers about your professional journey?

Chris Thaiss: I like that "of a generation." I know what that means! Well, yes, there were no rhet/comp programs when I came through grad school (Northwestern, 1975), where I concentrated in Renaissance (also known as Early Modern) literature in England. But my interest in that literary period was not antiquarian: what I admired about the Elizabethans and their Continental counterparts was their sense of adventure and of a break with the medieval past, manifest in the voyages of discovery, the revival of the Greek and Roman classics, the new science, and the explosion of literature and transnational communication catalyzed by the spread of printing. I was totally mesmerized at the time by the whole Elizabethan myth. I didn't realize at the time that my reading classical and Renaissance rhetoric would have so much relevance to what I would wind up doing with my life.

I had the good fortune at Northwestern to meet Wallace Douglas. Wally had a joint appointment in English and Education, and he inspired me with his love of teaching. I also came just at the time that Northwestern launched a training course for teaching assistants (TAs), and so I began reading Wilbert McKeachie and other eloquent advocates for undergraduate teaching. Then, when I began teaching as an adjunct in Virginia at George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College in 1975, I thoroughly enjoyed teaching composition and became the first tutor in the new GMU writing lab.

The founder of that tutorial effort was GMU faculty member Don Gallehr, who two years later would found the Northern Virginia Writing Project, and who would ask me to "co-direct" (really, be an assistant). It's ironic that in 1976 I was hired as an assistant professor, to teach Renaissance courses (and intro comp and lit), because once the Writing Project got going in 1978, I was pretty quickly transformed into this "new" thing called a compositionist. (I don't think we actually used that term until quite a bit later.) By 1979, I had taken over as director of comp and director of the writing lab (renamed the writing center in the early 80s)—*and* coordinator of this cool thing called "writing across the curriculum." All this in three years, while I was still an assistant professor. Such a thing was possible at GMU in those days, when it was a comparatively

small and new place, and an assistant professor's having these kinds of administrative adventures was not a hindrance to getting tenure, but, at least in my case, a help.

It's important to keep in mind that I have never seen a disjunction between my Renaissance studies and my teaching/administration of writing. Sure, the rhetorical continuum is one obvious link, but more profound for me is the link through experimental "let's try this new thing" culture heroes like Shakespeare, Erasmus, and Bacon. Since I come from immigrant farmers and craftspeople, I'm always attracted to stories of clever "by your bootstraps" types who like to try new stuff and don't mind organizing things. I guess that's one reason why I didn't have much trouble uprooting from Virginia in 2006, after 30 years, to go West to the University of California-Davis, which is a similar place in its entrepreneurial ways and has taken me back to my family's farming roots.

It's that same perspective on life that drew me to the teaching of writing and lured me away from literary history. It was easier for me to see how a writing class could help striving young persons achieve their goals, whatever those might be. After all, writing fits with any dream of moving forward. I enjoyed the lit classes I taught, but I always had the feeling that I was trying to sell the love and value of literature to students. Students would have to accommodate themselves to the texts, whereas writing can accommodate almost any self, because it is so flexible and variously useful.

CR: What a stunning combination of scholarly and pedagogical passions. Can you categorize the programs and projects that have most engaged you as a teacher and scholar? For example, your work with Terry Myers Zawacki at George Mason University had as much to do with faculty as graduate or undergraduate students. What kinds of professional work have been most satisfying?

CT: I think of myself primarily as a teacher, and one reason why I've loved writing studies as a discipline is that it links pedagogy with scholarship. I have never just been an administrator and wouldn't want to be. I've had one sabbatical in my life (last year), and even then I was working with my grad students. I'm equally drawn to undergraduate and graduate teaching. In the past few years, since coming to Davis, I've been especially happy teaching science writing to our passionate, hard-working, wonderfully diverse (disciplinarily and linguistically) science majors, though I enjoy just as much the grad classes, such as the new Writing Program Administrators (WPA) course I taught for the first time last fall.

Still, I've been a WPA type for over 30 years now, and what still excites me the most about this type of program coordination is that it puts me in constant touch with people who do interesting things and are dedicated to students. I love Writing Across the

Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) because it gets me out of a disciplinary silo and gives me a much more generous viewpoint on what's going on across the university. I always cringe when I hear people (including some folks in writing studies) bash faculty in other disciplines for being ignorant or uncaring as teachers. The people that Terry and I interviewed for *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines* were emblematic of so many teachers from different fields that I've met over the years.

The new job I took here at UC-Davis this past fall, director of our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, has given me an even greater chance to find out about faculty and TAs across the whole university, and I can't begin to tell you how I've been amazed to see the inventive student-centered courses they design and how dedicated they are to teaching. We do very little of what you might call "outreach" in the center, because we have our hands full trying to facilitate the ideas and answer the questions that people bring to us. I know that this is a top-tier research university and faculty are judged on their grants and publications way more than on their teaching, so, sure, the university accommodates that agenda with quite a few overly large classes. But that makes what I'm seeing and hearing here on a daily basis all the more amazing.

CR: You mentioned in another context that you can't back-track these smart faculty teaching innovations to any programming through your Center or other WAC faculty development. Do you see evidence of a teaching culture at Davis that promotes the inventive teaching you observe? For example, do you detect a particular writing culture vis-à-vis STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) departments that fosters the science writing you have been teaching yourself?

CT: My inability to back track the rise of a writing culture at Davis comes almost entirely from my still being a relative newbie here—only seven years. Our program website has an archive of documents from the early 2000s that details the reasons for the split of the writing program from English and testifies to the great respect that faculty and students across the curriculum had developed for writing and for the roles of the writing program in building it. That the archive was kept by a physicist colleague, Joe Kiskis, says something about the influence of WAC pedagogy and faculty development over the years here. One of the tasks I've undertaken since coming here has been to catalog as many of the components of that writing culture as I can observe. For example, my colleague Gary Sue Goodman and I have a piece about writing at Davis in *Writing Programs Worldwide*, and my colleague Dana Ferris and I have a somewhat historical essay on WAC and second language writers at Davis in the *Across the Disciplines* special issue on that theme.

Just last March (at 4Cs) I gave a talk specifically on the growth of a writing culture in STEM at Davis. I'd say the most profound continuing influence on that growth is

the research orientation of the faculty, which includes their great respect for writing. I chaired the university committee implementing our new multi-literacies general education requirement for three years, and I was continually impressed by the ways that course proposals across disciplines, including most of the science programs, featured substantial research-related writing projects written in stages. From working with so many science majors in my courses, I can see how many opportunities advanced undergrads have to work in labs and contribute to research projects. The first time I went to the annual Undergraduate Research Conference, I was blown away by several hundred high-quality poster presentations. Similarly, I'm always impressed by the number and quality of student submissions to our annual publications *Prized Writing* and *Explorations*, about half of which come from STEM students.

That we have such a staunchly supported WAC-oriented writing program and a strong teaching center derives from this ethos, but the influences are mutually reinforcing. Students respect the writing program in part because they know they have to use what we teach in their other courses and in their careers. Reciprocally, the faculty and grad students who take advantage of WAC and teaching center workshops and consultations become better able to teach in interactive, student-centered ways.

CR: You are clearly an ace collaborator, given your publications and your ongoing mapping project of WAC programs that extends internationally. In your experience, what are the benefits of collaboration for WAC folks? Are there limitations or obstacles?

CT: For me, there's been a natural link between the collaborating I've done for years now as a WPA and the collaborative urge in scholarship and writing. I know it's not the traditional norm in the humanities, who like to hold on to that fading myth of the lone author, but collaboration is the norm in most disciplines, and to me it makes sense that two or more heads are better than one, when the goal is to pool expertise and take mutual advantage of the strengths and perspectives of others. For mature scholars, I think it's particularly important to engage graduate students in collaborations, both to give them credit for the contributions they make and to help ease them into this competitive business of publication.

In WAC/WID scholarship, I think collaboration is especially rewarding, for the co-researchers and, I'd hope, for readers. The three short texts I did for Allyn and Bacon in 1999-2000: *Writing for Psychology*, *Writing for Law Enforcement*, and *Writing about Theatre,* benefited from my working with psychologist Jim Sanford, former FBI agent John Hess, and dramaturg/producer Rick Davis. I learned so much from them and they (they said!) from me. My recent collaboration with Paula Carlino (University of Buenos Aires), Gerd Bräuer (University of Freiburg), Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (Coventry University), and Aparna Sinha (UC-Davis) has been absolutely essential

to the success of *Writing Programs Worldwide*, our new book, not to mention the contributions from our 60 authors from 28 countries. The same is true of my recent collaboration with psychologist Bob Thompson and biologist Julie Reynolds, both of Duke University, on writing in STEM, on which Julie and I (along with Pam Childers, Michael Lowry, and John Bean) presented at 4Cs in March.

Collaborative scholarship might not be everyone's cup of tea, of course. As in any relationship, there has to be a willingness to share credit and keep egos from clashing. And collaboration may be a problem for scholars in fields, including English lit, that still are not geared to understand collaboration. A good bit of that comes from the typical practice of turning dissertations (sole-authored) into books, but I can't see a good reason for persisting with a requirement for sole authorship by faculty members in some departments, when group authorship is the norm elsewhere.

CR: Ed White has often been quoted (or paraphrased) as saying that WAC programs typically undergo a boom-and-bust cycle that depends on a variety of institutional and personnel factors. Have you observed such phenomena? Do you have a model that explains how some programs succeed better or longer than others?

CT: When Tara Porter and I did the Mapping Project survey and the Cs article that grew out of it, we were conscious of Sue McLeod and Eric Miraglia's 1997 study that showed how many WAC programs depended on the longevity of an original coordinator. At our annual WAC special interest group (SIG) meetings at Cs, we hear many stories of programs that are restarting after a first effort dried up, for whatever reason. I like David Russell's explanation that WAC is precarious because it works horizontally, across traditional reporting lines in academic departments, so is not seen as part of a unit's core mission. What we saw in the Mapping Project results is that many programs have figured out ways to ensure their staying power by becoming part of the fabric of their institutions (as you and Bill Condon describe in your *CCC* article) and handling the continuity of leadership.

Tara is still in the process of mining the data for her dissertation, which is focused on this idea of sustainability, but it seems pretty clear from the data that Barbara Walvoord's advice for WAC programs to establish links with many facets of a school's operations (e.g., general education, libraries, student services, technologies, etc.) leads to sustainability. That GMU, for example, saw WAC as the model for faculty development in technology fifteen years ago and as the centerpiece of its multi-faceted assessment efforts (since 1999) ensures the prevalence of the writing culture at that university, as Terry Zawacki and I described in *Engaged Writers*.

In a different way, that the University Writing Program at Davis is its own department, with upper-level WID courses, a thriving minor, a major (in preparation), and a PhD emphasis, ensures its longevity. (By the way, five of us from the UWP are collaborating on an essay about this development for a new volume on independent writing programs.) That writing is woven throughout the general education requirements and that UWP-led writing workshops and tutoring are a major part of the Graduate School's services to students also manifest the university's writing culture. One way I'd measure the success of a WAC/WID initiative is how, over the years, a college or university culture grows that respects active learning—student proactivity in their learning, teachers creating opportunities for students to demonstrate authorship and leadership, actual participation in research teams. That Davis has had a thriving undergrad research culture for years (e.g., a prominent center, two annual publications, and several conferences) is one indication of the success of its WAC program, as are the daily pleasant surprises I get as director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), as I mentioned above.

CR: Having collected data with your colleague Tara Porter on hundreds of WAC programs, you must have a sense of where the WAC movement, as it were, is heading in the 21st century. What are your predictions—both the fearless and reckless ones?

CT: I think about this a lot. I've just written a new version of the "WAC/WID pedagogy" chapter for the coming new edition of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, plus a couple of other pieces that ask a question similar to yours. I guess that comes with being around this territory for a long time. Basically, I think WAC is here to stay, which is pretty amazing considering that we've never had our own national organization, and even our biennial conference has no ongoing organization. Yet, you'd be hard pressed to find an institution in the US that hasn't heard of it and at least thought about having a program. Even *US News* has had a category for WID since 2003—and that helps with publicity. When we started doing the research for the international portion of the Mapping Project (which led to *Writing Programs Worldwide*), we figured that "WAC" wouldn't be a well-known acronym, but I don't think I'd have qualms about that now—and that was just seven years ago.

Tara, by the way, is planning a follow-up survey, to see where we've come in the five years since we closed the US survey, but I haven't seen her design yet.

CR: Good for her. I'm eager to see that survey and participate. It sounds as though you expect the numbers of WAC programs to have increased since the first Mapping Project survey. Can you elaborate?

CT: Why am I so optimistic? Well, we are now a global information/writing-driven world in a way that we weren't when WAC began as a movement 40-plus years ago. (I was listening to National Public Radio [NPR] commentator and sardonic humorist Andrei Codrescu a while ago, and he said in his inimitable way, "I was asked for my opinion. That used to mean something, when on any issue there were three or four opinions that anyone listened to. Now everyone writes an opinion. You can't escape opinions. Everyone now has opinions on the opinions. So why should I bother?")

Moreover, as I'm learning in my new job here, teaching technologies are becoming so popular that we're close to reaching a critical mass (I don't think I'm exaggerating) in teachers' willingness to create "blended" classes (with student work going on through technologies and in classrooms) and, in more and more cases, even to "flip" the classroom—with lectures and multimedia presentations recorded for students to watch outside class, so class time can be project- and group-oriented and interactive. I won't say most courses are there yet, but the number of teachers and TAs who are moving in that direction is growing quickly. The Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) phenomenon will cause that model to "go viral" (I hate that term), and in a few years I think it will become the norm for classes in all kinds of schools to feature much more peer-to-peer written communication, blogs, wikis, etc.—all tools that facilitate the old WAC credo of "writing to learn." It's amazing how quickly this landscape has changed. Ten years ago I'd not have ventured a statement like that.

CR: No kidding. I'm totally with you on that. And where is WAC headed?

CT: What all this means is that WAC/WID will survive and prosper not mainly because of the efforts of WAC outreach programs to convince and train teachers to be more language-centered in their teaching. That's happening because of the phenomena mentioned above. There will still be a need for teacher development and improvement, and a WAC program or a teaching center will be very helpful, even necessary, with that, but writing surely won't disappear from universities if they don't have WAC cheerleaders. But the writing and learning will be much more directed and successful with help from those organizations.

Having said all this, I get depressed thinking about a couple of forces holding back change. One is standardized assessment. The *WPA Journal* has just published my review of the excellent new book *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century* (partly a festschrift to Ed White), and it's positively scary to read the essays by folks from Educational Testing Service (ETS). They actually believe that a single instrument can capture how all these digitally and multi-modally connected young people are "writing." The ETS definition of writing is so out of date that they can't possibly be taken seriously. But the Feds and the states are handing contracts hand over fist to these people and other

testing conglomerates. The result is that K-12 schools are being forced to stay frozen in time, with the further result that schools are becoming less and less relevant to the multi-modally literate kids on their smart phones and other tools outside school life. Aren't you noticing that your first-year students come in much more influenced by the literacy experience they have outside of school than in?

CR: In some ways, yes, but they are still quite constrained by expectations of them as writers in school. It's difficult for me to convince them to do something as basic as embed an image in a prose document, whereas their digital lives assume not just the skills to do that, but the necessity of illustration as part of their rhetoric.

CT: Indeed—good point. As long as writing—and every other subject in the schools—is tested by these increasingly narrow, standardized, and machine-like (and machine-readable) methods, even the most carefully-thought-out curriculum will fail to help prepare students for college—because teachers will be forced to teach to these sorry tests, which have no way to account for who our children have become in their multi-media environments.

WAC/WID is also held back by our lack of research on the increasing multi- and trans-linguality of students (and faculty), which is part of the phenomenon of global networking through technology. Only recently (e.g., the December 2011 special issue of *Across The Disciplines*, *Writing Programs Worldwide*, and a forthcoming collection co-edited by Cox and Zawacki) has the WAC scholarly community looked at how out-dated a lot of "traditional" WAC pedagogy has become. At a lot of places, including Davis, we have so much work to do to incorporate policy statements like the 2009 "CCCC Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers" into WAC/WID work-shop and assessment practice. In too many places in the US, we still act as if one job of a WAC program is to help turn our students across disciplines into polished writers of standard edited American English, and to treat multilingualism as a deficit, not a strength in a global information culture.

This second concern is closely related to a third. I worry that WAC/WID—and an interdisciplinary perspective as a whole—is hindered by the continuing overemphasis in US colleges and universities, and in writing studies research, on first-year required composition courses housed in English departments. I was on the Braddock Award committee this year, and doing concentrated reading of *CCC* has sort of shocked me into seeing how the discipline of Writing Studies keeps focusing on the same—though important—US-centric, First-Year-Composition (FYC)-centric, and English-Department-centric issues that we've been writing about for decades: contingent labor in US colleges, respect for English-department-based writing programs, how writing knowledge "transfers" from FYC. In the September 2012 issue devoted to research

methods, I was disappointed to see that most of the articles described varieties of archival research and text analysis, the main interests of English departments, with few pieces devoted to any methods quantitative or qualitative in relation to student development, and these only speculative.

Not being in an English department for several years now, and my currently directing a completely cross-disciplinary teaching and learning center, have given me a bit of perspective on how much WAC pedagogy and program development have been guided by the often-unconscious view that WAC is an extension of FYC, which, consciously or unconsciously, US WPAs often view as the core of writing education in higher ed. Researching structures for teaching writing around the world has shown me how US-centric that view is. Going forward, I'd like to see WAC acquire more of an international, whole university view, with language-and-learning policy seen not just in relation to the interests of FYC programs in English. This means that FYC programs and WAC programs and any other funded entities have to be accountable to the needs of the whole student and shouldn't resist (as they/we self-righteously often do) assessing their value in others' contexts.

CR: Please say more about your vision of WAC as a player in institutional transformation. Would you imagine a connection with MOOCs and other digital teaching methods?

CT: Sure. I think that's a good way to put it: WAC as a player, a significant contributor. WAC has been now for years a powerful voice at many schools, because it came along 40-plus years ago with its message of working against silo mentality and achieving linkages across the college or university. At George Mason, the success of WAC was the prototype for subsequent cross-curricular efforts, for example, in teaching with technology and innovative interdisciplinary curricula. The many people nationally who cut their teeth in WAC and then went on to other cross-disciplinary efforts or administrative posts, show that influence. And there's no reason why that influence can't continue to be powerful. The younger generation of WAC directors I've gotten to know has much the same whole-institutional vision and potential to affect transformation across their colleges and universities.

At the same time, if WAC leaders want to help change whole institutions, they have to resist equating transformation with what they know best, writing. Put another way, transforming institutions may mean not putting the WAC program first, specifically the WAC director's vision of the ideal writing-centered environment. If the only kind of transformation the WAC director wants to contribute to just realizes the goals of the WAC program, then that's not being a player, but trying to be the team. Of course, transformation can mean many things, and there are certain highly publicized

"transformation" trends that WAC folks might want to resist, strenuously, such as narrow notions of assessment based on the kind of standardized testing that has so harmed K-12 education. But if the transformation we are talking about is toward a more learning-centered environment, one that appreciates the role of student thinking and creativity, then I'd think most WAC leaders could get on board with that, even if other strategies besides, or in addition to, writing are featured. That's what I've seen happening at Davis, and there is nothing in that vision incompatible with the aims of the writing program.

One transformative issue in higher ed that we all have to take seriously is scalability. Except at a few elite institutions, with very high price tags for students, student-teacher ratios have continued to climb and I doubt that will turn around. MOOCs are the (current) most extreme version of that trend, and I think we can rightly be skeptical about their potential to give students anything close to the same kind of experience that they get in a writing-rich class with 20 students or even 35 students. But we've already seen in reports from MOOC-taking students that there are some tried-and-true techniques from WAC pedagogy—specifically peer-to-peer, instructor-monitored writing forums—that can contribute to student satisfaction and deeper learning, and that are scalable in different-size venues. If we think of institutional transformation as building a more active, interactive, learning-centered environment, then we can imagine venues of different sizes that use active-learning, technology-rich techniques—some derived from WAC pedagogy—that contribute to that vision. I've worked with faculty at Davis from different fields—music, biotechnology, chemistry, sociology, etc.—who teach very large classes, even as large as 500 or more, but the size itself has not kept them from designing challenging assignments and providing useful responses, with the assistance of digital tools. Buying into scalability needn't mean riding a slippery slope to the death of small classes. Davis, for example, has many, many small capstone and research classes—that the large classes subsidize (our first-year seminars are capped at 19, for example). The students and faculty cherish these opportunities, and the balance among venues of different size enables them.

CR: Finally, is there anything you would especially want *The WAC Journal* readers to know about you, your work, or anything else?

CT: Thanks for asking, but I've gone on long enough. What a great opportunity you've given me!

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