
WAC: A Dean's View¹

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Soon after I became Dean in 1987, Mary-Lou Hinman told me about PSC's WAC program. I had heard of this new thing before, but I didn't know any details. All I thought at first was that if PSC had such a program, this must be a fine and progressive place.

As I learned more about WAC techniques, my reaction was: think of all the effort I put in, all those years of teaching philosophy, to get students to write, and how many things I did wrong! All those hours of correcting papers and covering them with red ink, when I was really trying to help the students improve their ability to write and comprehend philosophical arguments! How come I never figured out a better way?

Let me reconstruct this bit of my history from the late 60s and 70s. I was a fairly typical faculty member at a state university, current in my discipline and a regular attender of philosophy meetings. I was even a person quite interested in teaching, but I did not know of resources outside my field that could help me use writing-to-learn more effectively. If only that institution had had a WAC program!

Now I use WAC techniques in my classes and in many of my presentations. The one-minute summary done near the end of a talk is a real favorite of mine. Recently, I have found that Classroom Research exercises are a source of superb WAC activities. After all, Classroom Research is designed to give good written feedback to the instructor about the success of instructional strategies, and the activities I have

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used, like the Self-Study of Engaged Learning Time², really force the students to become more self-aware, critical thinkers.

On the institutional level, WAC helps to form a community where people from different disciplines can get together and talk about teaching. Our usual college structure doesn't make this talk easy to arrange, so when it does occur, people are amazed. I've seen this theme over and over again in evaluations of WAC workshops: "I was so happy to be able to talk with colleagues about teaching! The first time in twenty years! How come we never did this before?" These comments are typical and indicate a real need.

WAC supports faculty: this is a function that we don't often consider. Faculty members need to share teaching successes and get help with problems. I mean real talk about our art, craft, or calling, not just "recreational bitching" about students, or the administration, or parking. And talk about research or professional work is not a substitute for serious talk about teaching, either. After awhile it can make you crazy, not discussing the thing you do in class so many hours a week. I know I used to think endlessly about my classes, and I still do, especially in the middle of the night. That's okay, but discussion with others is needed too. Colleagues can give much-needed advice, feedback, encouragement, moral support, and helpful techniques that can help us perform at a higher level. Just having others listen destroys the isolation.

I found this out first by suddenly leaving teaching and becoming an administrator. All at once my office staff and immediate colleagues became a "work family," where we talked a good deal about what projects and problems we had to solve. I realized that I had not had a "work family" for my teaching, even though I had good colleagues with whom I remain friends. WAC can give you a "work family" if you let it. Brown-bag seminars and workshops can provide opportunities to

²See "Self-Studies of Engaged Learning Time, Technique 19", pp. 108-110, in K. Patricia Cross and Thomas A. Angelo, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty*, National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, 1988.

share effective strategies; sharing ideas can lead to collaborative projects and presentations; and colleagues with mutual interests can give each other moral support, and even enlightened criticism, for those brave enough to ask for it.

My focus has been mostly on what WAC offers to the faculty member. But let's keep in mind, always, that WAC techniques help students to think better. I won't go on about the connections between thinking and writing. Readers of this journal are already converted. But the attentive student who uses WAC techniques can learn much, not only about a discipline but also about the processes of learning, clarifying, exploring connections, and following out insights, that can be learned in almost no other way. That's why WAC is an important part of our General Education program.

WAC is one of the most important programs that we have at PSC, both to improve student success and to develop faculty. And with fully half of our present faculty aged over fifty and due to retire within the next fifteen years, WAC will become a key part of our effort to socialize new faculty into our community and help them to become effective teachers for the long run. I intend to continue to support it enthusiastically.