The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum

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The main reason I got involved with writing across the curriculum fifteen years ago was administrative and related to campus politics. The main reason I have stayed actively involved in writing across the curriculum for fifteen years is personal and related to my teaching. Quite simply, I am a better teacher because of writing across the curriculum. So while motivations and intentions are messy things to characterize, for me the combination of administrative and teaching responsibilities and personal and public desires have led to most of my professorial life being engaged in writing across the curriculum — in my own classroom and on my college campuses — first at Michigan Tech, and now for six years at Clemson University.

Fifteen years ago, as a new department head, I was called into the office of my even newer Provost and given a charge: do something about the lack of communication skills exhibited by Michigan Tech engineering students and recent graduates. I returned to my department, symbolically located, I thought, on the other end of campus, and met with colleagues to decide what to do.

Now doing something about the communication skills of engineering students was not at that time the battle cry of my fledgling departmental administration. We had established our own internal priorities around more traditional goals of creating a new undergraduate degree and thereby attracting more majors and of starting a graduate program. It was as if Bill Clinton, on being ushered into power on the promise to build an economically strong America, had been told that his first priority would be to build an even stronger Germany and Japan. To aid aggressive competitors in campus politics for market share and funding priorities. And not only to help them to achieve a better product, a more marketable engineering graduate, but to help them in an area that they themselves didn't deem very important to their mission or worthy

of their time — an area that they saw as a secondary one—communications skills. Kind of like the Japanese or Germans wanting U. S. advice on fashions — what to wear to a corporate dinner. Or so we thought. In some sense, very early on, we saw the Provost's charge as an opportunity, but to recognize how big an opportunity it really was took time, experience, and a new way of thinking about university priorities, about colleagues across disciplines, and about what being a teacher was really all about. So after about a year of study and discussion, a writing-across-the-curriculum project was launched at Michigan Tech.

Now, I hope you don't mind if I use the abbreviation "WAC" for writing across the curriculum. It has become a staple in my vocabulary, like GM, IBM, or GE. In fact, as long as I am drawing analogies to market competition, I might share an experience I had earlier this year. Conducting the second day of a faculty workshop at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, Canada, I arrived to find an overhead transparency projected onto the screen — "WAC MAN: THE RETURN." It was a newspaper ad from a local electronics store in Fredericton — appropriately, perhaps, named "Wacky's." I will spare you the rest of the extended analogy I wrote about obtaining a WAC mobile so that the briefcased crusader could battle sentence fragments and comma splices in a never ending battle against language corruption.

What I have found in fifteen years as a WAC Man, is that being involved with WAC has kept the focus of my professional life on teaching. I realize that my teaching suffers if I allow myself to become isolated, to drop out of the WAC community of teachers at my school, that I lose the reality check on my own teaching and forgo opportunities for further growth as a teacher. That is why WAC, for me, is both a personal and institutional matter. For WAC to work, it needs both the commitment of individual teachers and a supportive interdisciplinary community and institutional commitment to nurture it. Thus, my remarks today will have this twin focus, the individual and the communal, the personal and the public, the teacher and the institutions that support teaching.

It has not been enough for me to get some good ideas about teaching at a conference or faculty workshop and then drop the conversation — go into my classroom and shut the door behind me. I need to find ways to sustain the conversation — with my own students as junior colleagues in the enterprise of teaching and learning — and with each of you. I need them and I need you to keep the teaching conversation going within me, and together we must find ways to keep the faculty

workshop going—with long breaks and with good food, of course—but a continuing workshop nonetheless.

Writing across the curriculum, when it works well and thrives, conceives of students, teachers, our various disciplines, and our administrative programs as one interrelated system (Herrington and Moran ix). This is something I could not or did not imagine sixteen years ago — when I viewed faculty in different disciplines as competitors for market share — ones who talked a disciplinary language I could not understand and did not want to understand.

Writing across the curriculum has its beginnings, for me, in the important work of James Britton, Nancy Martin, and their colleagues at the University of London's Schools Council Project. Theirs was a major effort to integrate and then study "language across the curriculum" in English schools in the 1960s and 70s. Their work demonstrated in theory and in practice that language was integral to learning as well as to communication in all disciplines. Most WAC projects in the U. S. in the late 70s, such as the one at Michigan Tech, were motivated by a desire to enhance student abilities in these two areas. First, they were concerned with students' ability to communicate, what was often called student literacy — functional literacy, critical literacy, academic literacy. Teachers, administrators, and funding agencies wanted students to read and to write better than they did. Second, they were concerned with students' abilities as learners — they wanted students to become more active and engaged learners, critical thinkers, and problem-solvers — and they believed that providing students with increased opportunities to use writing as a tool for learning would help meet these goals. In some sense, we might say that first-generation WAC programs founded on these premises focused on the cognitive development of individual students. They encouraged writing in all disciplines to enable students to become astute learners, critical thinkers, and effective communicators.

In the 1980s, teachers explored the social dimensions of written communication, an exploration that gradually shifted WAC theory and practice away from a cognitive emphasis to a more socially-based perspective on writing. This shift paralleled WAC's move from the individual classroom into the wider social arena of campus-wide and state-wide programs. Thus, to the first two premises for WAC programs, a third and a fourth were added. Third, writing is a social activity; it takes place in a social context. If we want students to be effective communicators, to be successful engineers and historians,

then we cannot separate form from content, writing from knowledge, action from context. We should not teach writing generically, in a vacuum, as if it were a skill unconnected to purpose or context. Student writers need to join a community of learners engaged in generating knowledge and solving problems, to join, even as novices, disciplinary conversations and public-policy discussions. WAC programs, therefore, began to stress the role of collaboration in learning, the role of audience in communication, and the role of social context in learning to write and writing to learn. Each new context makes different demands on a writer and requires different understandings about what is valued as expressions of knowledge in particular communities. Teachers began to change the social environments of their individual classrooms to nurture and challenge student writers, and they began to lobby for the institutionalization of WAC within their school or college.

A fourth premise, then, is that writing is social action; writers are advocates who write to further personal and social goals. If we want students to be effective communicators, we cannot continually ask them to practice at writing separate from any social or disciplinary community of shared knowledge and interests. Writers write to change their perceptions of the world and to change others' perceptions of the world. Thus WAC programs have added advocacy writing to their repertoire; students writing to audiences beyond the classroom, writing to audiences who want to hear what they know and what they think about what they know, writing on electronic networks to understand, monitor, and solve global as well as local problems, writing "where language can lead to action in the world" (Dunlap 213).

As we move through the decade of the 1990s toward the twenty-first century, WAC proponents understand more and more what is to be done. We do not replace the cognitive dimension of writing with the social dimension, but rather we continue to build on the knowledge and experience of others in both areas. Today, mature WAC programs attempt to use all four underlying premises as a way of empowering students as active learners and effective communicators: writing to learn, writing to communicate, writing as social process, writing as social action. Certainly, there are tensions and conflicts between teachers and scholars who prefer either cognitively or socially-based instructional strategies, but the stance of most WAC programs is to welcome competing viewpoints on such matters, to see WAC as an inclusive and evolving movement, one which seeks to encourage conversations about significant educational issues by teachers and other

interested parties, and then to listen for opportunities that may lead to communal action and educational renewal based on consensus (preceding four paragraphs adapted from the "Introduction"to Farrell, Gere, and Young's forthcoming *Programs and Practices*).

But as we all know, when we try to start and sustain WAC programs, things do not always run smoothly in practice. About four years ago, Toby Fulwiler and I were editing a book on this subject: *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. We were just about finished, and it became time to write the introduction — an overview of the book and a response to the most frequently asked questions about implementing and running a WAC program. But something was bothering me. I knew from my personal experience as well as the experiences of the cross disciplinary faculty represented in the fourteen chapters before me, that something was wrong. We knew that WAC programs create a better academic environment for both students and faculty to learn and excel as teachers and learners, and yet we also knew that most WAC programs remain difficult to initiate, difficult to fund, difficult to sustain, difficult to institutionalize, difficult to integrate into the central role of the school or university. WAC " is still an adjunct program on most campuses, still on tenuous budgetary footing, still without administrative positioning within the academy, still, as it were, operating on the fringe of academic respectability" (287). Even though our book contained descriptions of fourteen exemplary and apparently healthy programs, I thought we needed to confront this darker reality. So Toby and I did what we often do when we don't quite understand what the other is talking about, he went his way to write the first draft of the "Introduction," and I went my way to write the first draft of what was to become the "Afterword" to the book — with the ominous title "The Enemies of Writing Across the Curriculum."

I elaborated on a long list of attitudes and practices that subvert WAC and its effort to improve education, what I called enemies of WAC and institutionalizing WAC— a list familiar to most of you, I'm sure:

— Academic instititutions are organized by disciplinary departments, and thus interdisciplinary programs, such as WAC, fall through the cracks of the academy, along with many of our students.

— WAC is identified as a remedial program, as a quick fix, as something temporary, so that once students again write better, as in the good old days, the program will be phased out.

— Unstable leadership: Writing faculty, often the most knowledgeable leaders of WAC on campus, are often adjuncts, part-timers, graduate teaching assistants, non-tenure track— subject to being rolled over and turned out in a few years.

— Resistance from English departments has many forms as well: reluctance to share responsibility for teaching writing with untrained faculty in other disciplines; reluctance to water down the main mission of the department, the literature program; reluctance to tenure and promote faculty in composition.

— The pressure at many colleges is for even larger classes, more students, but also more research. With large classes come standardized tests and the belief that such tests are objective and preferable to subjective writing assignments. This reinforces the myth that writing in educational settings should be used primarily to test students' knowledge rather than as opportunities to learn subject matter. In the nation's schools, the situation is even worse. Not only are the students labeled with a standardized test score, but so are teachers, schools, school districts, and states. Teaching to such tests subverts innovative teaching— and WAC thrives on innovation, just as mediocrity thrives on standardization.

— At the college level, the traditional reward system devalues undergraduate teaching and primarily rewards research, publications, grants. It also assumes that the teacher's job is to disseminate knowledge and that the student's job is to memorize what the teacher disseminates. If such a model is accurate, it makes perfect sense to videotape the professor's lectures, show them to ten or fifteen classes of students at the same time— or watch them in the library if you miss class— and have graduate students administer the scan-tron tests— to measure how much the students remember from the video lectures. It certainly does free up faculty research time— especially if the videotapes only need revising once or twice a decade (or a career?)

— The fear of student resistance is another key enemy: everyone knows students hate to write, so why turn them off and risk getting lower student evaluations at the end of the term? Teaching students to write about physics or horticulture is someone else's responsibility anyway. Our system of education has trained students to be like Skinnerian pigeons— to prefer things simple. Tell us what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and then give us our reward. But as every WAC teacher knows, students are not pigeons, and when given the opportunity, most prefer not to be treated as pigeons. Faculty are often pleasantly surprised when student evaluations actually go up.

— And the final enemy I noted, faculty resistance: some faculty are apathetic, others insecure, others downright hostile to any program that offers to assist them with their teaching. They see such efforts as a subtle indictment of their current teaching and feel threatened by any attempt at collaboration centered on teaching. They believe that teaching is a matter between teacher and students, and any organized attempt to change their teaching strategies is an attack on academic freedom. At colleges, faculty have an even greater reason to resist — it is against their own self-interest. Time spent on teaching is time robbed from research. (287-294)

This is a depressing litany, isn't it? And this from a guy who is generally upbeat, optimistic, idealistic, forward-looking. The WAC Man. Fifteen years as a WAC advocate. I don't know what got into me — some midlife episode, I assume. My "enemies" essay has now been out for a couple of years, and it has been interesting to see some of the critical reactions from teachers in other places. Mostly, the reaction has been favorable, favorable in the sense that they concede that I commonsensically summarized a depressing situation. Some scholars have been more perceptive and have constructed arguments about how I missed the boat on such things as faculty resistance. Faculty resistance is actually a good thing, they claim, because out of such resistance comes the creative tension that engenders change. The post-modernist paradox: the need to be part of a community with stable traditions and conventions — and the concomitant need for dynamic change and resistance within that same community (Howard 49). For some reason, these arguments did not immediately lift my spirits from their mid-life depths.

And then I read an article by Willima E. Coles. Jr., of the University of Pittsburgh, with the engaging title "Writing Across the Curriculum: Why Bother?" After summarizing my list of enemies and the struggles that WAC programs face, he writes and I quote, "that the real wonder is not that the program has enemies. The wonder is that it has gathered so many friends" (23). And reading Cole's essay, my spirits began to soar. And thus the title of my talk today on the wonder of writing across the curriculum. Cole goes on to conclude his essay in this way:

> Why bother to work at writing across the curriculum? Finally, I suppose, because a student, as it turns out, is not the only focus of the process. For teachers, no less than for students, writing across the curriculum — given its insistence that one ask real rather than loaded

> questions, the way it takes for granted the importance of dialogue and revisions as part of the writing process, and its emphasis on teachers rather than the supremacy of the Teacher — can be an expression of faith that can keep faith itself alive, faith in this case that real growth, real development, real change, are possible, even in an educational institution. This does, of course, demand a commitment of time and energy, but an unreasonable one only if I forget that, very simply, I'm a better teacher, a better student, a better preson, when I act as though I had that kind of faith. (25)

And thus the conversations we have at workshops, at colloquia like this one, and in print (like the one I had with William Coles), continue to work their magic for me. So with no apologies whatsoever, I'll tell you about one writing and learning process I have been using in an upper-level Victorian literature class I teach, and thereby share with you the joy I experience in teaching, a joy continually renewed not only by my interaction with students but with faculty colleagues who *bother* about writing across the curriculum.

I use writing to help students learn Victorian literature (the subject matter I teach), learn to read difficult texts, learn to talk and write about them, learn to pose questions that need asking, learn to make meaning in such a way that it is indeed meaningful to them and to others. Although our subject matter changes depending on our discipline, whether accounting or zoology, these are common goals among WAC teachers, ones we can adapt to the unique circumstances of our own teaching. By way of introduction, let me say that I learned about this strategy I'm going to share with you from an engineering colleague, Dan McAuliff, who used it in an electrical engineering course, and that it has been adapted and used by teachers at Clemson in various disciplines, including Melanie Cooper in chemistry and Robert Jameson in mathematics. Unless I am mistaken, all three of these teachers used it before I did. We learned about it from each other in our faculty workshops — which over 400 Clemson faculty have now participated in — and through articles we wrote for our local WAC Newsletter. Although my Victorian literature class enrolls about 35 students per section, it should be noted that Melanie Cooper's first-year chemistry course enrolls about 200 students per section.

The focus on this assignment is on a series of notes or letters students write to each other in pairs. They first write to a partner about the problems they've encountered in interpreting a difficult text — they construct and contextualize questions about it — and then write a return letter to their partner suggesting possible answers and perhaps raising

other issues to be discussed. In writing, they often surprise themselves with what they learn, and they are often gratified to help someone else understand — to make a difference through written communication.

Let me give you the context for this assignment: this was the last of six writing assignments students were required to do in the course, in addition to a midterm and a final exam. Two of the other assignments were formal critical essays on the literature, and three were more informal creative writing assignments, like writing a poem in the dramatic monologue form of Robert Browning. Students kept their writing in a portfolio, which was read and assessed by them and by me about midterm and at the course conclusion. For this final assignment, students had one week to read the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, to read the critical introduction to the novel by Cedric Watts, and to read one scholarly essay by China Achebe who argued that the novel is racist. Part I of this assignment, the first letter, was written before the novel was discussed in class; it could be handwritten and be about 200 words long; and Part II, the response letter,was written following the week's class discussion and needed to be typed and be about 500 words long. Students knew as well that there would be a final exam question on *Heart of Darkness*.

I present one letter of inquiry and one letter of response from the exchange between Emily and Alyson — as a way of centering our attention on students' texts.

> Alyson,
>
> On page 149, Marlow makes a general statement about women after having a conversation with his aunt, saying, "It's queer how out of touch with the truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset." After reading the novel, I could see how Marlow would think that Kurtz's Intended fit into this stereotype. She really did seem to be totally out of touch with reality, and she didn't seem to have a clue about the man she loved. The question I want to ask is whether the African woman described near the end of the novel on page 226 fits into this stereotype. Actually, I would like to know where and how she fits into the novel at all, beyond the insinuations of being Kurtz's mistress. I think this woman must be symbolic of something, although I am not exactly sure of what. Is she a living, breating human embodiment of the "heart of darkness," the wilderness of the African Congo, as seems to be indicated on page 226?
>
> Emily

Emily,

In class, we discusseed the possibility that Heart of Darkness is a masculine novel. This idea seems supported by the narrator's reliance on patriarchal assumptions and Marlowe's unsympathetic view of women and, perhaps, by the subject matter which focuses on plotting, murder, intrigue, and male adventure. Based on these assumptions, the savage woman's role can be explained as a symbolic representation of the things to which this man feels alternately attracted and repulsed — woman and Africa.

Before the trip, Marlow has, as you mentioned, stated his demeaning and subordinating attitude towards women (that they're out of touch with the truth). But that description fits his Aunt and the Intended specifically, while this savage woman seems a striking deviation from this stereotype. When considering the savage woman in the context of Marlow's stereotype, I came up with several possibilities.

Some possibilities for the purpose of this woman were suggested briefly by Achebe. He believes that she serves as a direct contrast or opposite to the Intended. If so, I wonder why Conrad would deliberately draw this contrast with his own view of woman who is embodied in the Intended? When you consider the dichotomies presented (Thames/ Congo, Africa/England, civilized/savage, good/evil), this contrast of the powerful, wild savage with the civilized, naive Intended is a fitting echo of the division made by Marlow. But does Marlow's image of women represent what he wants them to be? I think it does because he willfully hides the truth from the Intended by lying about Kurtz's last words.

Yet I think it's important that, to Marlow, truth is available to men only. It is a masculine concern. So if the woman represents Africa, which he suggests is the case by comments such as "... the whole sorrowful land... seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (76), then she has a strong connection with the truth. As I see it, the primitive and the savage is the vehicle for truth in *Heart of Darkness*; therefore, this woman conveys, or threatens to convey, truth....

However, another purpose this woman serves is to help explain Kurtz. The implication that she was his mistress makes Marlow and the reader consider her as a real woman, one who is capable of having a relationship with a white man. It's interesting to consider whether Conrad created her to represent how savage Kurtz had become or to show us that our kinship with Africa is real. I think an important question is whether she represents a positive alternative to the deluded, meek Intended or whether she represents the darkness which lured Kurtz into madness. That question asks, I think, a major decision to be made about the novel.

Alyson

As I read the exchange of student letters, the first thing that struck me was the quality of the talk about literature that is exhibited in the letters: the questions and issues that were thoughtfully raised, the insight and agility with the process of literary interpretation, the quality of the writing and thinking, the impressive array of intellectual skills that was brought to bear in assisting another to understand the novel: analysis, synthesis, inference and speculation, integration of primary and secondary sources.

Why was I surprised by such engagement and sophistication by my students? — because these lettters contrasted markedly with the two formal critical essays they had written previously for me and to me in the course — ones which were not coherent or insightful — ones that were not a joy to read. Many of you know the kinds of critical essays I mean. I began to question what might have caused the difference: the shift in audience from the teacher as primary to fellow student as primary with the teacher as secondary? The shift in context, from a topic or question the teacher concocted to a question raised by a fellow student? The shift from the form and language of my profession — the specialized language of literary analysis in the critical essay — a language many students must do their best to invent — since it is not the language of their profession or of their experience — to the form of language of notes and letters — at once personal and familiar to the students?

Some other questions I muse about when I study and interpret the student writing:

— Why did the students claim to enjoy and learn more from the letters they wrote and received rather than the formal critical essays they wrote?

— Why did many students write inept and "just playing the game" critical essays and insightful and sincere letters about *Heart of Darkness*? And was I just playing the game when I earlier in the course assigned a critical essay on the role of love and marriage in Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

— Why did the students complain about the restrictions on their creativity and their interpretive ability when I assigned the broad topic of love in Wilde's play for their critical essay, and not complain at all about writing a letter to a fellow student on a much narrower topic (such as the "role of the African woman" in *Heart of Darkness*, who appears for only a couple of pages) ?

— How come the students so easily integrated primary and

secondary sources into the flow of their letters, while quotes from such sources in their critical essays resembled patchwork quilts?

— And why, at the end of class, on the student evaluation form — did numerous students comment that the letters were the most difficult writing assignment of the term, and the most time consuming, and yet the one they found the most valuable and learned the most from?

I assigned these essays last semester — only three months ago — so I'm still musing — I don't have the answers to these and other questions. But I do have some initial observations that I'm willing to share with you — in the hopes that you will give me your ideas about these issues as we chat in the discussion period following this talk.

First, I think the social nature of the assignment was important. The students had interpreted my critical essay assignment as the familiar school assignment — show the teacher that you read the novel and can write some things about it — show your teacher you can think. You are not really helping the teacher understand the novel any better — because the teacher has read and taught the novel several times, read many professional books and essays about it, and you have spent a week reading the novel — while taking four or five other classes at the same time. The advantage of the letters is that they are written for a specific individual, a peer, who is asking real questions, asking for help, and for whom you can play the role of colleague and of teacher. The letters demonstrate students communicating to a real audience rather than practicing at communicating for a pretend audience: profesional scholars who read and write essays about *Heart of Darkness.* In addition, the letters are contextualized within the classroom community. As you can see from Alyson's response letter — and this was true of most letters — the classroom lectures, discussions, and readings are integrated into the letter writing — students synthesize and make sense of what they heard and read in class. The formal critical essays were written in the vacuum — as if to mention that you got some of your ideas from classmates and class discussion was a form of cheating. The letter assignment, I believe, was vital to the knowledge students were making, while the critical essay was perceived as an "add-on assignment" — an "out-of-class" project — and became, in practice, an isolated and isolating task.

Second, I think the problem-posing nature of the assignment was important. The students learned as much in Part I of the assignment as they did in writing the longer and more formal (it had to be typed) Part II. Fundamental to every discipline is figuring out how to ask important

and germane questions that continue the advancement of knowledge within that field. You've got to know a lot to ask good questions (and I found out my students know a lot), and good questions beget good responses. The person writing back to you knows that superficial generalities or a string of quotes from secondary sources will not do — will not answer your questions and address your confusion, will not help you understand a little more about *Heart of Darkness*, will not help at all. It asks the writer to take seriously the responsibility of a writer. It places responsibility on the writer in Part II — an obligation to teach, and an obligation to be sincere and honest. Reading this student writing made me question if I was being honest when I earler asked the students to write and essay on love and marriage in *The Importance of Being Earnest* — when I already knew most of the answers. I also note that Alyson, in responding sincerely to Emily, questions herself — and that these questions and the remarkable conclusion to her essay become an invitation to continue the conversation — not an attempt to provide definitive answers and thus end it.

In reading my students' writing — both the critical essays and the letter exchange — I not only learn about the students, about Oscar Wilde and Joseph Conrad, but also, and maybe most importantly, about myself as a teacher, who and what I value in teaching. I now realize I prefer my mirrored reflection, my own self image, as it is represented in the student letters — rather than the image of me I see represented in their critical essays. It makes me eager to read the writing my students this semester, in an entirely different course, are generating. And it makes me eager to listen to each of you talk about your teaching-- in the hallways and in the workshop sessions over the next two days of this colloquia. For doing these things, quite simply, makes me a better teacher.

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