Inquiry as a Non-Invasive Approach to Cross-Curricular Writing Consultancy

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In the concluding chapter of *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, David Russell argues that WAC must find ways to harness the efforts of the disciplines—"where the faculty's primary loyalty and interest lie" (304)—in order to end the marginalization of writing and make it a part of the fabric of all majors. His recommendations conclude a study which demonstrates, from its introduction onward, the "drive [of academic discourse] toward increasing specialization" (22) and the writing pedagogy meant to cope with that drive. Writing instruction has largely failed to keep pace with this specialization, let alone serve the central place it could for learning within departments. His treatment of this situation is comprehensive, but he does not discuss its solutions, how this harnessing may take place.

In this essay, I propose the use of inquiry as a non-invasive approach to WAC consultancy for linking writing to the disciplines. After that, by way of a lengthy conclusion, I discuss such related matters as the place of freshman English in the writing enterprise, writing to learn versus learning to write, and the appropriateness of specialization. But for the next few pages I would like to establish that there is a problem to be solved.

As loosely affiliated language communities, disciplines have their own values, purposes, and forms for writing. WAC consultants should look for the values the disciplines hold and help instructors develop assignments out of them. Not doing so in their interactions with faculty, at its worst, may create the type of scenario Paulo Freire describes as extension agentry. The agent presses his or her values on other cultures: "His cultural historical situation which gives him his vision of the world is the environment from which he starts out. He seeks to penetrate another cultural historical situation and impose his system of values on

its members. The invader reduces the people in the situation to mere objects of his action" (113). The extension agent fails to engage the locals at their level of expertise, choosing instead to "'fill' [them] with 'knowledge,' technical or otherwise." This process, according to Freire, kills "in them the critical capacity for possessing it" (101). Starting out from their cultural historical situation, as experts in writing instruction, WAC consultants carry their community's vision for writing into communities which also have a vision—developed through many years of local participation. If consultants disrespect the writing they find, or urge their values on other communities (in order to stop the production of "automatons," as I heard one panel member observe at the 1996 CCCC), the situation becomes decidedly unhappy for WAC. Do conditions exist in WAC which might produce this situation? Judging from conference presentations, from literature in composition studies and WAC, the answer is "Yes."

Some composition specialists express a lack of respect for writing in the disciplines. Ed White, for example, is almost apologetic in describing the dilemma he faces: "I often work professionally with those in other disciplines, but I confess that my PhD in English literature has so confirmed a particular discourse community that I routinely . . . find it hard to respect the scholarship of nonliterary communities" (191). Being aware of this dilemma no doubt mitigates the problem for White, who appears highly conscious, even accepting, of the differences. Kurt Spellmeyer, however, implies no sense of apology or dilemma when he argues that "discipline-specific writing instruction encourages both conformity and submission" (266), leading to "a pervasive lack of commitment" (271) because it does not allow students "to enter a discipline by finding their own voices" (275). They might work hard to comply with the community's "rules and fulfill its expectations," but too often are left with "nothing of [their] own to say" (271). His emphatic tone makes it sound as if what he values for writing (to find authentic voice, demonstrate "essayistic introspection and digression," and express the "relationship between the self and the cultural heritage within which selfhood has meaning" 269) must become what everyone values. This attitude and tone would rightly offend many who do not share his vision. Applied to WAC practice, Spellmeyer's point of view would probably not have much lasting impact on faculty outside his cultural historical situation.

If how to teach, what to teach, and where to teach come from authorities within one department and extend to indoctrinateable others,

writing will remain marginalized. Such practices will push assigned writing to the edges of a department, concentrating it in a few professors or TAs (see Russell, "Historical Perspective," 391) whose views conform to those of the authority. Most often taking forms less noxious than simply telling colleagues what to do, superintendency has its advocates inside and outside WAC. The perceived expertise of English in writing practice and theory, and the perceived lack of expertise within the disciplines; the conception of writing as one set of "skills" shared by all disciplines; and the urge to let one department take responsibility for broadcasting those skills if it is willing to do so, all promote a supervisory model.

Robert Jones and Joseph Comprone propose a well-intentioned form of this model, in their "Where Do We Go Next in Writing Across the Curriculum," with WAC controlled by English or another humanities department. If it is not so controlled, they observe, "academic leadership (the supervision of courses and teacher training) is not effective: courses end up requiring uneven amounts of writing; [and] evaluation of writing is often inconsistently or ineffectively carried out" (62). For them, lack of evenness and consistency stems from ineffective "supervision of courses and teacher training," and this assertion most suggests the potential for too much influence by those who make the decisions. Who determines what "even," "consistent," and "effective" mean—teachers in classrooms or supervisors from English? Jones and Comprone also want to combine "journal writing, workshops, in-class free writing, expressive writing" with "discipline-specific discourse conventions" in "WAC classrooms" (66). On its surface, this proposed combination appears an affable compromise between WAC factions which argue "the primacy of writing to learn" and those which support the "power of discourse conventions in specific fields" (Kirscht, et al., 369). But beneath the surface it assumes that differences between communities are matters of "convention," not ways of thinking about and being in the world. It also accepts the merits of joining the two approaches without proving the union worthwhile or even possible.

The point here, however, is not that journal writing, free writing, workshops, and expressive writing are unattractive or ineffective; in some form or another, to some degree or another, they find their way into all of my composition classes. The concern lies, instead, with assuming that the combination of discipline-specific conventions and expressive writing, etc. belongs in all classes. If the WAC program supervisors insist on such a union, an unlikely scenario, then a serious form of

extension agentry will occur. If they urge without insisting, then some marginalization of writing seems likely: to those who see the value of the combined techniques, or those who agree with the values of supervisors, leaving many others within the discipline to carry on as they always have.

In an article suggesting a more extreme form of superintendency, Louise Smith argues that English departments should control WAC because of their "expertise in the study of the construction and reception of texts" (392). English faculty understand and care about the writing process more than other faculty do. They have informed themselves in composition theory and are "more likely to [apply similar assumptions and questions to both professionals' and students' processes of composing] than are faculty in other departments . . . . " (392-393). She describes the efforts of teachers in the disciplines to use writing as "blundering"—in the same way that those efforts were blundering for composition teachers two decades ago (391). Her audience for this piece is largely college English teachers, many of whom would be interested in WAC; and from their "cultural historical situation" they may view as givens what are actually untested assumptions about the value of expertise in composition theory and practice: such expertise is necessary for using writing well, teachers who do not have it will blunder, and English must be depended upon to provide it. The problem with Smith's argument lies not so much in outcomes as approach. If the authority sees those who need her expertise as blunderers, then the atmosphere would seem ripe for extension, for faculty to be "filled with knowledge, technical or otherwise," belonging to the authority and her community.

WAC supervision evidently assumes that all disciplines share the way they construct and receive texts, allowing one group of experts to train another group of experts. An expanding body of literature, however, counters this assumption, representing disciplines as language communities into which faculty have grown for many years as speakers, readers, and writers and into which they hope to usher students—communities whose construction and reception of text differ. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for example, asserts that academic disciplines, "more than just intellectual coigns of vantage," are "ways of being in the world." Maturing in a discipline evolves "varieties of noetic experience" or "forms of life" (155). To do the work of a discipline "is not just to take up a technical task but to take on a cultural frame that defines a great part of one's life" (155).

Many others, outside and inside the WAC community, support the idea that assimilating the language of a discipline largely shapes people's lives—how they think, write, speak, even feel. Thomas Kuhn argues as a major theme of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that scientists must mature in the language of a particular community in order to think and do the work in that community; they "go native" in that language (204). Charles Bazerman describes how the speech and thinking of chemistry majors, like the speech and thinking of children in a family, develop through interactions with mentors and peers who recast the major's discourse to fit patterns acceptable to the community (304). External features of the language system go underground, in Vygotsky's terms, becoming the individuated and abbreviated code which allows the major to participate in the community. For Michel Foucault, the dominant purpose of higher education is to give students the "authority to speak" for their discipline—to designate them statutorily as those who have the right to make statements for the discipline (51). Educational systems ritualize the word; they fix roles for speakers (227). Numerous socialization studies treat this issue in ways more directly related to WAC. They too point to the general conclusion that "Developing communicative competence requires that [students] master the ways of speaking, reading, and writing which are indigenous to the new culture" (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman, 230; see also Catherine Blair, Richard Rorty, and Tony Becher).

If the indigenous values, goals, and activities of the culture are so important to writing and thinking, the way in which WAC engages the disciplines also becomes very important. Insisting that students find their own voices (Spellmeyer), expecting to discover blunderers (Smith), or, less extremely, intending to merge composition values with discipline based conventions (Jones and Comprone) will probably include some degree of extension agentry—transmitting to other communities the elaborated knowledge of experts. This practice may impede the active learning and commitment of faculty in other disciplines who sense "the inauthenticity of superimposed solutions" (Freire, 28). If, on the other hand, cross curricular programs look for the values and goals for writing within the varying communities, they may enhance the active learning and commitment of faculty who sense the process of change is coming from within them, not without them. In the latter scenario, WAC consultants become question askers, collaborators, and listeners. They look for the vision of the writing world in the disciplines rather than insisting on their own vision.

How does a consultancy enter other disciplines without imposing its own community's values? At the University of Nevada, Reno, we have tried to do so through inquiry. Inquiry and collaboration are well established techniques for interaction with students, especially between peers in the tutoring process (Bruffee, Cooper, Freire, Harris). Perhaps it is less common to think about these techniques as appropriate for consulting with faculty. But they do hold the same advantages: they grant that faculty have grown in different language cultures, and those being equal, one culture's values should not prevail over another. They create an atmosphere for faculty to develop and refine their own ideas about writing—from what will be assigned to how it will be graded. They encourage faculty ownership of and authority for that which should belong to them: writing assigned within the context of classroom and discipline. (For further benefits of the techniques, particularly collaboration, see Lunsford, 38-39.)

Our first-year writing workshops at UNR, open to all and attended usually by ten to fifteen volunteers, began, for example, with five questions. Each was obvious enough, but their impact has been to shift the locus of expertise, and the responsibility for teaching writing, from us to them. The first question requires workshop participants to choose a class in which they would like to try a writing assignment, usually a class not including writing before. The second asks them to isolate one or two goals for learning in the class, i.e. if students were to take away a core theory, argument, or principle from the term's work what might it be? (In an upper division biology course in genetics, for instance, a goal for assignment design might be to help students understand the biological basis for heredity.) The third question calls for faculty to list concepts, problems, or processes important to understanding course material—those which perhaps have given students trouble in the past. (In a course in museum training for biologists, an assignment might ask students to explain how to collect sagebrush specimens for display in the Nevada State Museum.) The fourth question asks faculty to decide between goals or concepts, or some other cognitive or affective task, in designing their assignment, with the qualifier that assignments connected to goals often involve longer projects than those associated with concepts, problems or processes.

Several model assignments are then presented. An example of an assignment linked to course goals comes from Electrical Engineering 423, Integrated Circuit Engineering. It requires teams of students to invent a workable circuit, demonstrate the circuit's applicability to a

larger system, argue its merits over alternatives, and present a design strategy to potential producers. For senior students, the project takes all semester to complete and is the defining feature of the course. An example of a shorter assignment encouraging problem solving appears in Physics 101, an Introduction to Physics. It asks students to explain to their bright but unspecialized brother, a resident of New York City, "why you have to cook three minute eggs for longer than three minutes in Reno," with its connection to altitude, air pressure, boiling point, and heat transfer. The physics assignment, for lower division majors and nonmajors, requires three double-spaced pages and allows two weeks for writing. After discussing the models, in response to the fifth question, workshop participants write a preliminary description of their own assignments.

There are several more questions, including "what problems do you anticipate your students will have in completing the assignment to meet your objectives?"—questions which urge faculty to consider the developmental levels and academic interests of their students. Faculty collaborate with each other and with WAC personnel, but make all of the most consequential decisions about the assignment themselves. An immediate result of these workshops is usually a workable assignment in draft form. As a larger result, an environment is created in which people in the disciplines expect to be responsible for what they do with writing. This environment has carried comfortably over into many of our future interactions with faculty, including an extensive discipline-based assessment project (Waldo, Blumner, and Webb).

These general workshops no longer have the impact they did seven years ago. The faculty is simply too knowledgeable. They know their disciplines have individual frames for thinking and writing, and that the English department or any one department cannot teach their students to write. Their concerns become, then, how best to link writing to thinking expertly in their own fields. Our consultancy has itself specialized, occurring now almost exclusively with departments and individuals. But we have not given up the question asking and collaborative process with which we began.

We want to problematize (in the Freirean sense) parts of the curriculum by asking teachers questions about their classes, their disciplines, and their own experiences. With electrical engineering faculty, for example, we ask about the goals they have for learning in specific courses at advancing levels in the curriculum, the thinking strategies appropriate to those courses and generally to EE, the values

and purposes they share for writing, and the developmental levels of their students. We then work with them on linking their responses to writing within classes and across their department. At the same time we want to draw on their history of learning to write, from their deeper to more recent past, their positive to more negative experiences, in an effort to help them create an atmosphere for students to succeed as writers and thinkers. Internal review of assignments and grading becomes a regular practice: Does this assignment stretch students cognitively without breaking them? Does it produce the kind of thinking intended? Is the goal clear, and the context for writing one that will interest and challenge students? For which audience is the paper written? How may it be graded fairly? How does it predict writing they may do in the future? This type of review helps students to become better EE majors as faculty become better mentors of, build better frames for, writing in their classes and community. But this type of review, it must be appended, is only possible after years (six in our case) of work, evolving from an increasingly sophisticated vocabulary about writing developing from inside the discipline.

Consulting through inquiry does require leadership, a theoretical and literal center from which WAC operates. That leadership precludes supervision, however, if it means insisting on techniques compatible with the consultant's discipline but alien to other disciplines. Nonetheless, it is time now to admit the obvious, that we too have goals for our consultancy. We hope faculty will take active responsibility for what they do with writing, making the deeper language and cognitive structures of their disciplines more accessible to students through their assignment making. We hope they will design assignments which foster learning about purposes or concepts central to their classes and, clear in intention and expectation, offer engaging contexts for writing. We hope students will think critically within and about their disciplines. Finally, we hope assignments will put students in what Vygotsky terms their zone of proximal development, challenging them in ways appropriate to their cognitive levels and prompting them to collaborate with mentors and peers. Our questions admittedly encourage these outcomes, as do the model assignments we use during the workshops. The qualifier is that each of our goals, except perhaps the last, merges with the disciplines themselves. If anything happens, it happens because the faculty members want it to, believe it will improve their courses and help their students.

Our approach has led to promising results. During 1995-96, Writing Center personnel conducted a phone survey (appendix A) asking faculty a variety of questions about undergraduate student writing. One hundred twenty faculty from thirty departments have so far been contacted. Of those, ninety one percent have responded that they require writing of undergraduates at the lower and upper division. Sixty one percent require more writing of lower division students than they did three years ago; fifty four percent require more of upper division students. When faculty do require writing, it is most often linked to some critical thinking process (see table 1). As might be predicted but is rarely documented, large percentages of faculty (80%+) report that students improve in each of these areas between the lower and upper division.

Table 1. Percentage of faculty whose writing assignments require the following elements (n=120)

Category	*Percentage*
Analysis and critique	89%
Review and summary	68
Synthesis	89
Problem Solving	80
Examining multiple points of view	66
Arguing issues	65

(n) = number of faculty responding

Beginning in 1991 (two years after formal introduction of the WAC program), UNR has conducted extensive surveys into its students' impressions of their college experience, reported under the headings "College Student Experiences Questionnaire" and "Senior Exit Interview Report." These surveys confirm the faculty impression that students are making gains as writers and thinkers. In 1991, thirty six percent of entering freshmen ranked themselves as above average or in the top ten percent in writing ability. Sixty four percent ranked themselves as average or below. When the 1993 senior class was asked about "understanding and abilities" with regard to writing, ninety seven percent reported making gains in "effective and clear" writing, and for sixty eight percent the gains were "dramatic." In related areas, students

reported substantial gains in "learning on one's own" (ninety seven percent reported strength in such learning), "integration of ideas" (ninety six percent), and "analytical and logical thinking" (ninety five percent). Seniors interviewed in 1993 are admittedly not the freshmen surveyed in 1991; these statistics, nonetheless, suggest that UNR's seniors become surprisingly confident in writing and thinking abilities as a consequence of their undergraduate learning. We attribute these results, at least in part, to the form WAC leadership takes: using questions and collaboration, listening to what experts in their own fields want writing to do and then helping them figure out how to do it.

Common sense suggests that specializing, developing expertise, appropriating a discourse happen gradually, not abruptly. The process more closely parallels growing in a family or a culture than, say, entering military basic training. Over time, through interaction with mentors and peers, through reading and producing texts, students evolve increasingly complex language and thinking patterns within the context of the discipline. Many freshmen have not chosen majors. They need opportunity to do so, often after taking a variety of introductory courses offered by departments. And then they need to mature in their majors at paces which approximate their developmental patterns, growth in specialized language communities occurring more during the upper division than lower division years.

Composition courses taught in English departments may help with this process and provide a good, even compassionate, introduction to writing in the academy. Certain qualities—student writing as the primary text, revision as an expected part of the process, collaboration with faculty and peers as a pedagogic focus, acceptance of diverse languages and cultures—make these courses vital to the collective writing endeavor. They become additionally effective when inquiry plays a central role in developing cognitive strategies. But composition classes offered by English departments (at any level) do not teach writing and thinking in the disciplines as, for example, the Kirscht group claims (379). They may teach a form of writing found in the disciplines, but not the writing itself. They may encourage a type of thinking shared by the disciplines, but not the thinking itself. Claiming otherwise does more to exacerbate than to lessen the conflict between WAC factions, and between WAC and the disciplines. Unintentionally, it marginalizes writing to learn and learning to write to English departments, by implying that the experts from English can do it all.

Does learning to write in the format of the biology paper using the

conventions of the practicing biologist belong in composition or in biology? For most readers the answer would be emphatically the latter. Does writing to learn thinking strategies belong in composition or the disciplines? Most would probably agree that it belongs in both. Cognitive skills, however, like the languages which generate them, differ by discipline. Problem solving in physics is different, in obvious and subtle ways, from problem solving in philosophy. Writing to learn and learning to write should be acknowledged as occurring together in any classroom which uses assignments, differing between disciplines in increasingly complex ways as students progress. Students have to write to learn and learn to write within their disciplines in order to join them—with all that means to developing the cognitive strategies specific to certain communities.

Using these strategies is a crucial part of the faculty's teaching, research, and service; developing their use is a critical part of the students' learning, preparation for, and participation in the professions. Far from being disentwined, the languages which foster these strategies are likely to grow with the technology, manufacture, and service they make possible. And even if this fostering process could be halted or slowed, there is a compelling reason why it should not be. The tasks we face are just too immense, complex and sometimes threatening to ignore the need for discipline specific approaches shaped mainly by language.

Facilitating environmental clean-up; engineering canals, highway interchanges, sewage systems, water treatment plants, and maintaining them; designing buildings, mass transit systems, space shuttles, and constructing or repairing them; diagnosing patients with aids, cancer, and treating them; creating solutions to social problems and trying to implement them; engaging with texts, understanding and sharing them; constructing a nuclear waste repository in Yucca Mountain, Nevada, and insuring that repository is safe (the list goes on and on), all require specialized languages to get the job done as, arguably, any complex activity does. Some readers of this essay will argue that specialized languages created the problems specialized languages must now solve—a point which seems inherently true to me. However true, we have to deal with what is, not with what might have been; and specialized languages also make possible much that society values. Others will argue that because people with graduate degrees generate knowledge in their fields, undergraduates do not need to be specialists. But since graduates with bachelors degrees do most of the hands-on work that advanced specialists make possible, they too will need the language

that, as White remarks, "allows [them] to work as professionals" (191). Does my proposal negate the important work in faculty development that WAC has made possible during the last two decades? From my perspective, certainly not. Instead it argues for another stage, obliging WAC consultants to become expert question askers and collaborators with their faculty colleagues.

WAC's approach with the disciplines needs to be noninvasive because they are distinct communities with their own goals, activities and values for writing. If WAC is invasive writing will remain marginalized, because few will commit to it as part of the fabric of their courses and communities. One noninvasive technique is to use inquiry to draw on faculty expertise in designing and grading assignments. When faculty take responsibility for the way in which writing is used, students benefit because they more readily develop the cognitive strategies necessary to becoming experts within the field. More students will be able to enter disciplines of choice because more attention will be paid to smoothing the steps which make up the path.

Acknowledging the tribal differences between disciplines, Geertz proposes an "ethnography of thought" within them; and then, in order to improve the possibility "for people inhabiting different worlds to have a genuine, and reciprocal, impact upon one another," he suggests three steps to a language of interplay between disciplines: to accept the depth of the differences; to understand what the differences are; and to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can be publicly formulated (161). Projects such as Yucca Mountain, requiring the focused efforts of several specialties, will not succeed without disciplines being able to talk to each other. It is also fundamentally clear, however, that they will not succeed without each discipline having the language to frame and solve the problems presented to it. Through inquiry-based approaches, WAC has the extraordinary opportunity to encourage the former with the latter.

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Appendix A
Writing Center Phone Survey

Gathering data campuswide on the kinds of writing required of students, and faculty perceptions of the quality of student writing

1. Do you generally teach upper division, lower division or a combination of these during an academic year?

2. Which of the following types of writing do you require in at least one of your classes? Please reply yes or no to the items on the following list:

a. writing that analyzes or critiques information	yes	no
b. in-class writing excluding exams	yes	no
c. essay exams	yes	no
d. writing reviews or summaries of information	yes	no
e. writing that demonstrates problem solving	yes	no
f. writing that requires argument or persuasiveness	yes	no
g. writing that requires the synthesizing of information	yes	no
h. writing that requires considering multiple points of view	yes	no
i. lab reports	yes	no

3. In how many of your lower division classes do you require at least one of those types of writing?

All More than half Less than half

4. In how many of your upper division classes do you require at least one of those types of writing?

All More than half Less than half

5. Over the last three years, have you required more writing from lower division students, less writing, or the same?

6. Over the last three years have you required more writing from upper division students, less writing or the same?

7. Do you feel that upper division students in general are better writers than lower division students? yes no

8. To be more specific about which areas upper division students in general show more capability than lower division students in writing, I'm going to read a list of writing abilities. For each item on the list, please tell me to what degree upper division students demonstrate more competence than lower division students:

degree of improvement (optional)

a. ability to problem solve in writing

great moderate small none

b. ability to reflect your assignments' requirements in their writing

great moderate small none

c. ability to assert an argument in writing

great moderate small none

d. ability to support an argument in writing

great moderate small none

e. ability to achieve sentence level correctness (punctuation, spelling, grammar)

great moderate small none

f. ability to reflect complex thought in writing

great moderate small none

g. ability to write logically about a subject

great moderate small none

h. ability to synthesize information in writing

great moderate small none

11. In general, do you see any writing improvement by your lower division students over the course of a semester?

yes no

12.In general, do you see any writing improvement by your upper division students over the course of a semester?

yes no

(My thanks to Scott Johnston for permission to include the survey.)