



Faculty Collaboration on Writing-Across-the- Curriculum Assignments: Linking Teaching and Scholarship

Washburn University WAC Discussion Group

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Anne Herrington argues that writing-across-the-curriculum(WAC) programs should be guided by the model of “faculty coming together to discuss teaching practices, reflectively and generously...” (89). In addition, Toby Fulwiler cites “mutually beneficial publication projects” as one of the possible outcomes of WAC faculty workshops (185). In our WAC discussion group at Washburn University, we do meet regularly to talk about teaching, as Herrington recommends, and we do collaborate on conference presentations and publications, as Fulwiler describes. In the process, we have discovered the importance of a third activity, one that connects the other two. In our experience, collaborating on experimental assignments can be an important link between teacherly reflection and scholarly publication.

Washburn University is a municipally owned, open-admissions university in Topeka, Kansas. It has schools of law, business, nursing, and applied studies, as well as a college of arts and sciences. Historically, the “WAC program” has been nothing more than one member of the English Department who was available to talk with faculty from other departments about writing in their classes. Such consultation was initially an overload, but in 1995, the administration increased its support for WAC by giving the WAC consultant a half-course of released time. In 1994, our WAC consultant organized a discussion group that met several times a semester and that drew faculty from eleven departments in Arts and Sciences and from business, applied studies, and law. The first year of our meetings we simply compared notes about writing in our classes. But the second year we moved from talking together to working together. We began to experiment with collaborative assignments.

Our first experiment was a writing-exchange assignment, inspired by Art Young's "The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum." In that article, Young describes a student writing exchange that had worked well in his literature class. Our group decided to try such an exchange across disciplines, with math and physical education students writing to each other, ESL and education students exchanging essays, and so on. A typical cross-class assignment was that used in an exchange between classes in exercise physiology and personal finance: "Write an essay in which you (1) explain one thing you have learned in this class, (2) tell why it was important to have learned it, and (3) explain why someone outside your class should know it." Students exchanged these essays and replied to them, and then the original writers had an opportunity to clarify further (Konzem & Baker). In addition to these inter-class exchanges, several members of our group arranged for student exchanges within individual classes, as Young had done. One such assignment asked students in a Viet Nam War in Literature and Film class to "describe any aspect of our subject that perplexes or puzzles you. Place this description in the context of the literature and film we have seen so far and the topics we have touched on in class discussion." The students were then to reply to each other's queries, placing their responses likewise within the context of class materials (Stewart, "Student"). Finally, we surveyed our students as to their perceptions of the value of the writing-exchanges.

Our second collaborative assignment was a creative writing assignment, asking students to "use creative writing to show your understanding of _____." Each member of our group filled in the blank in a course-appropriate way. Our students responded to the assignment by composing dramatic monologues, free verse, sonnets, limericks, plays, fiction, video-mysteries, satires, new words to Poe's "The Raven," and new lyrics to "Danny Boy." We were so impressed with our students' creativity that we organized a campus-wide coffee house reading where all the students who participated in this WAC assignment could share their work with the whole community. We have now institutionalized this coffee-house reading as an annual event, a place where students can, as one writers' group puts it, "write out loud" (Seattle). As with the writing-exchange assignment, we surveyed our students extensively about their responses to the creative-writing assignment, and our students' reactions inspired us to reflect back on our teaching.

Indeed, we found that every aspect of our collaboration on these two assignments deepened the discussions of our teaching. Our shared experience permitted us to formulate our speculations in concrete terms. Why, for example, did students seem to write better for each other in an ungraded context than they did for us in a graded one? Why did students both appreciate the freedom of the creative writing assignment and ask for

more guidelines? Why did both assignments work better in some contexts than in others? What could account for the enthusiasm of students' reactions? And what were we to make of the few student dissenters?

As we pondered these questions, we began to come up with ideas we wanted to share. We started to collaborate on articles and conference presentations (Konzem and Baker; Kent, Stewart, and Baker; Stewart, LaLonde, and Baker; Washburn University Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Discussion Group, "Creative," "Learning," "Revitalizing") and to offer workshops of our own (Washburn University Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Discussion Group, In-service, Faculty). We jumped into the growing "scholarship of teaching" at different venues around the country, and as we did so, we brought new ideas back to our classrooms. Then we were eager to see each other at our next WAC discussion meeting, to talk about those classrooms once again.

Thus, our collaborative experimental assignments helped us link teaching and scholarship in a way that connected the energy from the one with the energy from the other. Those elements form a circle that mirrors our faculty WAC group, sitting around a meeting room on a Friday afternoon, talking about teaching.

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