



WAC in the 90's: Changing Contexts and Challenges

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Introduction

By 1990 the context for WAC programs, which had flourished during the 1980's, was changing in significant ways. Established programs, often begun with external funding, faced challenges such as ensuring continued financial support, identifying new leaders, and keeping faculty involved and engaged (McLeod, 1989). However, new programs faced different contexts and challenges. According to McLeod and Soven (1991), many new programs were being established as top-down, administrative initiatives with unrealistic expectations and little understanding that WAC “involves a comprehensive program of faculty development and curricular change...to improve students' writing and critical thinking skills” rather than a set of requirements that add more writing and focus on grammar problems (26). In addition, most new programs did not have the financial support that earlier programs enjoyed, so release time for a program director or funds for faculty workshops in teaching writing, essential components of early programs, were minimal or nonexistent.

Questions about WAC's theoretical assumptions and future direction also came to the fore as the 1990's began. Although early WAC programs were based on a set of shared principles, different instructional emphases—one focusing on using writing as a tool for learning and one focusing on teaching disciplinary conventions and genres—were present from the outset. Early “landmark” programs such as the ones at Michigan Technical University and Beaver College combined these approaches, but MTU clearly emphasized writing to learn (Young and Fulwiler, 1986; Flynn et. al., 1990), while Beaver College (Maimon, 1979, 1990) focused instruction on disciplinary genres. These approaches, later characterized as “cognitive” and “rhetorical” by McLeod (1989) and as “Formalist” and “American Expressivist” by Mahala (1991), were not initially seen as “mutually exclusive” (McLeod and Soven, 1991, p. 26). However, by the early 90's they were increasingly viewed as representing conflicting rather than complementary instructional approaches. Mahala (1991), for example,

argued that eclectic programs, which combined strategies from both approaches, were philosophically inconsistent because they overlooked deep differences about the role of writing and the nature of learning in the university curriculum. Around the same time, the accumulating body of rhetorical research on writing in the disciplines led Bazerman (1991) to propose that the “second stage” of WAC focus on introducing students to specialized disciplinary discourse rather than on converting classes into writing workshops. The resulting theoretical dichotomy presented 1990’s WAC programs with a further dilemma: whether to construct programs that emphasized one of the two approaches or to try to reconcile differences between them.

Formative Evaluation: A Tool for Program Improvement

Formative evaluation is a preliminary assessment that identifies a program’s strengths and weaknesses. Because its purpose is to improve programs rather than to assess student outcomes or render a final judgment on a program’s effectiveness, formative evaluation can be a powerful tool for program development and improvement (Scriven, 1996). It is not only a quicker and easier procedure than a comprehensive, summative evaluation, but it can target specific grammatic concerns. The following formative evaluation was conducted at California State University, Los Angeles (CSLA), an urban university with a diverse student body, where two WAC requirements were instituted between 1993-1998, one for a “Writing in the Major” course and the other for writing in upper division general education “theme” courses. The resulting program, established with minimal faculty discussion, was requirement-based and had no clearly articulated goals or overall structure. It consisted, instead, of individual courses developed or modified in response to the requirements. To assess the impact of these two requirements, I designed a formative evaluation that would answer the following questions: (1) To what extent do courses meeting the upper division general education theme requirement and the Writing in the Major courses provide instruction in and an emphasis on writing and critical thinking skills? (2) What instructional approaches (i.e, writing to learn or writing in the disciplines) do the writing assignments and instructional strategies utilize? (3) How well does instruction in one requirement complement and extend the instruction received in the other? Although the account that follows describes a particular program, it illustrates a general methodology that can be used by other institutions to evaluate and improve their WAC programs.

Analyzing the Requirements

CSLA’s two writing requirements were instituted at different times and for different reasons. The first, effective in winter 1993, mandated an

upper division “Writing in the Major” course for every undergraduate major. Criteria for these courses were quite specific: writing was to be an integral part of the course, and instruction was to focus on teaching disciplinary genres and ways of developing and articulating ideas consistent with conventions of the discipline. Students were also to write frequently and receive timely feedback on their writing.

The second writing requirement, effective in fall 1998, was added to an existing upper division “theme” requirement during a revision of the university’s general education program. To complete their upper division general education theme, CSLA students must take three interrelated courses—one from the Humanities, one from the Social Sciences, and one from the Natural Sciences—on one of nine themes described as “current, enduring, and of significant importance for humanity.” Criteria for the writing required in the theme courses were more general than criteria for the Writing in the Major courses and included no statements concerning the goals of the requirement or the function of writing within the course.

Data Collected

I collected assignments from twelve courses, six from each requirement, and interviewed the faculty teaching these courses. For the Writing in the Major requirement, I selected the courses from the Business, Biology, Electrical Engineering, English, History, and Psychology Departments. For the upper division general education theme courses, I selected two of the nine themes—Human Maturity and Aging: Problems and Processes and The Diversity of Human Emotions—and collected data from one course in each of the three areas. The six courses included one each from the Biology and Psychology Departments in the Natural Sciences, one each from the History and Psychology departments in the Social Sciences, and two from the English Department in the Humanities.

Methods of Analysis

To analyze the writing assignments from these diverse courses, I needed a framework that would allow me to compare writing not only across disciplines, but also between major and general education courses. The framework developed by Walvoord and McCarthy (1990) to analyze data in their naturalistic study of writing in four disciplines met these criteria. They found that writing assignments asked student writers to adopt one of three roles: (1) the professional-in-training, (2) the layperson, and (3) the text-processor. In the text processor role, students were asked to summarize, synthesize, or comment on course texts. The layperson role asked students to address problems and issues raised in the course but did not expect them to use disciplinary knowledge or methodology. The professional-in-training role, on the other hand, required students to ana-

lyze a problem or an issue by using both the knowledge and methodology taught in the course. Using these categories, I identified the expected role(s) in each class by analyzing the written instructions, the supporting materials for the writing assignments, and the comments made by faculty during my interviews. Writing assignments were classified as requiring a professional-in-training role if students needed to use disciplinary genres, knowledge, and conventions to complete them. Assignments signaled the text processor role when they directed students to “summarize,” “describe,” “explain,” etc. Assignments requiring the layperson role asked students to use either general academic genres such as the analytic essay or less formal genres (e.g., reflective journals, autobiographical accounts, or personal interviews) and did not require students to use disciplinary conventions, genres, or theoretical frameworks to complete the assignments.

Each of the roles makes different cognitive and rhetorical demands on writers, and these, in turn, imply a need for different levels of instructional support. Therefore, I used a second framework that analyzed the degree of “scaffolding” provided. Scaffolding, an instructional strategy based on the theories of Bruner and Vygotsky, supports the learning of new skills and knowledge through teachers’ use of explicit instructional strategies or models. While this scaffolding initially helps learners solve new problems, they subsequently internalize the cognitive and rhetorical strategies and are able to solve similar problems independently (Applebee, 1984). Williams and Colomb (1990, 1993) contend that many students’ writing problems can be attributed to their status as “novices” within a disciplinary community and argue that providing explicit instruction (scaffolding) on the strategies and genres used by experts is preferable to the gradual apprenticeship model advocated by Freedman (1993, 1995). To assess the scaffolding provided, I analyzed writing assignment sheets and related instructional materials, class activities, comments on student papers, and instructors’ descriptions of their instructional approach. I identified the following types of instructional support in the data: oral feedback through individual conferences or peer response groups, written comments on drafts or completed papers, written instructions that outlined the task expectations and suggested ways to meet those expectations, opportunities to rewrite papers based on feedback and/or to write multiple papers in the same genre, and instructor-led class presentations or activities that explained or modeled expert strategies.

Results

Results from the analysis of the Writing in the Major courses are shown in Table I on the following page:

Department/Course	Expected Role	Level of Scaffolding
Biology: Writing in Biology	Professional-in-Training	High
Business: Business Communication	Professional-in-Training	High
Electrical Engineering: Writing for Elec. Engineers	Professional-in-Training	High
English: Writing the Critical Essay	Professional-in-Training	High
History: Historiography	Professional-in-Training	High
Psychology: Experimental Research	Professional-in-Training	High

Table I: Writing in the Major Requirement

As Table I shows, the six Writing in the Major courses all emphasized the professional-in-training role. Although they used different course designs, each course focused on disciplinary genres and ways of articulating ideas that embodied disciplinary conventions. The English and History courses, for example, both focused on teaching one genre (the literary critical and historiographic essays respectively), and students were expected to apply the analytic and rhetorical skills being taught with increasing expertise as the term progressed. Biology students, on the other hand, wrote papers in several different genres including a biological description, a review article, an experimental article based on an observational study that they had conducted, and a personal statement. Students in Experimental Research, the Psychology course, designed and conducted an original experiment, analyzed the data, and then wrote up the results as an experimental article. Both the Business and Electrical Engineering courses emphasized forms of writing that students would use in the workplace. Business students, for example, wrote memos, letters, short reports, and a ten page, researched analytic report. Students in Electrical Engineering wrote technical reports of varying lengths, including one requiring on-line research. In addition, the Electrical Engineering course was specifically designed to prepare students for their senior design course, where they would conduct experiments to solve problems similar to those they would encounter as engineers, then present their results in a technical report.

Although their methods varied, all instructors also provided a high level of scaffolding to help students learn expert strategies and specific disciplinary genres. In the English Department's Writing the Critical Es-

say, for example, the class was conducted as a workshop where students presented their essays for critique by the entire class and the instructor. In Historiography, the professor provided students with a six page hand-out of step-by-step instructions for writing the historiographic essay and developed their understanding of these principles during class lectures and discussions by analyzing essays written by professional historians. The Biology instructor modeled disciplinary strategies, and students received extensive feedback on their writing during a weekly, two-hour computer lab where they composed and revised assignments with assistance from the instructor and a Writing Center tutor. Psychology students, who usually took Experimental Design as one of their last major requirements, had been socialized into disciplinary genres and conventions through earlier coursework. Nevertheless, they received extensive oral and written feedback on each section of the experimental article. Both the Business and Electrical Engineering courses were conducted entirely in computer classrooms, and the instructors alternated between modeling and explaining the principles of business and technical writing and providing in-progress feedback as students composed the assigned writing tasks.

Results of the analysis for the general education theme courses are shown in Table II on the following page.

Unlike the Writing in the Major courses, the theme courses show no consistent pattern in terms of expected roles or levels of scaffolding. Three courses—History of Emotions, Psychology of Emotions, and Biology of Aging—expected students to assume the professional-in-training role; however, the emphasis on this role varied. In History of Emotions, for example, only the professional-in-training role was emphasized. One assignment asked students to analyze changing criteria for marriage between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by drawing on primary and secondary historical sources while another asked them to critique a recent historical argument on the relationship between courtship, dating, and love. In Psychology of Emotions, the professional-in-training role predominated, as students wrote a scientific review, which used sources from disciplinary journals and followed APA format. However, the paper's conclusion called for the layperson role, as students were asked to write a paragraph that related the topic—a discussion of the relationship between an emotion and a social issue—to their own experience. The Biology of Aging course had less emphasis on the professional-in-training role as the major writing assignment, described as an “analysis paper,” asked students to assume all three roles. In the first section of the paper, students summarized the article selected for analysis (text processor role), and in the last they discussed the influence of values on personal evaluations (layperson role). However, in the second and most important

Theme: Human Maturity and Aging: Processes and Problems		
Department/Course	Expected Role(s)	Scaffolding
Biology: Biology of Aging	Professional-in-Training	Low
	Text Processor	Low
	Layperson	Low
English: Narratives of Maturity and Aging	Layperson	Low
Psychology:-Psychological/ Psychosocial Development	Layperson	Low
Theme: The Diversity of Human Emotions		
Department/Course	Expected Role(s)	Scaffolding
English: Human Emotions in Literature	Layperson	Low
History: History of Emotions	Professional-in-Training	High
Psychology: Psychology of Emotions	Professional-in-Training Layperson	Moderate Low

Table II: General Education Theme Courses

section, they analyzed the relationship between the evidence in sources and the conclusions (professional-in-training role).

The other three upper-division theme courses emphasized the layperson role exclusively. Writing assignments in the courses called for students to consider course topics and/or texts from a personal perspective and de-emphasized disciplinary genres and conventions in favor of general academic or less formal genres. In Human Emotions in Literature, for example, students wrote four emotional "logs," a type of reflective journal, in which they responded to any aspect of the assigned texts (*Hamlet*, *Ourika*, *Flowers of Evil*, and *Affliction*) that elicited a personal emotional response. The logs, based on a psychoanalytic approach to reading and responding to literature, were used to deepen students' responses to literature and their understanding of those responses, not to prepare them to write a critical essay. In Psychological/Psychosocial Development, a course in the Human Maturity and Aging theme, students interviewed a person seventy-five years or older (a family member, friend, or neighbor when possible) and evaluated his/her success in coping with older age. Near the end of the term, they wrote their own life story and then imagined what their life would be like as an aging adult. Although students could draw

on theoretical concepts from the course in writing their papers, this was neither required nor explicitly encouraged. In fact, the instructor, who had previously taught a class on aging for psychology majors, clearly distinguished between her expectations for students in the general education course and those for majors, who were required to use psychological theories to analyze topics and issues. The third course, *Narratives of Maturity and Aging*, was structured so that the literature read dramatized the developmental stages experienced by men and women as they mature and age. One writing assignment gave students an opportunity to analyze their attitudes toward aging by writing an in-depth personal essay or by interviewing someone older and comparing that person's views with their own. The take-home final, which asked students to "explore age-related aspects of crises experienced by characters from three works read," encouraged students to consider aging from their perspective, rather than from a literary or critical point of view.

Levels of scaffolding ranged from low to high with low levels predominating. To help students meet the disciplinary expectations in the *History of Emotions*, the instructor provided a high level of scaffolding through a detailed handout and extensive feedback on their essays. In the *Psychology of Emotions*, the instructor provided moderate support to assist students with the scientific review: a page of "do's" and "don'ts" (largely dealing with matters of style), examples of possible and appropriate topics, tips on searching databases for relevant psychology journal articles, and a handout on APA style. The remaining four courses, (*Human Emotions in Literature*, *Narratives of Maturity and Aging*, *Biology of Aging*, and *Psychological/Psychosocial Development*) had low levels of scaffolding, as instructions for students focused primarily on the topics to be covered and provided few comments regarding the structure or form of the papers.

Discussion

Advocates for a "writing-to-learn" approach have argued that an emphasis on disciplinary writing threatens such WAC goals as shared responsibility for teaching writing, creation of a student-centered pedagogy, and the use of writing as a tool for learning (Mahala & Swilky, 1994). On the other hand, proponents of disciplinary writing instruction point to students' need for instruction in writing more sophisticated arguments on complex subjects and argue that disciplinary approaches can incorporate WAC principles and goals (Williams & Colomb, 1990; Bazerman, 1992; Gottshalk, 1997). Data from the six Writing in the Major courses evaluated in this study lend support for the latter view. In my interviews, faculty who taught the Writing in the Major courses saw teaching students to write within the major as their responsibility and took it seriously. They

also indicated that their writing assignments were designed to teach disciplinary methods of analysis and thinking as well as the discipline's genres and conventions. English majors, for example, not only learned rhetorical strategies for writing critical essays, but also learned ways to analyze and explicate literature. Both Biology and Psychology majors conducted research studies, and this activity required them to carry out scientific procedures and analyses appropriate to their disciplines before writing up their results as an experimental article, a primary disciplinary genre. All six courses also emphasized active learning through a consistently interactive pedagogy that demanded active participation through class or small group discussions and 1:1 conferences with the instructors.

The positive faculty response to the Writing in the Major requirement and the development of generally solid writing courses may seem surprising considering that it was a mandated requirement without university-wide discussion of WAC principles and goals or workshops on teaching writing. However, all six courses were genuinely "writing intensive," and the course titles of four of the six specifically designated them as writing courses. In addition, all departments but one (Business) limited class size to 20 to maximize the individualized attention and feedback that students could receive on their writing. During my interviews, faculty identified several factors that led to the successful implementation of this requirement. Initially, the Writing in the Major requirement stimulated discussions within departments concerning the role of writing within the discipline as well as the function of the required course within the major. These discussions eventually led to a departmental consensus about the goals and content of the course, its placement within the major, and a commitment to the requirement.

By comparison, the emphasis on writing in the upper division theme courses varied considerably. Writing was central to three of the courses—History of Emotions, Human Emotions in Literature, and Narratives of Maturity and Aging—and students' entire grade was based on their written work. In the other three courses (Biology of Aging, Psychology of Emotions, and Psychosocial Development), writing assignments constituted only 10-15% of the course grade, and students were evaluated primarily on the basis of multiple-choice exams. The three courses with a heavy emphasis on writing (the history and the two English courses) were taught by full-time, tenure track faculty in disciplines that traditionally emphasize texts and writing, while those that had a low emphasis on writing (the biology and the two psychology courses) were taught by part-time faculty in disciplines that emphasize empirical research. In addition, class size was also higher in the theme courses that had a low emphasis on writing, ranging from 45 in Psychological/Psychosocial Development to more than 140 in Psychology of Emotions.

The theme courses also exhibited more varied instructional patterns. Three courses (History of Emotions, Psychology of Emotions, and Biology of Aging) asked students to complete writing assignments that required them to use disciplinary expertise and to assume the professional-in-training role. However, only one (History of Emotions) provided a high level of scaffolding to help non-majors use disciplinary genres and conventions despite the fact that all Writing in the Major courses included such scaffolding. The three remaining courses (Narratives of Maturity and Aging, Human Emotions in Literature, and Psychological/Psychosocial Development) gave writing assignments that asked students to adopt the layperson role, and assignments in these courses focused on relating the theme to students' present concerns, deepening their understanding of topics within the theme, and applying the thematic issues to their future lives. This de-emphasis on disciplinary genres and analytic methods undoubtedly contributed to low levels of scaffolding.

Writing instruction in the upper division theme courses, therefore, had neither the coherence nor the consistent approach that I found in the Writing in the Major courses. Only three of the six theme courses could be considered "writing intensive," and only one—History of Emotions—provided sustained instruction in writing. In addition, the courses were almost evenly divided between an emphasis on disciplinary and writing-to-learn approaches. These inconsistencies may be attributed to several factors. First, the criteria for the general education writing requirement were far less specific than the criteria for Writing in the Major courses, encouraging an "additive" response to the requirement. In addition, part-time faculty taught three of the courses. Although all three had heard "something" about a writing requirement, none of them knew exactly what it was. However, the full-time faculty, who were more familiar with the requirement, did not indicate they had modified their approach in response to the requirement. Rather, writing was integral to their courses because it is central to teaching and learning in their disciplines—history and English.

To what extent might student writers find the contrasting instructional approaches used by their three courses within one of the upper division themes confusing or conflicting? With the exception of their general education theme courses, upper division students at CSLA take courses primarily in their major. Stockton (1995) found that as students develop expertise in writing for their major courses, that expertise can conflict with disciplinary conventions in other courses. For example, English majors in her study had difficulty writing the kinds of narrative accounts expected in upper division history courses because they seemed like plot summaries, a rhetorical strategy they had been taught to avoid when writing literary analyses. By the time students have reached upper

division status, they will have experienced a range of approaches to and expectations for writing in courses across the curriculum. Although they may well find the diverse rhetorical tasks and expectations encountered within a single theme to be confusing, these differences are most likely to cause them difficulties when writing assignments ask them to adopt the professional-in-training role and, therefore, to use disciplinary conventions and genres that are likely to be unfamiliar. They would therefore benefit from a high level of scaffolding, but this was provided in only one of the CSLA theme courses with a disciplinary emphasis.

Implications and Future Directions

Despite the oppositional stances sometimes taken by advocates for writing-to-learn and writing in the disciplines, viewing them as dichotomous approaches oversimplifies a complex relationship. Given the structure of the baccalaureate degree, most upper division coursework will be in students' major departments, and successful completion of writing assignments in their majors will require students to use disciplinary genres and conventions. The Writing in the Major courses in this study demonstrate that an emphasis on disciplinary writing instruction does not necessarily conflict with such WAC principles as active learning, shared responsibility for writing, and a student-centered pedagogy. Even though the courses evaluated did not use assignments generally classified as "writing-to-learn," the disciplinary assignments served as tools for deepening students' understanding of concepts and topics in their majors. Despite being a mandated requirement, Writing in the Major courses were taught by committed faculty and shared a coherent approach to writing instruction. Although the explicit criteria for the Writing in the Major course may have contributed to its successful implementation, university faculty will be more receptive to assuming responsibility for developing disciplinary writing skills than for "general" writing skills. Most faculty are strongly committed to their disciplines, and they are able to see disciplinary writing instruction as one step in the process of inducting new members into the discipline.

Despite their many positive features, the Writing in the Major courses could benefit from incorporating ideas and assignments developed primarily by programs emphasizing a writing-to-learn approach. For example, none of the courses included the informal, ungraded writing assignments that are generally associated with writing-to-learn approaches, and students' understanding of disciplinary concepts might have been enhanced by a broader range of assignments (see Klein and Aller, 1998, and Kastman and Booker, 1998, for examples of courses that use writing-to-learn assignments to complement disciplinary writing tasks). However, incorporating writing-to-learn into disciplinary writing courses may prove difficult. CSLA

faculty may not have used such assignments because they were unfamiliar with them, but Russell (1991) points out that there is a long history of disciplinary resistance to cross-disciplinary approaches, and opposition to writing-to-learn assignments has been noted even in programs that included extensive faculty training (Slevin, et. al., 1990).

Although mandated disciplinary writing courses may be reasonably successful without the structure of an overall WAC program and faculty workshops on teaching writing, mandated general education requirements are likely to be problematic and unevenly implemented. In "WAC and General Education Courses," Thais (1992) observes that successful strategies for teaching writing in major classes must be adapted for general education classes because of differences between them. Although his analysis focuses on lower division general education classes, some of the differences he points out are applicable to CSLA's upper division theme classes. At the upper-division level, students are also likely to enroll in general education courses with little intrinsic interest and motivation and to lack familiarity not only with the subject of the courses but with their discourse forms, style, and methods. Other similarities between upper- and lower-division general education classes include their broad, general goals, a reliance on part-time faculty, and larger classes. Thais recommends using a writing-to-learn approach in general education courses and introducing faculty to WAC principles and strategies through faculty workshops. In developing an overall approach, he stresses the need for "programmatically thinking" to help faculty plan a "diverse, complementary writing program across the curriculum (p. 104)."

In her closing address at the 3rd National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, Herrington (1997) attempted to integrate WAC and WID approaches by recommending that future WAC efforts aim toward instructional practices that promote active learning, draw on students' authoritative knowledge when appropriate, encourage their pursuit of personal interests through disciplinary methods, and foster a dialogue between students and teachers (89). These goals might serve as a starting point for reconciling differences between WAC and WID approaches and bringing coherence to problematic 1990's WAC programs. However, creating a university-wide commitment to a WAC program that incorporates such principles "after the fact" represents a considerable challenge for requirement-based programs. It is difficult to backtrack and initiate faculty dialogue on WAC and or provide workshops for previously established, requirement-based programs. At CSLA, efforts to develop a plan for assessing general education outcomes may offer a forum for pointing out problems with the general education writing requirement. I am hopeful that these discussions will help faculty clarify the purpose and function of writing in general education courses as well as lead to faculty workshops

on teaching writing across the curriculum. Programs at other institutions may discover that linking WAC to local priorities and initiatives will be the most effective strategy for beginning conversations about mandated WAC requirements and arguing for additional resources to implement an effective program.

In his history of writing across the curriculum, Russell (1991) claims that "Cross-curricular writing programs were almost always a response to a perceived need for greater access, greater equity" (p. 271). The perceived literacy crisis of the 1970's combined with open admissions policies created conditions conducive to the widespread adoption of WAC in the decade that followed. Today, an increasing number of first generation college students, many of whom speak English as a second language, are seeking access to higher education at the same time as remedial programs are being attacked and dismantled. The need for WAC programs is as strong today as when the movement began because WAC's underlying principles will support these students' efforts to succeed academically. As WAC moves into the 21st century, we need to direct our efforts not only toward maintaining long-term, successful programs, but also toward transforming the requirement-based programs of the 1990's into ones that are genuine sites for writing and learning across the curriculum.

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