Writing Across the Curriculum: The Power of An Idea

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In his 2005 Chair's address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication," Doug Hesse asked "Who owns writing?" "Who owns the conditions under which writing is taught? . . . Who may declare someone proficient or derelict?" (337). While Hesse argued that teachers of writing should have that control, as stewards for student writers, he reviewed some other forces in position to control writing including education associations that aim to set standards that would define writing and learning outcomes; computer programs (and their developers) that assess writing and thereby also set values on it. One bright spot Hesse noted was Writing Across the Curriculum, which he believes "enjoys rather a new spring" (336). Still, the forces he pointed to are ones that potentially challenge WAC as well since they impact what will be valued as writing and learning across disciplines.

His challenge to the members of 4C's, one we argue applies to us here, is to take responsibility to act in this time of change: "Those of us who teach writing must affirm that we, in fact, own it. The question is what we should aspire to own—and how" (338). To us, this is a question about the conception of writing and learning that will guide us—in other words, a question of our vision of writing across the curriculum.

Barbara Walvoord asks this question also in her 1996 article, "The Future of WAC." Similar to Hesse, she argues that for the Writing Across the Curriculum movement to remain vital and to impact national debates about education, we, as a collective, need to constantly

clarify our goals. She notes the power James Britton's theories in shaping the WAC movement of the 1970's and asks "What is the original or founding vision? Is it still vital?" (67).

Perhaps because James Britton's work, along with that of Nancy Martin and their collaborators, has been so important to both of us, we decided to look back at their work and identify what we see as key principles of their vision and to test out whether they are still vital today as a guide for decision-making and advocacy regarding conditions for writing and learning across the curriculum. We'll begin with a dialogue, an oral presentation of an email dialogue we carried out to identify the principles. We'll then move into two monologue sections where we use these principles to assess various assessment practices on the basis of how they define writing and learning.

Dialogue on Principles

[Charlie] Hi Anne, to start things off—around our question, "what is still vital in Britton's work" –what has stayed with me is his trust and belief in the learner. I'm thinking here of that moving passage toward the end of *Language and Learning* where he says (I don't have it in front of me) something like "what we have to do for them [students] is to trust them....and to see that what they are demanding contains fragments of what we have always wanted." And this of the British students who were, in 1968-9, rioting in the streets.

> And in the end what we have to do for them is to trust them. To begin to do which is to discover that some of the obvious things they say could have power if enough of a generation said them, and believed them…and finally to admit that, among the injustices and extravagances of the young people's revolution, demands are being made that represent fragments of a world we have always wanted (270).

Another parallel thought: when Britton set up his categories of prose—transactional, expressive, poetic—the powerful assumption, for me, is that all writers work in these categories—and that means that any of us can write in the poetic—and that means that we can, any of us, including very young children, commit 'literature'. That takes 'literature' out of its position of privilege and opens it to student writing. That's for me another example of his 'trust' in the learner, a move that makes it possible for us to see moments in students' writing as 'literature,' as sharing greatness with the canonized great writers.

Anne: Yes, and Britton links the poetic function with the "spectator stance," where one steps back from the world and pragmatic purposes to review and even reshape experiences and also to imagine other worlds. In a passage I love, Britton writes, "We've only got one life to live as participants. As spectators, countless lives are open to us" (105) —imagined lives and refashioned actual lives.   In our case-studies for *Persons in Process,* Marcia Curtis and I saw students using writing for this reflective, self-shaping purpose, "going back over things in order to come to terms with them" (104) in a range of types of writing, not solely poetic. For example, the spiritual autobiography one of these students wrote for a Spiritual Autobiography course described in our *Genre across the Curriculum* collection provided an occasion for him to grapple with his faith in light of abuses he suffered as a child. For another case study student, in a Multicultural Education course, writing a reflective report on an interview she conducted with someone of another faith and culture furthered her understanding of her own self in relation to others.

I'm also thinking of the importance Britton and others place on expressive language and the expressive intention. Expressive language is assumed to be the language one is most comfortable with, and that could be a dialect or even language that is not that of school. As they

put it, "Expressive writing…may be at any stage the kind of writing best adapted to exploration

and discovery. It is language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to

grips with an experience (Britton *et al*., *Development,* 197). Nancy Martin, in *Writing and*

Learning Across the Curriculum 11-16, sees expressive writing as "the seed bed from which

more specialized and differentiated kinds of writing can grow—towards the greater explicitness

of the transactional or the more conscious shaping of the poetic" (26). Britton, Martin, and their

colleagues are arguing here for writing as a powerful means of *thinking*—which seems

sometimes to be conflated with learning. One of my early problems with how this idea was

translated into WAC practice is that expressive writing was valorized by some above all other

functions with too little examination of how one moves from expressive beginnings to a finished

poetic piece or transactional piece, with learning entailed throughout the process. The link to

home language also remains important today, recalling a central educational objective of many

early WAC programs: supporting access.

Charlie: I'm connecting with your "too little examination of how one moves from expressive

beginnings to a finished poetic piece or transactional piece, with the learning entailed throughout

the process." It seems to me that this is the great weak link not in the theorists work but in its

application. Britton is clear that expressive writing is where it all begins, but not where it all

ends. In *Development* he pushes for the inclusion of at least some expressive writing into a

curriculum entirely dominated by writing-to-teacher—not for the dominance of writing in the

spectator mode, but for its appropriate use. In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey railed at

his 'progressive' followers who stopped at "experience" and did not push on to "education" (*e.g.*

21-22, 60). And, a half-century later, James Moffett wrote the preface to his second edition of

Active Voice to counter what he saw as the unhappy results of the first edition: "So few teachers

ever got beyond informal, dramatic, and first-person writing that this intellectual development was lost, and my work sometimes became inappropriately identified only with informal, 'personal' writing" (4).

I've seen this happen in the Writing Project—we spend so much time on personal writing in the summer program that we never get sufficiently beyond it to its imagined end—the piece of transactional writing that is firmly grounded in the expressive, the personal. This error, in its way, testifies to the power of the personal, the expressive. Once we in the Writing Project, or our students in our writing classes, have permission to write about and around the personal, we discover its value in making sense of our own existence, and this huge project takes over from the other, less powerful project: learning to write in an academic discipline. One of the benefits of WAC is that it may help to keep us on track, to give us a strong reason to move beyond the personal, as we are charged in some degree with preparing writers to engage in disciplinary discourse.

Anne: Yes, linking personal and intellectual. I want to return to the point about the focus on the learner. In his chapter in *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*, David Russell reminds us that Britton's notion was not that of totally student-centered learning, but of "adult- and child-centered." I went back to the passage he cited. It's a 1980 talk Britton gave where he says that he finds the term "child-centered education. . . a highly ambiguous and even misleading term. Britton replaces that one-sided view with "interactive learning," drawing on Vygotsky's conception of learning as social and cultural in nature:

"Adult and child-centred" seems a more accurate description of the kind of education we
have in mind, appropriate to an interactive view of learning, and highlighting the crucial

role of language, in its many modes, as the principal instrument of interaction ("English

Teaching" 204).

Throughout his work, Britton also stresses the importance of the teacher in that interaction as a

"stable audience" and "listener," instead of solely an error corrector.

Charlie: Yes—In *Language and Learning* Britton makes a clear distinction, drawing on Clare

Winnicott, "between a professional and a personal relationship." (185) The teacher, he writes, is

"not reciprocally related to his pupils" (187).

> In whatever circumstances, and whether the going is hard or easy, the establishment first
>
> of a reciprocal person-to-person relationship and next of a professional relationship with
>
> individual children must be sought by any means, while at the same time the teacher's
>
> management of the group as a whole is conducted in such a way as to threaten least
>
> damage to these individual relationships (188).

Indeed, in his definition of the proper role of the teacher, Britton begins with the 'personal' and

moves to the 'professional,' in much the same way that he sees 'professional' writing evolving

from, based upon, the 'personal.'

Anne: And, back to the centrality of language for learning. Nancy Martin reminds us that the

Bullock Commission Report, *A Language for Life*, urged use of reading and writing across the

curriculum, according to Martin, not "to improve language, but to facilitate learning"

("Language" 20). Both saw a focus on disciplinary practices as distracting from this focus on

broad issues of learning and teaching. Here's Martin:

> While advances in the disciplines take people further away from understanding each
>
> others' worlds, there is a direction in teaching, as distinct from research, that is by its

nature a shared one. This is an interest in the processes of learning and in the ways in which teaching may be accommodated to those processes once we know more about them ("Language" 21).

And, Britton argues similarly in "Theories of the Disciplines." I was struck by his comment in that chapter that "most incumbents of the disciplines in prestige subjects and prestige establishments wear their learning with very little thought of how they came by it" (59). And that's what he wants us to focus on, how we and our students learn, then figure out how best to teach. This takes us to the teacher as learner. He ends that chapter urging us to focus on "not so much *what is known*—as the disciplines are—as *who knows what*" (60). I read that statement as pointing again to questions of equity and access.

So, writing across the curriculum, not in the disciplines. Well, here I want to have it both ways. There is a value to our focusing on ways to use writing to learn the ways of thinking and genres of our disciplines. That, too, is central to WAC. Indeed, engagement with a particular area of inquiry—history, literature, biology, writing—brought us and our colleagues to our positions. What seems central also is the "shared" interest across disciplines in learning and pedagogies that enhance learning. My experience is that when we come together from across disciplines it also helps us understand what we may take for granted about practices within our disciplines.

Charlie: Yes—in *Language and Learning* Britton quotes Basil Bernstein—"If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (189). This is, as you say, "having it both ways." To the extent that the teacher sees herself as 'disciplinary,' then this is the "culture of the teacher" that is to become "part of the consciousness of the child." Before this can happen, according to

Bernstein and Britton, "the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher"—that is, the teacher must 'know' her students, where they are in their disciplinary or pre-disciplinary thinking—must know "who knows what."

I'm struck in all of this by what we could see as a difference in 'level' or in some scheme of human development. The Language Across the Curriculum movement was situated in London's primary schools. Writing Across the Curriculum, as we are assembled here at Clemson today, is chiefly a college-level phenomenon. How do we translate, or extrapolate, 'up' the metaphor? Nancy Martin is pessimistic, speaking of the "vanishing commonality" of the disciplines ("Language" 21).

In our Writing Project summer institutes, it is often the case that the "elementary" teachers have the most to teach us. They have the straightest route, it seems, to "the culture of the child." As we move up the metaphor towards 'higher' education, we tend to put away childish things: as Britton *et. al.* and Applebee have shown us, in secondary schools in England and America this translates into no more expressive, or personal, writing. Yet in our own graduate program, as we work with Ph.D. students, you and I both know that we again and again suggest that they do some informal, short writing before they launch into the term paper, or dissertation prospectus, or chapter draft.

In 1966, well before the 'process' paradigm shift, my dissertation advisor, knowing that I was 'stuck,' advised me to bring him a draft of a chapter on a small piece of the project— "nothing finished," he said—"just your thoughts." That started me off, and we repeated this for several small "pieces" of the project—and lo, the dissertation emerged. I would say that my dissertation advisor knew, in some degree, "the culture of the child," or "the culture of a dissertation-writing Ph.D. student," and because he did, he was able to help me understand "the culture of the teacher," in this case the discourse around British literature of the 18th century.

Britton speaks of the "dens of the disciplines" (Language 7). I'd say that my dissertation advisor was certainly living and working in the "den" of his discipline, but he also had access to what he terms "predisciplinary theory" ("Theories" 60)—or, as Nancy Martin put it, "An interest in the processes of learning and in the ways in which teaching may be accommodated to these processes" ("Language" 21)—for which I am everlastingly thankful. Otherwise I might have been one of the large percentage of dissertation writers in my field who never completed their dissertations and left the profession.

 Anne: Charlie, I'm glad you came back to this point about expressive writing. I think you're pointing to two things: one, the value of "informal, short writing"—"just your thoughts"—to get started on a larger project, and two, the value of identifying one's *personal* interests. I know, too, that I could never have finished my own dissertation had I not found what motivated me in pursuing research in something so alien to me as two chemical engineering courses. And, we know from so many studies—Sternglass, Carroll, Curtis and my own—of the importance of students' connecting academic projects to personal interests.

I also want to pick up on that passage you quote from Bernstein about the "culture of the teacher" and the "culture of the child." What I don't find in Britton and colleagues work is the importance of critical reflection on the assumptions, values, and writer roles that are embedded in the genres we take on and ask our students to take on. And how open are we to learning from our students when their own cultural values and practices might not fit with our own?

In a powerful critique of the lack of such critical reflection in some Writing in the Disciplines scholarship, Harriet Malinowitz argues that "the intransigence of the disciplines' positions in the academy as the reigning categories of knowledge leaves students confined to writing only *across* the curriculum and *in* the disciplines, and it precludes their writing *out* of the

inherited order of things and *into* new forms" (300). Well, Malinowitz damns with too broad a brush. Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki's recent book, *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, shows faculty who are quite reflective about their writing practices and open to alternatives to established practices, both in their own writing and their students. They, along with Malinowitz and others (LeCourt, Villanueva) call us to keep asking, "What values are we supporting? "Whose interests are being served?

Assessing Assessment Practices

Charlie: Well, we have pulled together what we think of as still vital in Britton's work, and by extension that of Nancy Martin and the London Schools' Council project: the focus on, and trust in, the learner; a focus on teaching and learning across the disciplines; the assumption that learning is interactive; valuing a range of types and functions of writing; seeing expressive writing and talk as central for learning.

We've argued that this work was foundational in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, and that it continues to be so. We've also pointed to a dimension that needs to be added to what we have inherited: a critical perspective on the values that inform the discourses and practices in the disciplines.

But there are powerful counter-forces at work in education today, forces that constrain and restrict our ability to continue the work that has been so well begun. In her essay in our MLA book, Nancy Martin wrote that in the London Schools project Language Across the Curriculum took hold in the 1970's because of what she termed "conditions of change" (16), conditions that, in 1990, she saw as no longer present. In a recent essay Sam Watson believes that contemporary conditions in his corner of the world make it unlikely that something like WAC could happen now. In the world we inhabit today, in 2006, can WAC continue to grow and prosper? Can it survive?

In 1990, Art Young and Toby Fulwiler gave us a rogues gallery of "enemies of WAC," including in their list "uncertain leadership," "English Department orthodoxy," "compartmentalized academic administration," "traditional reward system," "testing and quantification," and "entrenched attitudes," such as the assumption that writing is a 'skill' that can be learned quickly in high school and then left alone (287-294).   We guess that these "enemies" of WAC are still out there, though we're not so sure about "English Department orthodoxy": the national move of English toward cultural studies has been a good 'fit' with WAC. But there are two forces now more obviously at work than in 1990: the diminishment of the public sector generally, of which public post-secondary education is a part; and the national testing movement, including the powerful marketing of automated essay scorers. We want to look at each of these as they may affect WAC.

The diminishment of the public sector generally has resulted in a squeeze on public sector budgets generally. This squeeze, as it has appeared in public post-secondary education, has had a number of related consequences: increased tuition, with resultant loss of access and equity; and, to a greater extent than in the private sector, larger class sizes, heavier teaching loads for full-time faculty, and the replacement of full-time faculty with adjuncts and teaching assistants(U.S. Department of Education, 22, 26). As reported by the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, in the San Diego Community College District, in 2004, there were 503 full-time faculty and 1,616 adjunct faculty; 53 percent of the courses offered were taught by full-time faculty. In the state of California in the same year, 62 percent of the courses offered by public community colleges were taught by adjuncts (Lang).   And as reported by the Associated Press, 43 percent of college faculty members around the country are part-time, non-tenure-track professors, up from 33 percent a decade ago ("State Schools").

All of these consequences work against WAC, given that reading and responding to student writing is a labor-intensive process. If faculty have increased teaching loads, or large classes, they are less likely to build writing into their courses. And the increasing number of adjuncts and part-timers has multiple consequences for WAC. We don't mean to say that these teachers are not good, but they are younger as teachers, and younger as persons in the disciplines, than their senior faculty colleagues and less likely, therefore, to be confident writing teachers in their disciplines. More importantly, these teachers tend to be, as well, short-term hires, in the worst case the "freeway flyers" who teach at several institutions, picking up assignments at the last minute and piecing together a livelihood as best they can.

There is good evidence that an 'adjunct-heavy' course schedule negatively impacts students (Bettinger & Long). For our particular purposes here, we want to argue that the increasing numbers of adjuncts negatively impacts WAC. WAC has been from its beginnings a faculty-development program. Faculty development can only bear real fruit in an institution that has a stable and long-term faculty. In WAC literature we often tell the story of how a faculty development workshop with tenured faculty creates a sense of campus community. This community, if it is long-term, keeps the learning that has happened on our campus. Faculty development with short-term adjuncts and TA's does not do this; adjuncts are generally not connected to the campus in ways that tenured faculty are; and teaching assistants are graduate students on their way to full professional status, almost always at another institution.

A second constraint and challenge, one that has evolved from the "testing and quantification" trend that Young and Fulwiler included in their list of "enemies," is the rise of outcomes testing and benchmarking—again chiefly in the public sector, with a consequent move

toward machine-scored writing. In outcomes testing writing is seen not as a way of learning, or as a means toward personal growth, but as display. The mandating of outcomes testing, with the consequent hundreds of thousands of tests to be read, has driven the rise of automated essay scoring, marketed by powerful firms such as ETS and Pearson, where a computer program 'reads' a student's writing and returns a response—in milliseconds—a technological marvel, but one that reduces writing to a least common denominator: that which can be measured and counted. We will look at a particular example of this reduction of "writing" because we think the dangers it poses to WAC are so great, and because we think that there are strategies that as WAC programs we can offer to counter this trend.

In March 2006, I [Charlie] wrote a response to a prompt offered by ETS through its on-line essay scoring system, Criterion. The prompt was:

Often in life we experience a conflict in choosing between something we want to do and something we feel we should do. In your opinion, are there any circumstances in which it is better for people to do what they want to do rather than what they feel they should do? Support your position with evidence you're your own experience or your observations of other people.

I wrote a serious essay, one that looked at our long-standing engagement in Iraq as "evidence" that the feeling that one "should" do something does not always produce a better result than the feeling that one "wants" to do something. I argued, too, that in the case of serial killers, or suicide bombers, or rapacious CEO's," should" and "want" seem to be conflated. My overall score was "N/A," not applicable," with this "advisory" in red type: "your essay does not resemble others that have been written on this topic." So I am being told to write an essay that <u>does</u> resemble others that have been written on this topic—reducing my options as a writer to some least common denominator. The "trait feedback" I received was essentially what one

could get from any grammar-check program. I was told that I had committed these errors: grammar, 1 error; usage 2 errors; mechanics 5 errors; style: 31 comments. The "error" in grammar was a fragment that was not a fragment: "Let me pick on the last of these 'what-if's' and expand upon it a bit." It's a sentence, but apparently one beyond Criterion's definition of a sentence. I should not write sentences like this. My two "usage" errors were alleged misplaced articles. The three spelling errors listed were not spelling errors at all; they were words outside the program's dictionary. Were I a student, I would learn not to use those words. I was found to have written "too many long sentences," was found to have used the passive voice [actually, the program misidentified the passive formations], and was found to have repeated words too often. What I learn from all this is to shorten my sentences, not use the passive voice, and not repeat terms that were key to my argument but "vary your word choice."

All of these comments are reductive in their effect; they tell me not to use the full array of sentence patterns and vocabularies that I have access to; and they repeatedly tell me to "look in the handbook" to discover such gems of handbook-wisdom as: "In your introduction you should capture the reader's interest, provide background information about your topic, and present your thesis sentence."

This program, Criterion, is now available to college and university bookstores, where it is assumed that teachers will require their students to buy access keys to the program, one key for each course, $12.50 per key. The virtue of the program, its marketers tell us, is the instantaneous feedback that students get. The program used in this way is a 'coach.' The kind of coaching it offers, even if it were correct (100% of the errors it marked in my piece were not errors— imagine one of our writing teachers being wrong 100% of the time!)—even if the feedback were accurate, it would drive students toward a bland, normalized prose: varied word choice

irrespective of rhetorical intent; no passive voice; no 'big' words, no long sentences, boiler-plate introductory paragraphs.

I believed my essay was thoughtful. I was not 'gaming' the machine. I wish that a reader had read my essay. In composing this part of this talk, I had to restrain himself from including long swatches of the essay, so that I could deliver it to this audience. I want a human response! It is only the human reader who can see the writer as learner, as a person using language to put together some fragments of life, as a person whose struggles to make meaning, in this case of our misadventure in Iraq, who wants and needs to connect with readers' or listeners' own struggles to make meaning. The automated essay scorer does not care about meaning-making. It reduces writing to display, and to a game in which your goal is to avoid having your prose flagged for some deviance from programmed-in norms, such as sentence-length. The marketers of these programs stress that they will improve as computing-power increases. Indeed, ETS is preparing us all for the 'launch' of Criterion 6.2, new and improved. We need note here that it doesn't matter, for our purposes, whether ETS can 'improve' Criterion and make it better at what it does. What it does works against what we are trying to do in WAC.

It is possible to 'blame technology' for all of this, but, of course, it is not the technology, but the uses to which it is put, that are good or bad. We've described what seems to us a use of this technology that works against what we are trying to achieve in WAC, one that has been developed by for-profit publishing firms and is actively being marketed to administrators, teachers, and students.

But at the University of Missouri, within a WAC progam, this same technology has been used in a way that we deem responsible. In *Machine Scoring of Student Essays*, Edward Brent and Martha Townsend describe the ways in which Brent has built machine-scored writing into his sociology course, a Writing Intensive (WI) General Education course that is part of the

university's WAC program. Granted, Brent developed the program because his course enrolls 250 students—one of the results of the downsizing of faculty in the public sector. But that notwithstanding, Brent came to the University's writing committee with a proposal: that he replace multiple-choice tests, which were not giving him what he wanted, with machine-scored microthemes whose object was not only to assess students' learning but to fulfill two WAC goals: to use writing to help students learn, and to permit them to assess their own learning. He assigns four of these microthemes early in the semester to help his students work toward a longer paper submitted late in the semester. Briefly, for each of these microthemes Brent constructs a full and elaborate prompt in which he outlines what he wants students to write.

> Assignment: select a type of crime discussed in the chapter on deviance and social control. Briefly describe this type of crime, give examples of it, and indicate other types of crime it might be closely related to. Then take one of the theories of deviance discussed in the same chapter, briefly summarize the theory, and discuss how well that theory can account for the type of crime you have chosen. Your answer should identify the theory, one or more proponents of the theory, and four or more concepts from that theory (184).

Then Brent constructs a semantic web of key terms, and keys the program's feedback to those terms. Here's an example of the feedback that the program gives to the student writer:

> Number of concepts from the Chapter: You appear to have included only 2 concepts from this chapter, instead of the four or more required. The concepts you included that are from this chapter are primary deviance and secondary deviance.
>
> Overall Treatment of Theory: You were asked to discuss one theory, including at least one proponent of the theory and four or more concepts associated with the theory. This paper considers the labeling theory of deviance. The paper's treatment of the labeling

theory of deviance is inadequate. The paper does not discuss Howard Becker, Thomas
Scheff, Thomas Scasz, and William Chambliss, who are related to this theory. This paper
discusses labeling….it does not discuss….. (185).

The feedback given by the program is on its content, not its mechanics—a good WAC practice
for a first draft. The student can revise the paper given the feedback and re-submit. After this
cycle is complete, a TA reads the paper. The final grade is 1/3 the revised first draft and 2/3 the
final draft.

So there's what we, and the University of Missouri's Writing Program director, see as
good WAC practice. To quote Martha Townsend,

"Writing to learn," I say [to Ed Brent]. "You're using machine-scored revised
microthemes to promote learning." Now it's Ed's turn to process my discipline's
discourse. I describe the writing-across-the-curriculum pedagogies he has unknowingly
adopted: short writing assignments focused on specific problems, attention to concepts
over mechanics at the early stages of the process, rewriting to clarify one's ideas (191).

We'd add to Martha's list these aspects of good WAC practice: the program has been locally-
developed and administered; it arises from the context of a particular course; it presents the
students with a highly-structured and constrained writing task; its feedback is on content, not
grammar and style; the program encourages dialogue with the instructors around the feedback it
gives; and students' writing is read by machine only in its early stages, and by the course
teachers thereafter.

Anne: I want to pick up on Charlie's point that Brent's approach is locally developed to fit the
particular learning objectives and pedagogy of his course and shift to another aspect of the
current "testing and quantification" pressure: that is, the pressure for assessment that uses

external norms and enables comparison among institutions—in other words, standardized tests. We see this pressure from the federal government, some state governments, as well as from some within higher education, and certainly the testing industry. According to an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education will "urge colleges and accrediting agencies to voluntarily adopt assessments of student learning, and will recommend two tests" (Field A33), those tests being the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) developed by ETS and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) developed by the Council for Aid to Education in partnership with the RAND Corporation. And the American Association of State Colleges and Universities—representing public education--supports "value-added assessment," specifically recommending an assessment model that would "Draw on recognized and tested national instruments and be embedded in state, system, and accreditation policy according to particular educational and workforce priorities." According to the AASCU website, this approach "promotes inter-institutional and interstate comparability that is essential for identifying pockets of promise and persistent weaknesses." By whom and for what purpose is not identified. Again, the question of who will control writing is central.

From the perspective of the Commission and AASCU, then, the following assessment scenario—which is entirely plausible—would likely be desirable:

- College Board's Accuplacer Plus for placement of entering students, using the automated essay assessment program Intellimetric to rate the writing sample;

- ETS's Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) test to assess general education outcomes, testing reading, mathematics, writing, and critical thinking using multiple choice questions, although the website marketing materials promise "Coming Soon: An optional <u>essay</u> module using the <u>*e-rater*</u>® tool" (an automated essay scoring engine)

- ETS's Majors Fields Test to assess student learning outcomes in their major, for example Psychology or Literature.

Criterion or a comparable computer program could also be used to evaluate writing in composition classes and Pearson's Intelligent Essay Assessor to evaluate written assignments in large lecture classes in, say, history or biology. (Pearson has even appropriated and copyrighted the phrase WriteToLearn for one of its machine-scoring reading and writing programs.)

While ETS allows schools to add a few of their own questions to the MAPP and Major Fields Tests, all of these tests are for the most part, externally developed. (1) One of the selling points, of course, is that by using the same test as other institutions, scores may be compared "inter-institutionally". The trade off is that assessment is then detached from the teaching and learning context. And, in turn, control of the curriculum moves from the classroom and institution to the testing companies and the "experts" they hire to develop the tests. And, significantly for writing, the fundamental connection between writer and reader—or to move into the classroom, the interactive relation between student and teacher—is severed, as assessment is either by multiple choice questions or an essay judged by a computer. Here's an example of the kind of writing related multiple questions asked on MAPP follows:

"Being a female jockey, she was often interviewed."

Rewrite beginning: "She was often interviewed. . . . " The next words will be. . . . .

   a) on account of she was
   b) being she was
   c) because she was
   d) by being a

I think it speaks for itself.

(A related aside: I think it is interesting that even a supporter of rigorous national standards, education scholar Diane Ravitch, decries the direction that College Board has progressively gone

since WWII in moving from a role of "establishing standards" to becoming a "testing agency," and putting psychometricians in control, displacing faculty from primary roles in test design and evaluation (B:44-45).

Another higher ed organization, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, does not support standardized testing to the degree that AASCU does and perhaps not surprisingly, since they represent private institutions primarily. In *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College* (2005), they write that "AAC&U has taken a stand against the view that standardized tests are the best way to assess students' learning gains and level of accomplishment over their several years in college. AAC&U does believe, however, that standardized tests can supplement curriculum-embedded assessments when they are used with appropriate professional standards and cautions" (10).   And they have supported the development of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, as an alternative to MAPP. It comprises task-oriented p*erformance tasks* as well as *argument writing* and argument analysis tasks. All require written response.   The argument writing is assessed by *erater*. I couldn't tell who or what assesses the performance tasks.

These are the worlds in which we and our students live and the differences are striking between public and private institutions, while perhaps not surprising given different stake-holders and funding sources.

Still, whether we are at a public or private institution, large or small, we have to be involved in policy making regarding assessment because it will impact the writing and learning that is to be valued across the curriculum. For all of us, whether at public or private institutions, our starting point should be course-embedded assessments that best represent the range and richness of students' learning. . . in other words that focus on the learner and the teaching-learning interaction.

That focus is evident in the AACU report I just cited, and I believe it could help us make arguments for sound, local assessment practices. In the report, they argue that the best evidence of liberal education outcomes comes from "assessment of students' authentic and complex performances" (10). They stress that "evidence should vividly depict the rich and complex nature of student accomplishment as knowledge and skills are built over time and across disciplines" (7). Among the settings they list for such evidence are first year seminars, significant writing and speaking opportunities, and capstone projects; among the practices they cite course-embedded assignments as "a highly efficient way to gather direct evidence of student learning," particularly using "portfolios, both traditional and electronic" (7). Portfolios and course-embedded assessments are also likely to allow for a broader range of functions of writing—transactional, poetic, possibly expressive?—although that depends on the values of those developing the assessment.

The starting point for an assessment project, though, is identifying valued outcomes to assess; it is not with an assessment instrument. We could begin inductively by examining our own course syllabi, specifically statements of learning outcomes; by examining student writing and other work; by consulting with students and former students. At UMass Amherst a few years ago, a group of us came together from a range of departments to develop learning objectives for our Junior Year Writing Program courses, the formal aspect of our "writing across the curriculum" program. We examined our syllabi and read samples of student writing, discussing what we valued and working to come to some common language. Engaging in that process gave me not only a greater understanding of learning in, say, physics and nursing, but also some critical perspective on my own values within English studies. I mention this to come back to that central argument that Britton and Martin make about the importance of faculty coming together from out of our disciplinary enclaves to focus, in Martin's words, "on the

processes of learning" and what we, as a faculty, value our students' learning across their studies, as well as within our distinct programs.

We—that is, faculty from across disciplines--could also begin with statements developed by others. The AAC&U report clusters liberal education learning outcomes in three broad areas: Knowledge, Intellectual and Practical Skills, and Individual and Social Responsibility (3). If we look at the specific outcomes for the latter two areas, we see where writing comes in. The Intellectual and Practical Skills include the following:

- Written and oral communication

- Inquiry, critical and creative thinking

- Quantitative thinking

- Information literacy

- Teamwork

- Integration of learning

The *Liberal Education Outcomes* report does not elaborate much on what is meant by "written and oral communication skills," although reference is made to "writing (and speaking) clearly and effectively," and in what is troubling for a document that advocates context-embedded assessment, they cite data from the ETS Academic Profile (the precursor to MAPP, using multiple choice questions like the sample we showed) to report what is known of college students' skills (6). Still, despite this seeming narrow view of writing, the unelaborated list is useful as a heuristic for considering writing not solely as a practical skill but also as medium for thinking and learning. For instance, consider how writing links with "critical and creative thinking" as a vehicle for engaging in a range of kinds of meaning-making: for example, in a history class, writing a report on middle class family life in a 19th century New England town

working from diaries as primary sources; or writing a fictional diary from a matriarch of such a family. As I look at this list, I wonder also how we would want to define "information literacy." Solely as a practical skill, or also as intellectual and creative activity? We might also consider asking students to compose multi-modal texts for purposes linked to goals the AAC & U report lists for Individual and Social Responsibility

- Civic responsibility and engagement

- Ethical reasoning

- Intercultural knowledge and actions

- Propensity for lifelong learning

Looking at this list invites me to think about linking writing with ethical reasoning and intercultural knowledge. Recall the project I mentioned earlier, from the multi-cultural education course, where students wrote a reflective report on an interview with someone of another faith and culture. I think also of Stephen Fishman's philosophy assignments, described in *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice*, that ask students to apply philosophical reasoning to situations in their own lives. As I've tried to imply, discussion of a list such as this with colleagues across disciplines would prompt us to consider not only valued outcomes, but also curriculum and writing assignments in a range of genres and writer roles, assignments that might also be included in student portfolios.

The next move is to ask, how best to evaluate valued learning outcomes in ways that keep the focus on the learner, do not distort the nature of writing and meaning-making, and inform teaching and learning—all key principles of the vision of WAC we've articulated. Again, we should look not at standardized tests first, but to our classrooms with our students' work for our courses and work with colleagues from a range of departments. Lee Ann Carroll's book *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers*, is an outgrowth of such an

assessment project at Pepperdine University where faculty from across disciplines came together to assess student portfolios as a way to evaluate their general education program—not individual student proficiency, but a program. George Mason University provides an example of how a statewide mandate can still be implemented by adopting guiding criteria while keeping program assessment local and tailored to specific programs. Many other schools have also developed local portfolio projects for single courses, programs, or school wide purposes (e.g., Tidewater Community College through Donna Reiss's "Webfolio (Electronic Portfolio) Project" and Washington State University's Junior Writing Portfolio program; see also Cambridge, and Yancey and Weiser). In other words, we can learn from one another examples of good assessment practice that maintain the vital link between assessment and the rich range of writing and learning projects that arise from vibrant writing across the curriculum programs.

Now, one might argue that we don't need to draw on James Britton and Nancy Martin for principles of good assessment practice. Granted. What we have aimed to demonstrate, however, is that these principles are ones that can guide us in planning and advocacy regarding a range of challenges, one of them being assessment. These are times that call for a guiding vision, times of exciting potential as we engage with new technologies for teaching and learning and times that challenge us as we grapple with increased class sizes, external mandates for testing, and other pressures.

In "Who Owns Writing?" Doug Hesse reminds us that "the nature of an activity changes according to who organizes it and for what ends. . . [and] these days all sorts of interests would organize writing" (354). We turn to Britton and Martin not out of nostalgia but because their focus on the learner and the centrality of language for meaning-making and interaction between learner and teacher defines "ends" that can enable WAC to prosper and, in turn, our students and ourselves as teachers.

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