

Shifting Currents underneath Content “Coverage” and WAC

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UST WAC

Learn to Write

Write to Learn

The Context

- I direct a fairly young WAC program (five years old) and am focused on creating a “culture of writing” at the University of St. Thomas.
- We hope to implement WAC as a four-course student graduation requirement in Fall 2015.
- Each year, two cohorts of 20 faculty complete a five-day WAC seminar with Dr. Chris Anson.
- These “WAC faculty” now number over 200 full-time and adjunct faculty (out of approximately 493 full-time and 383 adjunct faculty overall).

The Problem

Many faculty perceive that WAC involves including more writing and/or attention to writing in their courses (and it does, for most, though not all).

When WAC pedagogies take class time—discussion and practice of writing, peer feedback groups—faculty sometimes raise the issue of “coverage”:

I can't afford to take class time for WAC pedagogies because...

I need to COVER the sixteenth century.

I need to COVER number theory.

I need to COVER Romanticism.

I need to COVER the Mesozoic Era.



If you add writing...

+



Then you need to subtract something else.



Geological Time Scale

ERA	PERIOD	EPOCH / AGE	Million Years Ago	EVENTS
CENOZOIC <i>Age of Mammals</i> 65.5 mya – present day	<i>Quaternary</i>	<i>Holocene</i>	<i>Today</i>	Ice Age ends Humans are dominant
		<i>Pleistocene</i>	– 0.01	Earliest Humans appear Ice Age begins
	<i>Tertiary</i>	<i>Pliocene</i>	– 1.6	Hominids (human ancestors) appear
		<i>Miocene</i>	– 5.3	Grass becomes widespread
		<i>Oligocene</i>	– 23.7	Mammals are dominant
		<i>Eocene</i>	– 36.6	Eocene – Oligocene extinction event
		<i>Paleocene</i>	– 57.8	First large mammals appear
MESOZOIC <i>Age of Reptiles</i> 245 mya – 65.5 mya	<i>Cretaceous</i>	<i>Extinction of Dinosaurs</i>	65.5	K-T extinction event Earth looks closer to present-day Flowering plants appear
	<i>Jurassic</i>		144	First Birds appear Pangaea splits into Laurasia, Gondwana Dinosaurs are dominant
	<i>Triassic</i>	<i>First Dinosaurs</i>	208	Pangaea cracks First mammals appear Reptiles are dominant
PALEOZOIC 570 mya – 245 mya	<i>Permian</i>	<i>Age of Amphibians</i>	245	Permian – Triassic extinction event Pangaea forms
	<i>Carboniferous</i>		286	First reptiles appear First large cartilaginous fishes appear
	<i>Devonian</i>	<i>Age of Fishes</i>	360	Late Devonian extinction event First land animals appear First amphibians appear
	<i>Silurian</i>		408	First land plants appear First jawed fishes appear First insects appear
	<i>Ordovician</i>	<i>Age of Invertebrates</i>	438	Ordovician – Silurian extinction event First vertebrates appear
	<i>Cambrian</i>		505	End Botomanian extinction event First fungi appear Trilobites are dominant
PRECAMBRIAN 4600 mya – 570 mya	<i>Proterozoic Eon</i>		570	First soft-bodied animals appear First multicellular life appear
	<i>Achean Eon</i>		2500	Photosynthesizing cyanobacteria appear First unicellular life appear
	<i>Hadean Eon</i>	<i>Priscoan Period</i>	3800	Atmosphere and oceans form Oldest rocks form as Earth cools
<i>Formation of Earth</i>				

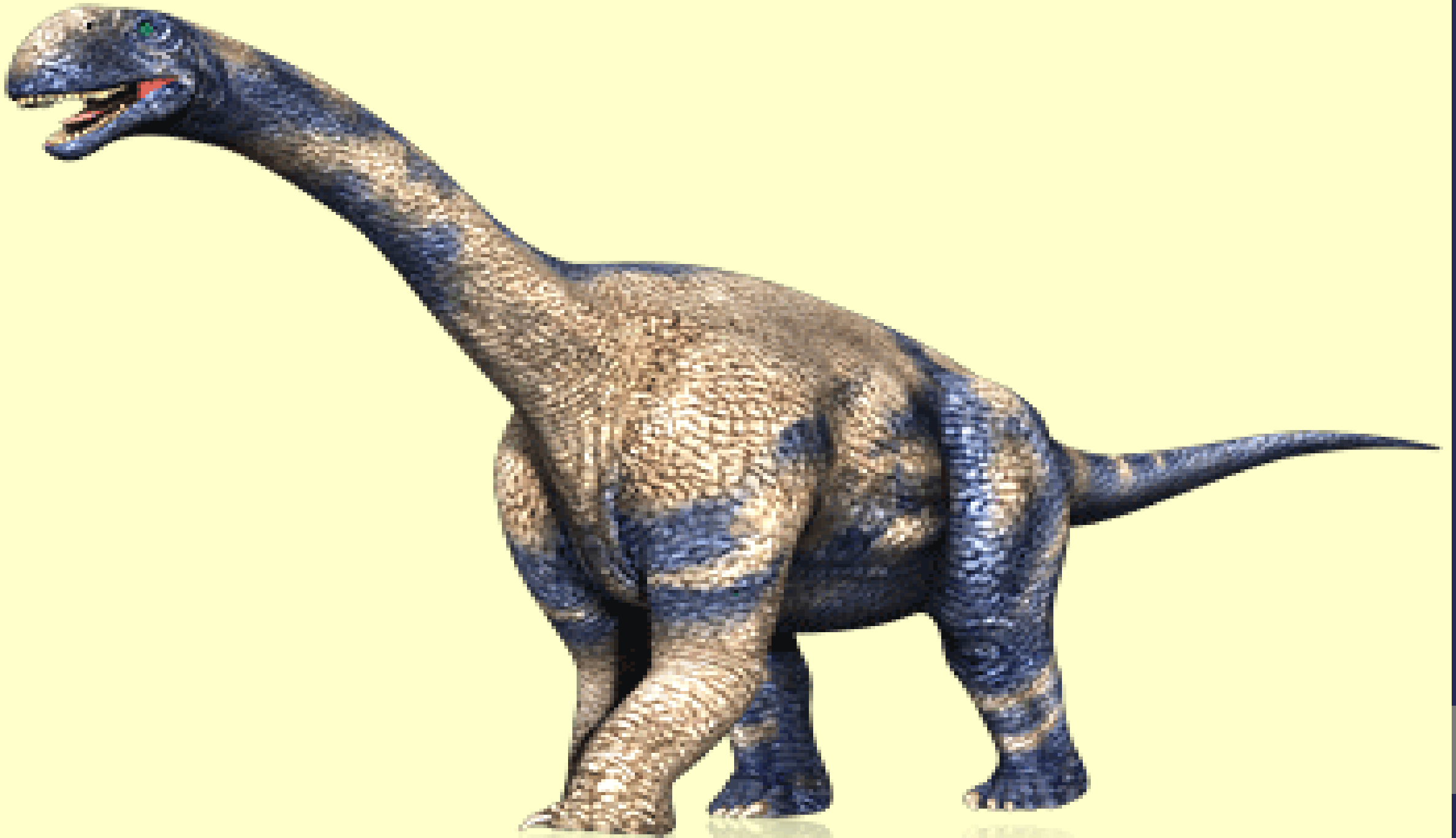
Then you need to subtract something else.

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Geological Time Scale

ERA	PERIOD	EPOCH / AGE	Million Years Ago	EVENTS
CENOZOIC Age of Mammals 65.5 mya - present day	Quaternary	Holocene	Today	Ice Age ends Humans are dominant
		Plistocene	0.01	Earliest Humans appear Ice Age begins
	Tertiary	Pliocene	1.6	Humans (Homo erectus) appear
		Miocene	5.3	Grass becomes widespread
		Oligocene	23.7	Mammals are dominant
		Eocene	36.6	Eocene - Oligocene extinction event
		Paleocene	57.8	First large mammals appear
MESOZOIC Age of Reptiles 245 mya - 65.5 mya	Triassic			
	Jurassic			
	Cretaceous			
PALEOZOIC 370 mya - 245 mya	Permian	Age of Amphibians	270	Permian - Triassic extinction event Fungus forms
	Carboniferous		285	First reptiles appear First large vertebrates taken appear
	Devonian	Age of Fishes	360	Late Devonian extinction event First land vertebrate appear First amphibians appear
	Silurian		400	First land plants appear First ground Silesites appear First insects appear
	Ordovician		430	Ordovician - Silurian extinction event First vertebrates appear
	Cambrian	Age of Invertebrates	505	End Ordovician extinction event First fungi appear Trilobites are dominant
	Pre-Cambrian		570	First soft bodied animals appear First vertebrates life appear
PRECAMBRIAN 4000 mya - 570 mya	Proterozoic			
	Eon		2500	Photosynthesis appears First vertebrates life appear
	Archean			
	Eon		3800	Atmosphere and oceans form Oxygen rich form in Earth's water
	Eon	Proterozoic Period	4000	





What is behind this assumption?

- Does “coverage” mean that if an instructor conveys information in class it is “covered” (Freire’s banking model)?
- What role, if any, do students take in achieving coverage?
- How important is coverage as a teaching goal across the disciplines?

The Survey Questions

- “In connection to your teaching, what does the term ‘coverage’ **mean** to you?”
- “Compared to all of your other goals as an instructor, **how important** is achieving coverage to you in your teaching? Why?”
- “What primarily **influences** your approach to coverage in your teaching?”
- “What is your primary **means** of achieving coverage?”
- “Please describe up to three of the **most significant challenges** to your achieving coverage of course material in your classes.”
- “Has your **attitude** about the importance of coverage **changed** over the course of your teaching career? Please explain”
- “Have your **methods** of achieving coverage **changed** over the course of your teaching career? Please explain.”

The Response

- Fall 2013: 121 faculty responded
- English (19 respondents), theology (12) and business administration (12)
- Other 24 academic disciplines: respondents in the single digits
- Other information:
 - Number of years of teaching experience
 - Status (adjunct, tenure-track, tenured)
 - Gender (60% female, 40% male)
 - Completion of five-day WAC seminar (49% WACed, 51% not [yet] WACed)

What I am Learning

Most faculty highly value coverage as a course goal.

Compared to their other goals as instructors...

- 30% identified achieving coverage as “extremely important”
- 50% as “very important”
- 19% as “neither important nor unimportant”
- 2% “very unimportant”
- 0 chose “not at all important.”

Interestingly...

WAC faculty valued coverage as a course goal equally as much as non-WAC faculty.

Most faculty define coverage as “content”: material being conveyed to students

- 59 of 92 comments define “coverage” strictly in terms of material conveyed to students.

For some, the concept is fairly straightforward:

- “It means covering the period 1600 to 1877 in U.S. History.”
- “Coverage means going over a certain amount of material within a given period of time. Usually, the amount of material to be covered is prescribed by some outside authority (e.g., what students must know before entering the next class level, what students must know to be competent in a given area, etc.).”

Others feel more conflicted:

“To explicitly address or assign a genre or time period or terminology or particular texts that students would be expected to know as an outcome of the course. That is, that **I would feel remiss or irresponsible** in their not knowing. When I use the word ‘coverage,’ though, **I’m usually thinking in a reactive way—that I must ‘cover’ X or Y for students to move up a level or because my colleagues would be appalled** if my course didn’t include X. Coverage feels broad and thin rather than deep. (Still, it exerts **a real pressure.**”

Many also define coverage as including skills

33 of 92 comments define coverage in broader ways that include skills as well as material.

“For me, coverage is not limited to the disseminating of knowledge/content. It also must include **skill development** and **appreciation of dispositions appropriate to the discipline**. Facts are important, but with today’s explosion of knowledge and technology, I think it is more important to learn how to appropriate this knowledge in meaningful and productive ways.”

“I think it’s also possible to think of ‘coverage’ **not** as a set list of **texts or movements** (e.g. ‘we have to cover Twain!’) **but as a range of APPROACHES** to texts (and to writing about texts).”

The reasons faculty value coverage vary

- Students need to know the information or the skills for various reasons. (Philosophy: “To live a meaningful life.”)
- Departmental expectations (mostly humanities)
- Prerequisites for courses to come in which certain knowledge is expected.
- External stakeholders/employers/need for job (more important for business, engineering, hard sciences). On students who are going to be engineers, “People can die” if information is not covered.
- Student expectations/contract with students.
- Responsibility, conscience, moral obligation, integrity of the discipline.

Some faculty perceive a conflict between student expectations about coverage and faculty goals

- Faculty who are working to achieve tenure understandably are concerned with student ratings.

“From my experience, **students think they learn more when there's more coverage** – i.e. they can ‘see’ all the ‘things they've learned’ (facts, knowledge, etc.), which may influence faculty in providing more coverage/breadth. **However, my personal philosophy** is that students actually learn more (and become better learners) when there's more depth (and thus less breadth/coverage), even though they don't necessarily realize it.

This gets at that nebulous ‘critical thinking’ goal - students don't always realize how much their thinking is improved, but can fairly easily determine how much their factual knowledge has increased by the end of the course. I think **this pressures faculty into focusing more on coverage at the expense of depth**, which in my opinion does a disservice to the students, the professors, and the profession. (Now how to combat this... that's the real question!)”

- “... given the heavy emphasis on IDEA scores as a measure of faculty teaching, coverage also must address student satisfaction. **Students feel like they’ve learned something if they memorize long lists of terms and understand what happened when.** So in my teaching, I also must ‘cover’ a clear chronology that covers the time period and geographical area of the course description, and give students the impression that nothing is left out and they know everything they need to know.”

Yet....

- “**I cover less** now because of student resistance [to fact-based instruction].”

Lecture is the primary means of achieving coverage

Overall faculty ranking:

1. Lecture
2. Reading
3. Discussion
4. Writing
5. Online

WAC faculty ranking:

1. Lecture Reading
2. Discussion Reading
3. Writing Reading
4. Writing
5. Online

Yet some faculty strongly critique this means of delivery:

- “**If students do not understand** what is ‘covered’ in lecture, it doesn’t matter whether it was covered.”
- “Lecturing, being the sage-on-the-stage imparting knowledge to students, is the most ineffective teaching method for coverage; and yet teachers persist because it gives them a **sense of control** over the material. Letting students be different in how they approach coverage, through more experiential learning (writing, discussion, peer collaboration) is not as controllable, but it gives the students ownership of learning.”
- “I lecture a little less than I used to—it turns out **I’m not so fascinating** that I need to be the only one talking for an hour at a time.”

Faculty methods of achieving coverage are changeable

- Has their **attitude** towards coverage has changed over time?
 - 59% “yes” 41% “no”
- Have their **methods** of achieving coverage changed over time?
 - 77% “yes” 23% “no.”
- **Most likely to report “yes” to change in methods?**
 - Tenure track faculty and faculty who have participated in the WAC program (86%)
 - Faculty with 20-30+ years of experience (83%).
- **Most likely to report “no” to change in methods?**
 - Faculty who have not participated in the WAC seminar (35%)
 - Faculty with 1-6 years of teaching experience (29%).

The most-cited challenges to achieving coverage are “time” and “students”

Lack of Time

55 citations

- “**Time, time, and time!** With five units, I feel as if I am running a Marathon!”
- “**Too much material.** The longer I am in the field the more I know and the more I think is important.”
- “**Balancing the pace** of the course (recognizing that it takes both time and work for students to "get" something, and doesn't serve anyone well if we move on to the next thing before that happens).”

Lack of Student Preparation

33 citations

- “Students who tell me ‘we never saw that before....’ when **I try to build on material they should have had.**”
- “**Inadequate student preparation** before Physics classes (math and problem solving skills).”

Lack of Student Motivation/Engagement

29 citations

- “1. Students who have **not completed** the reading assignments before coming to class 2. Students who are **reluctant** to participate in class discussions 3. Students who **do not attend** class regularly.”
- “Student motivation and time spent on the course outside of class. If students do not spend enough time outside of class working through problems and understanding concepts, **then we must spend more time in class before we can move on.**”

Not mentioned as often, but significant:

Departmental/Field expectations: 19 citations

- **“Lack of consensus in my department and in my field** generally as to the importance of the actual knowledge base of the field (as opposed to skills and practices).”
- “In our department intro class coverage is determined by department decision, and is very strict and exacting, and encompasses a lot of material. **It is a strain to maintain coverage in that class.**”

What might we take from this?

Given that 80% of faculty surveyed highly value coverage as a course goal,
and given that faculty who have taken the WAC seminar value it as much as other
faculty

*we should not shrink from using the language of coverage when working with
faculty.*

What might we take from this?

While most faculty's ways of defining coverage (material) and achieving coverage (lecture) are predictably traditional,

we can build on the strong undercurrent favoring diversification--that skills and dispositions can be covered along with factual content and that all these things may be covered in a number of ways (including writing).

What might we take from this?

While it's useful to appeal to colleagues' personal teaching goals, given the outside pressures many faculty feel regarding coverage (student evaluations, departmental expectations, prerequisites, accrediting bodies, future employers), *it is also important to acknowledge and address the effect of these influences on how faculty approach coverage.*

What might we take from this?

Faculty can't "cover" material alone. It takes students, too!

Students—their expectations, their resistance, etc.—play a big part in faculty's expressed challenges in achieving coverage.

We can encourage faculty to communicate clearly with their students about what they expect to cover in a course (and why) and what methods they will use to achieve that coverage.

A bonus for us: As the "culture of writing" spreads across campus, students will repeatedly hear from faculty that they are going to "cover" material by having students **DO** things (including writing) and not just lecture. If students hear this more, they may resist less.

What might we take from this?

We can *draw satisfaction and confidence* from the fact that WAC helps our faculty colleagues to become more flexible in their means of achieving coverage.

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