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Abstract
This collection is an informal history of the early years of the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement, as told by some of the people who made this history. If you are reading this, you probably already know that the WAC movement is an effort to improve education by encouraging students to write in many fields (or content areas). What you may not know is that the WAC movement is an extraordinary example of grassroots change in education. In 1984, when the WAC movement was 14 years old, I first started researching the history of attempts to improve students' writing across the curriculum, dating back to the beginnings of mass education in the waning years of the nineteenth century (Russell, Writing). What struck me most often and most forcefully in the early 1990s was that the WAC movement had lasted longer—and involved far more students and teachers—than any previous attempt to improve writing across the curriculum—and there had been many, I found. Now, twenty years later, WAC may well be the largest and longest-lived educational reform movement in the history of American higher education that did not develop a formal organizational structure—with the possible exception of the general education movement. How did that happen?

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Introduction

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David R. Russell

This collection is an informal history of the early years of the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement, as told by some of the people who made that history. If you are reading this, you probably already know that the WAC movement is an effort to improve education by encouraging students to write in many fields (or content areas). What you may not know is that the WAC movement is an extraordinary example of grassroots change in education. In 1984, when the WAC movement was 14 years old, I first started researching the history of attempts to improve students' writing across the curriculum, dating back to the beginnings of mass education in the waning years of the nineteenth century (Russell, Writing). What struck me most often and most forcefully in the early 1990s was that the WAC movement had lasted longer—and involved far more students and teachers—than any previous attempt to improve writing across the curriculum—and there had been many, I found. Now, twenty years later, WAC may well be the largest and longest-lived educational reform movement in the history of American higher education that did not develop a formal organizational structure—with the possible exception of the general education movement. How did that happen?

This book is by and about the people who made that history, people who began, often, as newcomers to education and went on—largely through their involvement in WAC—to become provosts, directors of core curricula, department chairs, deans, heads of teaching and
learning centers, as well as WAC program coordinators. And so WAC spread and gained such staying power, to the extent that it has brought about systemic changes rather than just individual classroom change. Though WAC has been important in secondary schools (and is increasingly so), the most visible institutional change came in higher education, the focus of this book. WAC appeals to the way professors work and think (they have more time to ponder questions and do research), and it appeals to something many of them sense they are lacking (more knowledge about teaching and learning). Further, faculty can and do become administrators, who then have the power to change practice in a way that secondary teachers do not (unfortunately, in my view). Thus, WAC has been a training ground for change agents: WAC coordinators who then go on to support other innovative programs that are in line with WAC principles, forging alliances and spreading the insights that into teaching and learning that come though focusing on learning to write and writing to learn.

The book has three main purposes and three audiences—overlapping, I suspect. First, it's for people interested in the process of educational change, especially when that change takes the form of a movement. From this perspective, the book is a kind of loose case study of one of the longest-lasting and most widespread movements in the history of American education. The WAC movement began with—and maintained—a very informal structure, relying on a network of personal relationships in a community of practitioners in many disciplines, rather than a formal organization (Walvoord). The trade-offs involved offer educational reformers—in WAC and other movements—much food for thought.

Second, it's for people interested in the WAC movement as part of the larger enterprise of literacy teaching and research. The teaching of writing became a professional field at the same time as the WAC movement began. And the emerging field of composition (as it is still usually called) owes much to the WAC movement. This collection makes that debt clear—and also reveals the complex relation between general writing courses, such as first-year composition, and efforts to develop students writing and learning in other courses.

Third, it's for people interested in the history—and future—of WAC. The movement has over the thirty-odd years of its existence involved hundreds (perhaps thousands) of K12 and higher education institutions, tens of thousands of teachers, and millions of students.
The stories collected here enrich the meaning of that diverse and ongoing work, providing (as history often does) new ideas and insights for the future as it opens up the past. I was asked to contribute this introduction because I wrote a book-length history of attempts to improve writing across the curriculum, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, which devotes a chapter to the WAC movement. And readers wanting a more formal overview might begin there. But much is left out in this and other published accounts—very much. And this collection fills in important gaps in the published historical studies.

I'll take up these three purposes one by one, providing some background for the stories that follow and suggesting some of the many themes those stories offer.

**WAC: Case Study in Grassroots Educational Change Movements**

Movements are begun as responses to social needs, but they are begun by human beings, shaped by the decisions of those people, their loves and fears and desires and interests (Giddens). People, not "forces," make a movement happen. These are very much personal stories, stories of intellectual interests developing out of not only institutions and books, but also personal networks, human communities. These sustained and spread the movement despite its lack of formal organization.

As I suggested earlier, the WAC movement did not have an elaborated theory but rather a few powerful ideas, which might be summarized as "Writing to learn; learning to write." Nor did it have a single curricular agenda, but rather a wide range of possible models, to be adapted or rejected according to local institutional needs and personalities. Nor did it have any formal or well-articulated research agenda, but rather a bricolage of theories and methods, without refereed journals or graduate courses or conferences specific to it. It did not, in other words, have the usual means of disseminating ideas and practices in academia.

What it did have was a community. In the stories that follow, we see that community develop in several key ways, mainly relying on personal, face-to-face contact. Over and over we hear of ideas developed in a faculty workshop passed on to another institution when the workshop leader served as a consultant for a day or two. Or spread through a semester or summer visiting professorship, (Maimon to
Penn [see Peterson and Kuriloff this volume]; Weiner to South Dakota [see Bean, this volume]). Or disseminated at a seminar or small conference organized at an institution, as at Beaver College (see Maimon, this volume) or Chicago (see Soven, this volume). Or a rump meeting or special interest group meeting quietly held as a small part of a national conference, as with the National WAC network at CCC the NCTE conference (see Thaiss, this volume). With enough time and records, one could create a map of dissemination by tracing the visits of a few consultants, influencing program directors where they visited, who then became consultants themselves, and so on, to form the network of personal relationships that created the movement. This is evident in the stories that follow, as the contributors tell of a visit that became another node in the network.

Barbara Walvoord, in her essay "The Future of WAC," subtly analyzes this phenomenon well in terms of social movement theory. WAC's early emphasis on "micro, rather than macro, concerns," such as individual faculty adoption, local curricular change, membership, and resources, led to a "quiet and local flowering" (61). It did not seek national publicity, form an agenda—or spawn a counter-movement.

What the movement did do is form useful, if often tentative, alliances with other movements, opportunistically and often serendipitously. Early on, it allied itself in informal and local ways with the National Writing Project (NWP), a program begun in the Bay Area for secondary school teachers that quickly spread nation-wide. WAC borrowed its workshop methods and egalitarian ethic. One may also note, in the stories that follow, alliances formed and reformed with such movements as critical thinking, assessment, general education reform, learning communities (Freshman Interest Groups), writing centers and other student support units, teaching centers, literacy movements, and many others.

This flexibility allowed WAC to get funding from very disparate sources, local, regional, and national. And the quest for funding forms an important theme in these stories as well. Early WAC programs did particularly well in getting federal and foundation monies, not only because they had good ideas for meeting real needs in an environment of expanding access and, later, greater calls for accountability, but also because they could ally themselves with any number of other reforms. Writing is everywhere and everywhere necessary. And the funding fol-
allowed good ideas on how to use writing to accomplish something beyond “fixing” students’ writing.

The flexible, informal organizational structure also allowed WAC to negotiate the treacherous political battles that education, like all organizations, is heir to. As a grassroots movement, protean in form, WAC could “fly under the radar” and escape the fire of more visible and agenda-driven movements, as Walvoord points out (62).

However, the lack of formal organization also involves trade-offs. Thaiss, in his chapter on the National Network of WAC Programs (this volume) provides a very personal and soul-searching inquiry into many of the questions Walvoord and others have raised. He writes, “A mere network lacks the ability of a more formal organization to do many things: create an agenda to focus efforts, issue position statements, establish and publicize standards, conduct statistical surveys of members, and, maybe most basic, ensure continuity through an orderly process of succeeding leadership” I agree with Thaiss that the lack of organization is most evident in the relative slowness of WAC to be adopted in secondary schools, where it might be extremely useful to the profound and contentious reforms (particularly in assessment) affecting secondary education from the 1990s on. And I would add that WAC’s relationship to the professional organization most closely associated with it, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, has become weaker, in many ways, as the direction of CCCC has moved toward a focus on critical pedagogy within courses and away from building articulations between general writing courses and courses in the disciplines and professions—which can and do include critical pedagogy as well.

Whatever directions WAC may take will still depend for their conception and initial execution on the agency and dedication of individuals in the network of personal relationships that formed WAC. And it’s worth noting here that many of the people who created WAC (including many of the contributors to this volume) are now heads of Teaching and Learning centers, department chairs, deans, provosts, and chancellors, as well as leaders in professional organizations that shape secondary and higher education policies and directions. They are in a position to make a difference in ways that were unthinkable twenty or thirty years ago because of the movement they created and sustained.
But the leadership (however dedicated) and organization (however loose) are certainly not the most important factor in WAC’s longevity, as these essays make abundantly clear. The crucial move was to make faculty from many disciplines into what the literature on educational reform calls “change agents,” those who actually make educational reform happen. As McLeod and Miraglia pointed out, extensive research on change agents in school reform found that “pedagogical and curricular change was a problem of the smallest unit, of local capacity and teacher motivation. The most effective change agents were not in fact outside consultants and external developers brought in for the various projects, but rather the teachers themselves” (WAC 21). It was faculty who took insights from workshops into their classrooms and departments that, as Thaiss has pointed out, “remains the basic strategy of WAC faculty development” and a central reason for its longevity (358). It is indeed a grassroots movement, and one that has evolved as faculty have developed in their careers to increasingly influential roles within institutions, carrying with them those colleagues and friends who formed a long-lasting community—and made an increasingly influential movement.

WAC’s Role in the Professionalization of Composition as a Field

WAC’s growth coincided with—and in many ways helped create and shape—the professionalization of composition as a field. In this collection, we sense the excitement of young professionals in English and other fields discovering that the study and teaching of writing could be serious intellectual work, something worth devoting a one’s professional life to. Most were trained in literature (a surprising number in Renaissance literature, oddly enough). But through their contacts with one another at WAC seminars and at professional meetings, they came to find new purpose in their work and create a community that became a movement. Particularly important was the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), which had begun after WWII as a place for composition teachers to meet but grew in the 1970s into a full-fledged professional organization.

The social context of the 1960s and 1970s provided motivation for the professionalization of composition and the creation of WAC. Many of the authors in this collection, like others in the emerging
field of composition, saw their work as having important social significance. Most were students during the campus upheavals of the 1960s, and they came to see teaching writing as a humane and socially responsible way to help previously excluded groups succeed in higher education, as open admissions policies brought an influx of students who had difficulty learning and writing in this new environment. Many colleges, universities, and funding agencies began programs to help these new students. WAC coordinators found administrative and grant support to enlist the aid of faculty in all disciplines to improve students' writing and learning—and success rate. As teachers and researchers of composition interacted with faculty in other disciplines, through workshops and consulting, they glimpsed the great variety and richness of the uses of writing and began to rethink fundamental assumptions that have undergirded general compositions courses for a century.

The formal teaching of writing had been based on skill drills (on the behaviorist model) and the teaching of general strategies focused on forms ("modes"), not processes. This has come to be called the "current-traditional paradigm" of writing instruction. And the research on writing instruction was also primarily behaviorist and focused on inculcating general skills, which were assumed to be readily transferred by students to their writing in other disciplines.

In the 1970s came the first research on writing process, based in cognitive psychology and centered at Carnegie-Mellon University. Cognitive models of how students develop as writers and/or learners (e.g., William Perry, Jean Piaget) were an important topic of discussion in the WAC community, as they might offer help across the disciplines. Graduate programs in composition began, along with expanded research. And classroom practice in general composition courses began to change as a result of this research.

However, as writing teachers began interacting with faculty in other disciplines, through WAC programs, they saw the profound limitations of the current-traditional model and of cognitive models. Cross-disciplinary rhetorical comparisons, spurred by the WAC movement, made the limitations of these generalized approaches even more apparent. Writing came to be seen as a social process, dependent on the communities, organizations, and purposes for which students—and professionals—write. Thus the personal and social as well as behavioral and cognitive psychological dimensions of writing came to be
an object of focus (Nystrand et al.). Drawing on Britton's theory and
the experience of NWP and WAC workshops, classrooms began using
more informal and personal writing as a way of involving students.
Kenneth Bruffee's collaborative model of writing development, devel-
oped in a cross-curricular writing center, was influential ("Collabora-
tive"; Collaborative). There came to be much more small group work,
collaborative writing, and peer editing. As researchers and theorists
looked more widely and deeply at disciplinary activity systems extend-
ing beyond the classroom, some began to focus on the ways discourse
carries on disciplinary and professional activities, and they ways stu-
dents learn in a discipline.

A few researchers began to use ethnographic methods to explore
the variety of ways writing shapes learning in specific disciplines. They
found that students are like "strangers in strange lands" when they are
asked to write in a variety of new disciplines, to borrow the title of one
of the most influential early ethnographic/linguistic studies of WAC
(McCarthy). And research began on what writing in the disciplines is
really like, how, for example, the seemingly humble and ubiquitous
"research paper" takes many forms and has many functions across the
curriculum, reflecting the methods, values, and epistemology of the
discipline. Many general composition courses began to teach students
that writing was different in different disciplines and tied to the kinds
of learning going on in those disciplines. Textbooks by two authors in
this volume, Bazerman (The Informed Writer) and Maimon (Writing
in the Arts and Sciences) (both 1981) were particularly influential in
this regard.

Similarly, the experience of WAC influenced the assessment of
writing. Several of the stories in this collection begin with a composi-
tion director needing to do assessment and finding the old behaviorist
and formalist ideas of assessment inadequate. How do students use
writing to succeed in college? they asked. And to answer that question,
they began to look beyond the traditional composition classroom and
talk to colleagues across the curriculum.

So WAC benefited mightily from the professionalization of com-
position in the 1970s and early 1980s. But WAC also contributed
mightily, in broadening the focus to the role of writing in whole cur-
riculum, in the development of the whole student, and to the whole
range of writing that the general composition courses were—quite un-
realistically—expected, traditionally, to prepare students for. Indeed,
the WAC movement raised the level of awareness of the university community (and in a more modest way, the K-12 community) to writing, thus raising its professional status by making it more widely and directly useful.

**WAC's History and Future**

Today the WAC movement—called variously writing in the disciplines (WID) or communication across the curriculum (CAC), depending on the emphasis—takes a vast number of forms at different institutions, K-graduate school. Perhaps one third of U.S. institutions have some WAC program (McLeod and Soven). These programs are often (but not always) connected with or a part of the general writing courses (first-year and/or upper level), specialized writing courses, composition courses linked to courses or departments in another field, or a writing center/tutoring center. Many WAC programs also exist without any specific curricular connection; instead they are part of faculty development efforts, often under the umbrella of a teaching support center. But they are almost always charged with integrating writing development into the teaching and learning in the various specialized academic programs, through building partnerships. The vast number of forms WAC takes is well illustrated in this volume (for more specific discussions of WAC models, see McLeod, et al.).

The first programs, however, began with faculty in various disciplines sitting down to talk about a felt need—poor writing (or thinking) among students. The "ur-form" of WAC, as I noted above, is a faculty workshop, led by a faculty member from English, ordinarily, but decidedly in the role of leader or facilitator—not trainer or teacher. The model was egalitarian. The faculty workshop was a place to share ideas and practices, not a place to learn from an expert, ordinarily. There faculty not only discussed the particular needs and resources for their students' writing but also how writing works differently in each of their disciplines, how it brings students to deeper involvement with the unique ways of knowing in each—the epistemology—and how they write themselves, professionally and, sometimes, personally. (Fulwiler and Young, this volume) This was a revelation, often, to both English and other faculty, as was the experience of sitting down together and talking seriously about their teaching—a rare experience, unfortunately, for most faculty.
How is such an informal, grassroots practice disseminated to become a movement? The model of dissemination was, as things evolved, that of the “itinerant preacher”—the workshop facilitator (Walvoord 61). Institutions tended to bring in workshop leaders or “WAC consultants” for the faculty. Thus a loose network formed.

The model for many workshops was the NWP. In the NWP model, teachers in a region gather, usually in the summer, to share teaching ideas on improving students writing—and to write themselves. They write and talk and grow together in an egalitarian and collegial community. Though NWP summer retreats attracted mainly English and language arts teachers, teachers from other content areas were welcomed. Often local, regional, or state NWP sites were attached to universities, and the NWP site came to inspire college faculty looking for a way to improve teaching and learning through writing across the curriculum. As the WAC movement spread in higher education more rapidly than in secondary education, the connection between WAC and the NWP became less common or deep, though there are important exceptions (see Thaiss, this volume).

WAC, then, originated as a grassroots effort to improve teaching and learning through writing, without any specific curricular or theoretical agenda. And it has remained that. But WAC quickly found intellectual roots. Actually the WAC movement in the U.S. was directly inspired by a British researcher named James Britton and his colleagues at the University of London Institute of Education, who coined the term WAC. Several of his colleagues figure in the stories told here, such as Nancy Martin and Robert Parker. Britton and his colleagues viewed writing (and talk) as a gradually developing accomplishment, thoroughly bound up with the particular intellectual goals and traditions of each discipline or profession, not as a single set of readily-generalizable skills learned once and for all. Learning to write goes hand in hand with writing to learn, in James Britton’s famous phrase. WAC aims not only to develop students’ writing but, more importantly, to develop learning through writing. The basic idea is that students best learn to communicate when they’re communicating about course material and preparing for professional roles where effective writing (and speaking and visual design) will be vital to their success—and preparing for roles as critically-aware citizens. They learn to write as they write to learn.
In the U.S., this theory of secondary-school writing development was adapted to higher education, which made sense because in U.S. colleges and universities, unlike those in Britain, students take courses in a range of fields rather than specializing immediately. With this basic theory and a basic form of grassroots organization—the faculty workshop and itinerant consultants—the WAC movement was set to contribute to the professionalization of composition and to the reform of American secondary and, especially, higher education.

It is these crucial formative years that the essays in this volume focus on. And an equally rich volume might be written on the years of development in the late 1980s and 1990s when WAC became woven into the fabric of American higher education brought us to the present sprawling diversity of approaches and national—indeed international—awareness. WAC is now becoming an important reform movement in European higher education, with the formation of a professional association, the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing, conferences, national and international, and investments in research and pedagogy (Rienecker et al.). The WAC community is helping to produce 'change agents' worldwide. What then of the future?

The future of WAC has been the subject of much discussion and some controversy—as it must and should be in any growing movement. But what is certain is that this grassroots movement will continue to depend on the kind of personal and collegial commitment that these essays illustrate: a community of change agents.

I have tried here to suggest some themes and issues that struck me as I read these stories. Readers will doubtless find their own, and, I hope, new possibilities for their own work, whether in WAC or in other educational reforms. But in closing, I'd like to remember the breadth and depth of the challenge that the WAC movement took up, to put in perspective its remarkable accomplishments. The WAC movement has taken what is still widely regarded as a single, generalizable skill, learned once and for all at and early age—writing—and re-conceived it as a ubiquitous and powerful tool for developing students and their teachers at all levels in all disciplines in all kinds of institutions. Even more ambitiously, WAC has attempted to simultaneously raise the awareness of students, teaching staff, and policy makers to writing’s powerful and varied role in learning and teaching and work, while at the same time integrating efforts to improve writing into the
specialized studies and activities writing serves—instead of segregating it and holding it in the domain of some discipline, or, worse, keeping it on the margins, where it has historically been in academia.

The movement has succeeded to the extent that now educators in other nations are looking to the WAC movement for inspiration and ideas for transforming their systems of education. WAC has expanded because it meets a deep need of people in modern societies, to connect with each other. It connects us to one another in powerful ways. And by learning to write in new ways, students are expanding their learning and thinking—and their involvement with different worlds that make up our world. The WAC movement has found and is continually finding ways to help students enter and eventually transform powerful organizations of people, lives linked by the written word, in ways so pervasive and daily that we forget sometimes how powerful writing is to our futures—and the futures of our students. So if students learn by expanding their involvements, so too must the WAC movement learn by expanding, as it has for a third of a century now. The future of WAC, like its past, is about forging alliances, expanding with new connections. And I’m terribly optimistic about its future.

As Barbara Walvoord pointed out, WAC—like so many other movements—may be transformed through its alliances and involvements into something that looks very different than the movement today. It might not even be called WAC. But the deep principles on which the WAC movement was founded, and to which it has persistently held, should continue to undergird whatever new transformations we create. These principles were articulated beautifully at the 1997 National WAC conference by Elaine Maimon (“Time”). Here they are:

- Writing is a complex process integrally related to thinking.
- WAC means active learning across the curriculum.
- Curriculum change depends on scholarly exchange among faculty members.
- Writing helps students make connections.
- WAC helps faculty members make connections, with students and with each other.
- WAC leads to other reforms in pedagogy, curriculum, and administration.

In the stories that follow, we see these principles in the making, in the words of several of the makers.
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