EVALUATING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM


Though the call for accountability in higher education is hardly new (even some of Plato's dialogues might be read in that light), it has taken on an increasingly strident tone in the last decade as political and economic stakes have risen. Questions of educational aims and achievements occur in public forums ranging from legislative hearings to talk shows, often framed in simplistic and even hostile terms.

In light of the political/economic pressure that such discussions put on education, the nearly simultaneous appearance of these three books involving the assessment of writing across the curriculum (WAC) is apt, if faintly ironic, since what we know today as WAC originated in the early 1970s in response to a similarly public concern for educational reform. One well-known manifestation of that concern—the December 9, 1975,

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Newsweek cover story, “Why Johnny Can’t Write”—is usually identified as the inciting factor in the establishment of one of the leading early WAC programs. At Beaver College, Elaine Maimon was summoned by her dean, handed the magazine, and charged with finding a solution. In response, Maimon began working with faculty in disciplines across the campus to use writing to improve pedagogy (Russell 15-16). Though perhaps with less dramatic beginnings, faculty in varied disciplines at other campuses were already discussing ways they might help students improve their writing. As early as 1970, for example, interdisciplinary WAC workshops were taking place at Central College in Pella, Iowa, occasions sometimes identified as the beginnings of the WAC movement (Walvoord 75). Within a few years, Toby Fulwiler and Art Young would develop another highly visible WAC program at Michigan Technological University (their account prefaces the Yancey and Huot collection). The growth of similar programs was rapid, with some estimates suggesting that as many as a third of the country’s institutions of higher education had some sort of WAC program by 1987 (McLeod 103).

Accounts of these early programs stress the ad hoc nature of WAC as a response to perceived local needs. Not surprisingly, then, the configurations of these programs varied greatly, as is evident in such early collections as Fulwiler and Young’s Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum, Susan H. McLeod’s Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum, and McLeod and Margot Soven’s Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs. Despite apparent differences in operations and structures, two basic approaches underlie most WAC programs. One stresses the heuristic value of writing, advocating the use of personal writing as a means of discovery. Often associated with the phrase “writing to learn,” this approach makes heavy use of short informal writing assignments. The other prevailing approach seeks to introduce students to the professional discourse of the fields they are preparing to enter. Sometimes called writing in the disciplines (WID) to distinguish it from the other model, this approach puts particular emphasis on disciplinary conventions and forms. Even though some WAC practitioners see these approaches as antithetical and some programs are built exclusively on one or the other of them, it is not unusual for schools to view them as complementary and combine them. However, even a cursory look at program descriptions and at the larger body of WAC scholarship suggests that these underlying assumptions are not always clearly defined.
Likewise, accounts of early WAC programs often stress the voluntary participation of teachers, emphasizing their enthusiasm and idealism. Having backgrounds in a wide range of academic disciplines and usually lacking formal training in composition and rhetoric, these practitioners were—in an entirely praiseworthy sense—amateurs. That is, their efforts were born of their love of teaching and their concern for their students. And, from the beginning, they were concerned to assess their efforts. Articles championing WAC practices usually included informal before-and-after observations, sometimes following the pattern of the testimonial or conversion story. Somewhat more formally, Laurence Behrens was reporting data from faculty surveys in 1978, and Fulwiler’s “How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?” (1984) synthesized information he had been collecting over the first five years of the program he directed. On the whole, though, attempts at assessment were not pursued systematically or on a particularly large scale. Certainly, WAC practitioners worked conscientiously to evaluate and improve their programs, but there was no marked sense of urgency. Few people involved in WAC were trained in assessment techniques; moreover, it was clear that most standard educational measurements were unable to detect growth in writing abilities—let alone evaluate it. For that matter, the general satisfaction of program participants created no real exigence for the complex, time-consuming efforts that would be required to master those techniques or create new ones.

Today, of course, the exigence for continuous assessment is inescapable: budget constraints require the curtailment or elimination of unproductive expenditures; changes in institutional culture, such as the adoption of principles derived from the TQM and CQI movements, cast students in the role of customers; developments in technology create new ways in which to package and deliver the educational product to those customers; waning public confidence in the quality of education, undoubtedly exacerbated by media accounts of various crises and conflicts within academe, is leading to calls for certifying student “competencies” and focusing on “learning outcomes.” In this new climate, WAC, with its quarter century of history, is no longer an innovative solution but part of the institution and subject to the same sorts of scrutiny.

That scrutiny is complicated by the factors sketched above—WAC’s informal origins, its rapid growth, the diversity of programmatic configurations, and its multiple and not always clearly defined aims.
Taken together, the three books under consideration here suggest something of the range of current assessment practices being applied. They suggest, too, the larger stakes that may not at first be evident.

WAC practitioners will probably be drawn first to the collection edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot. Written by some of the best-known figures associated with WAC, these fourteen essays constitute a microcosm of the field. Despite the diversity of the programs represented, certain commonalities of approach to assessment emerge quickly. Older positivistic methods are rejected; instead, most of the writers work from a social constructionist perspective, many of them drawing heavily on Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln's *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Whether the investigators concentrate on working with faculty or students (or occasionally both), they are concerned with empowering the subjects of the investigation and sensitive to their own inability to remove themselves from the investigation. Recognizing that all knowledge is situated, the writers provide revealing descriptions of the programs in which they are working (making institutional power structures part of those accounts) and providing copies of surveys or other instruments, often including the data gathered as well. In short, composition specialists are likely to find the landscape of this approach to assessment much more familiar than they might have expected.

At the same time, those new to using this approach to assessment will find much of practical value here. The opening group of essays lays out many of the issues involved in assessment, making underlying assumptions explicit. Though all are useful, complementary essays by Cynthia L. Selfe and Martha A. Townsend make an excellent starting point. Selfe provides a compact yet clear historical overview of recent developments in assessment and a lucid exposition of the contextual model she endorses. She concludes with a brief set of strategies to illustrate how this model might work in practice. Townsend reverses the emphasis, outlining the model briefly and then working through its application in more detail. Taken together, these two pieces constitute an effective short course on the topic.

Readers will no doubt be attracted to other essays on the basis of their own needs. Those concerned that the evaluator's own values will unduly dominate the evaluation, for example, will find much of interest in the articles by Barbara Walvoord ("From Conduit to Customer: The Role of WAC Faculty in WAC Assessment") and by Raymond Smith and Christine Farris ("Adventures in the WAC Assessment Trade:

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Reconsidering the Link Between Research and Consultation”). Likewise, Christopher Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawicki’s “How Portfolios for Proficiency Help Shape a WAC Program” points to an unanticipated indirect source of information about the status of writing in classes across the campus.

 Extremely useful in another way is “WAC Assessment and Internal Audiences,” a dialogue between Richard Haswell and Susan McLeod that ought to be required reading for any writing program administrator. Their conversation addresses one of the consistent themes in the volume, the rhetorical nature of assessment. McLeod, an associate Dean of Liberal Arts, explains the differing needs of various administrators and suggests appropriate forms for meeting those needs. Together, they also identify six areas in which conflicting points of view commonly create misunderstandings between an evaluator and an administrator: the clash between a vision of a part and a vision of the whole; the clash between description and action; the clash between problem discovery and problem solving; the clash between expert and public understanding; the clash between the need for truth and the need for usefulness; and the clash between abstractions and personalities (232-34).

 As the penultimate essay, that dialogue raises some extremely important questions about the dozen that have preceded it. In terms of the six “clashes” Haswell and McLeod identify, many of the other authors are strongly committed to the evaluator’s side of the conflict, sometimes in explicit opposition to the side aligned here with larger administrative concerns. To be sure, those essays are addressed to other evaluators, not administrators, and they take up comparatively localized programmatic issues. Still, evaluators often must address an audience that does not share the views of assessment presented here. Reports of the demise of logical positivism are much exaggerated; outside of academe, and sometimes inside as well, it remains a powerful presence in debates about education. Moreover, data collected for purposes of formative evaluation can easily be turned to summative ends. If such concerns fall outside the scope of these essays, future work on contextual evaluation would do well to confront them directly.

 In the Long Run shares many of the assumptions underlying Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum, but the book-length format allows it to be more ambitious in scope than any of the individual essays. Examining WAC over a period of years at three different schools, the authors concentrate on its impact on faculty, including its impact on teaching philosophy and career patterns. In the opening chapter the
authors write that their study differs from most earlier ones that focused on faculty in not imposing a WAC “orthodoxy” to which teachers are expected to conform. “We did not want to interpret teacher change as ‘resistance’ or as regrettably slow and incomplete progress toward ‘complete implementation’ of our agenda,” they explain. “Rather, we wanted to understand WAC’s role in teacher-directed, multifaceted, career-long development, driven by the teacher’s struggle to define a self, to balance constraints, to maintain control, and to realize educational objectives in ways consonant with that teacher’s own personal vision and wisdom of practice” (16).

Not surprisingly, the results of the authors’ attempts to realize this goal are somewhat mixed. They start by laying out the context and methods of their study, beginning with the differences in the institutions they describe: the University of Cincinnati, a doctoral, research-oriented school with 36,000 students, where WAC was implemented in 1989; Towson State University, a school offering baccalaureate and master’s degrees to 15,000 students, where WAC was implemented in 1976; and Whitworth College, a private liberal arts school of 2,000, where WAC was implemented in 1987. The authors acknowledge that, though different, their institutions are not broadly representative; however, they note, common themes emerge from the data, and they concentrate on those themes rather than the institutional context. While defensible, this decision does downplay a crucial factor in faculty teaching and career patterns. At most schools tenure and promotion decisions are said to be based on publication, teaching, and service, with each of those factors receiving different degrees of emphasis at different types of institutions. As a student-centered approach to teaching, WAC often demands substantial investments of teacher time that could more profitably (literally) be devoted to publication efforts. Likewise, many students still regard writing as the province of English classes, a view that may affect term-end evaluations. Almost nothing is said of such institutional pressures in connection with any of the faculty surveyed here (e.g., the faculty member representing the “Road Not Taken” pattern did not take up WAC because he saw it is peripheral to this subject area). In a study that so conscientiously foregrounds “political” concerns, its absence is puzzling.

That absence may be accounted for, at least in part, by some bias in the sample, as the authors themselves note. Explaining their decision to deal with faculty who entered WAC earliest (and thus were best suited to talk about the “long run” of the title), the authors acknowledge that these “early adopters” are likely to be comfortable with risk. Noting, too, the
large proportion of women in their survey, they say that “this book may reflect the faculty who, either through ethnic and gender socialization or through temperament, are most amenable to the student-centered approaches of WAC” (27-28). Though such frank and clear-sighted acknowledgment is welcome, the authors say nothing more of the significance of this possibility or its implications for their larger project.

The final chapters of *In the Long Run* (“WAC and Faculty Career Patterns” and “Conclusions and Implications”) also show this curious pattern of recognizing limitations but not pursuing their larger implications. The career patterns emerging from surveys and interviews fall into six categories: “The Road Not Taken,” “WAC on Hold,” “Embracing, Then Winnowing,” “Little by Little,” “The Road to Damascus,” and “New Worlds.” The names, arrangement, and space devoted to each are telling. Each of the first five patterns is covered in under a page, with a brief representative statement drawn from a faculty member who fits into that category. The culminating “New Worlds” section consists of two fully developed essays by two faculty members and runs to eleven pages. The second, by one of the coauthors of the volume, recounts the “major career transformation” experienced by “a hardworking, gently introverted, limelight-shunning English professor” (130), who also reports “increased assertiveness, leadership, and speaking confidence” among the “intangible” effects of his exposure to WAC (132). Is it any wonder, then, that the authors are collectively “aware that the ‘testimonial’ genre still influences [their] report” (139)? While it’s possible to admire the authors’ self-awareness on this point, they seem to adopt a fatalistic view toward the presence of this genre and make little attempt to minimize this influence when it could be done.

*Public Discourse and Academic Inquiry* differs considerably in its approach from the other two books. Whereas those insider accounts concentrate on assessing WAC as a largely self-contained part of academe, William Craig Rice approaches WAC from the outside, as part of a much larger concern. Charging that academic professionalism seriously limits public engagement in American intellectual life, Rice brings his subject into manageable bounds by limiting his inquiry to a single area. Here he is concerned particularly with “how effectively writing programs in colleges and universities serve the life-long involvement of students and graduates in public intellectual culture.” His goals—and his expectations—are high: “These programs at their best might become centers of rhetorical education, forums where questions posed by educated citizens are deepened through exposure to the thinking
of experts and scholars, who would themselves be held to more inclusive and generous standards of communication and intelligibility” (12).

Because WAC explicitly introduces students to new intellectual communities and sets out to make contact between different audiences, Rice has chosen to examine it more closely. Rather than surveying faculty or gathering syllabi, Rice investigates the claims of WAC through a close analysis of fourteen textbooks designed specifically for WAC, which forms the bulk of the long second chapter of his book (“The Success and Failure of Writing Across the Curriculum”). His conclusions are mixed. Tabulating and categorizing the readings in these texts, he finds that most of them come from nonacademic authors and from academic authors writing for nonspecialist readers. This finding, he says, sharply contradicts the claim that WAC initiates students into disciplinary discourse communities; at the same time, however, Rice sees in this reliance on nonacademic sources a “pronounced public dimension” that does help initiate students to “sources vitally important to the larger intellectual culture” (22).

Moving beyond this introductory level of WAC in the third chapter (“History as a ‘Public Utility’”), Rice turns to a single discipline, examining the engagement of academic historians in public life. In this narrower context, he devotes less attention to WAC, but his reaction is once again mixed. Briefly acknowledging that he has “heard next to nothing that would cast doubt on the effectiveness of the upper-level initiatory function of writing across the curriculum” (88), Rice concentrates on a single textbook, Writer’s Guide: History (1988, part of D. C. Heath series of discipline-specific writing texts), noting that it, like the textbooks surveyed in the previous chapter, initiates students to the field by relying more heavily on nonacademic writers than on specialists writing for other specialists.

Certainly, some of Rice’s methods and findings are open to question. While textbooks would seem to reflect their authors’ intentions, textbooks are notoriously subject to all sorts of economic and political pressures that will affect their content. In addition, the manner in which a textbook is employed in a classroom depends entirely on the instructor who has adopted it. In the chapter on history, the vague reports of the success of the “initiatory function” of WAC in advanced courses deserve to be weighed against the single specialized textbook examined there. In short, the evidence from textbooks does not appear quite so conclusive as Rice suggests.
These reservations are comparatively minor in that they have little impact on Rice’s central concern, which goes well beyond WAC. In the final chapter, “Presentism, Public Discourse, and the Teaching of Writing,” Rice returns to writing programs in a larger sense, raising questions of how they might best fulfill their promise as centers of rhetorical education. Committed to what he labels “liberal education in a democracy” along Deweyan lines (11-12), Rice warns against making political issues central in the composition classroom. Without arguing for the complete abolition of those issues, he contends that, in making the classroom a “site” of contention, “the Left-activist academic argument goes well beyond the simple and transparently true assertion that teaching inevitably has political dimension” (131). Rice cites some particularly provocative statements of Richard Ohmann and James R. Bennett, judging their arguments to be “professionally self-destructive, politically suspect, and—saddest of all, given that we are talking about teaching—pedagogically condescending” (133). However, Rice is not wholly critical of these developments, since they do favor “an increased reliance on public intellectual discourse in writing programs” (138). He concludes by examining two examples of forms this discourse has taken: the much-publicized battles in the college writing program at the University of Texas in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the WAC movement as revealed in the textbooks he has examined. In endorsing the WAC model as preferable, Rice notes, with some surprise, something of a Left-leaning bias in the selections in those textbooks; nevertheless, he is pleased to find an ideological balance in them and enough diversity of topic and approach to prevent their becoming too doctrinaire. He has particularly high praise for Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz’s *The Presence of Others*, which “shows an inspiring willingness to include multiple viewpoints, all the way from the Reptilian Right to the Hallucinatory Left” (145). This approach typifies the sort of open debate that Rice sees as the key to renewed public intellectual culture.

No matter whether one accepts or rejects Rice’s argument, it suggests something of the way in which the evaluation of WAC—indeed, the evaluation of any writing program—can be taken far beyond the ends most internal evaluators would intend or perhaps even imagine. Such books as *Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum* represent real advances in the field as writing assessment moves away from its positivistic origins in directions that seem more appropriate to composition specialists; at the same time, however, those new directions
will not automatically be accepted outside that community. In this context, the importance of recognizing and responding to the rhetorical dimension of assessment can hardly be overstated.

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Works Cited