lications (1987), Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing (1990), and Candace Spigelman’s recent Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups (2000). The multi-vocality of this edition makes it less conclusive, perhaps even a bit less coherent than less ambitious works; but, as the editors rightly suggest, the real strength of this volume will be the many questions opened for readers who care to jump into the conversation.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by R. Mark Hall, California State University, Chico

Mark Waldo’s case for discipline-based WAC programs housed in writing centers begins with an apt counter-reading of the Bible story of the Tower of Babel. God may have punished the ancient Babylonians with the confusion of tongues for attempting to build a tower to reach the heavens, but such an ambitious structure, Waldo points out, could not have been achieved with one universal language in the first place. Building would have required communication in and among multiple discourse communities, including architecture, mathematics, brick-laying, carpentry and so forth, each with its own particular ways of imagining the project, thinking, and speaking. The university, Waldo argues, with its varied disciplinary specialties, is a Tower of Babel. In order to facilitate student writing amid the clamor of confusing and sometimes contradictory professional discourses, WAC programs should loosen ties to the assumptions and values about writing in composition studies and, instead, foster dialogic relationships with disciplines, helping them to identify and teach their own values for writing, not ours.

Waldo’s guiding assumption—that one writing doesn’t fit all—is not new, but is supported by decades of literacy research, which shows that writing is bound by the genre conventions of a particular context, with its own ways of thinking.
literacy practices, forms, and rules for writing. Writing is not a single universal, transferable set of skills, which once learned students may take with them anywhere, like items in a backpack, to apply to any course or writing situation. Writing is determined by its role in a particular activity in a specific circumstance. Novices learn by practicing writing in a specialized context, for a particular purpose, addressed to an actual audience. Waldo’s WAC reflects a university characterized by multiple language communities—each with contextualized values, purposes, and genres, with no single discipline’s values superior to another. WAC programs, including multi-layered, discipline-based writing assessments, should be tailored to the local, community-based needs of disciplines within a particular institution.

Chief among his targets, Waldo takes aim at the commitment in composition studies to writing-to-learn. In his view, writing-to-learn promotes the values of “process-expressivism,” including writing as a recursive process, peer response group workshops, free writing, journal writing, and developing the writer’s personal perspective. Writing-to-learn may be an option for disciplinary faculty who chose it, but its values may clash with learning to write in the disciplines. “Writing to learn,” Waldo asserts, “is a set of values for writing developed largely in the context of the discipline of composition studies. It belongs mostly to one discipline. Not shared across the disciplines, it cannot complement learning to write” (11). By contrast, learning to write in disciplinary-specific genres and conventions is a universal value. WAC should let composition do the work of process-expressivism and let other disciplines apply their own tenets for teaching writing. WAC should focus less on promoting disciplinary expertise in composition and turn its attention, instead, to learning and promoting the writing values and agendas of the disciplines.

Because writing centers are already uniquely positioned to facilitate student writing in multiple contexts via cross-curricular agendas for writing, WAC programs housed in English Departments should free themselves from the narrow perspective of English to join with independent writing centers in order to recognize and facilitate divergent values, purposes, and genres for writing across the university. Writing centers should be staffed primarily by experienced graduate students from across the disciplines, trained not only in writing in their chosen specialties, but also in recognizing differences in language use and genre conventions. Effective discipline-based tutors need also to be steeped in the theory and practice of cognitive development, in particular, how language and writing are learned.

Waldo’s argument is compelling because it is based upon copious data gathered in his own writing center at the University of Nevada, Reno, since 1989. He has carefully analyzed an array of writing center statistics, tutor reviews, and hundreds of student interviews and faculty surveys. Additionally, Waldo makes a strong case for the material and ethical consequences of teaching writing in and across language communities. He ends by proposing an upper-division capstone course within each department, which would invite students to examine “the issues of difference between discourse communities, a disciplinary code of ethics, and a common language of collaboration” among specialties (165). For Waldo, there
is, in addition to the discourses of the disciplines, a universal or cross-disciplinary language that specialists must share in order to solve complex problems—such as global warming—collaboratively. In order to become responsible professionals and stewards of the earth and its resources, students must learn to communicate and problem-solve not only within specialties, but between them, and to become reflective practitioners, considering and acting upon the ethical consequences of their decisions even as they make them.

Where *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy* invites debate is in Waldo’s critique of writing-to-learn. Of course compositionists in WAC should learn and facilitate the writing values of the disciplines, but I’m not yet convinced that writing-to-learn is incompatible with learning to write. The weakness in Waldo’s argument stems from his narrow view of writing-to-learn as the helpmate of process-expressivism. If disciplinary genres are not merely forms for writing, but forms of thinking and acting, then writing-to-learn seems essential to developing understanding of key disciplinary concepts, influential theorists and practitioners, historical movements, competing paradigms, and so forth—in short, the thinking and activities of a discipline. Writing-to-learn need not be expressivist. Its purpose may be tailored to the discipline. For instance, while a learning-to-write goal in biology may be to practice the form and syntax of a lab report by writing up the results of an experiment involving gall wasps, a complimentary writing-to-learn activity to develop understanding of the formal features of such a report might invite students first to examine an expert model, identify, and then write informally about the role of rhetorical features, such as analogies and metaphors in scientific prose. Students might collaborate with classmates to brainstorm analogies and metaphors to distinguish the oak apple gall wasp and its gall from that of the oriental chestnut gall wasp. The purpose would not be to develop the writer’s personal perspective or “voice,” but to learn disciplinary concepts and to practice identifying and making rhetorical moves valued in biology.

I also question Waldo’s assertion that process pedagogy is the domain of composition studies and need not be a tenet of writing instruction elsewhere. While honoring the writing values of other professional discourses, as literacy specialists, WAC personnel should not ignore our expertise, which we should use occasionally to prompt disciplines to question and, at times, even modify their values. For instance, in Waldo’s list of values compiled by nursing faculty, sentence-level correctness ranks first, while meeting the assignment takes last place. Waldo justifies this attention to form over function because in a court of law a poorly written treatment plan may cause a jury to doubt a nurse’s competence, not only as a writer, but as a medical professional. What Waldo overlooks is that nursing students are not professional nurses. They are novice-learners practicing how to write treatment plans, whose genre requirements, to the beginner, may appear quite mysterious. As learners, students need room to make mistakes. Indeed, mistakes may be evidence of learning. Research has taught us that when novice writers attend too early and too narrowly to sentence-level correctness, meaning
making suffers. What good is a treatment plan with no misspellings if the treatment described harms the patient? Expertise in writing pedagogy might prompt nursing faculty to reconsider their values. Discussions about the necessity of putting content before form might encourage faculty to devote attention to writing processes, to teach students strategies for proofreading and editing, and to maintain correctness an important goal, while accepting that error-free prose is unlikely—perhaps even an unfair expectation—of a novice. Such discussions might lead faculty to value student learning as more than merely the ability to produce error-free prose. In short, there are values we ought to encourage our colleagues across the disciplines to implement for more effective writing instruction.

What I found to argue with in Waldo’s text I also count among its strengths. In sharing his book with colleagues and talking to them about Waldo’s recommendations, I found myself, again and again, in lively, provocative, and sometimes contentious conversations. As a writing center director at a university which has recently axed an effective WAC program, much like the discipline-based design Waldo advocates, his book confirmed our theory and practice, while helping me to imagine how I and others interested in improving the teaching and learning of writing on our campus might—once again—make a new case for this essential resource. Writing center and WAC personnel, including graduate students interested in program design and administration, will find Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy engaging reading. With his careful research, graceful prose, and good humor, Waldo’s is an important perspective to add to any writing program library.

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