
Reviewed by Brennan Collins, Georgia State University.

In the early 1970s, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) began as a grassroots effort to improve educational practices by applying two compelling concepts—writing to learn and writing in the disciplines. The movement is still loosely held together by these basic ideas, but WAC programs have taken on various forms depending on purpose, emphasis, organizational structure, and institutional support. Although there is still no national organization to guide the direction of individual WAC programs, the current success of the movement can be measured in part by the number of schools linking WAC to accreditation plans in recent years. As many programs experience this shift from bottom-up educational reform to top-down institutional initiatives, it is an ideal time to look back on the history of the movement.

Composing a Community, edited by Susan H. McLeod and Margot Iris Soven, offers a chance to reflect upon the early development of WAC. The book is a collection of eleven personal histories written by many of those involved in the early years of the movement. As John C. Bean suggests about his and the other narratives in the book, the beginning of the WAC movement is “a story of serendipity and community” (115). These themes provide a common thread throughout the narratives; the contributors did not know what would happen when they brought faculty from different disciplines together to discuss teaching, learning, and writing. Because the essays are from the perspective of those who were in the early stages of the WAC movement, the reader gets a sense of both the excitement and the anxieties about creating something new. The successes and failures do not seem inevitable as WAC grew from workshops and retreats to a nationally recognized movement.

The essays provide both the larger historical context of WAC’s beginnings as well as the particular and often personal details of the movement. By the early 1970s, educators had to come to terms with the fact that college was no longer only for the elite. Several of the narratives briefly discuss the opening of higher education to a more diverse body of students and the resulting perception of a “literacy crisis” epitomized by the 1975 Newsweek article “Why Johnny Can't Write.” In a sometimes hostile climate, these pioneers of the movement had to negotiate between calls for them to be grammar drill sergeants and what they understood as the actual educational needs of their students. The contributors all understood the significance of writing, but they knew that “Grammar Across the Curriculum” was not the solution.
Through trial and error in their own classrooms and through conversations and disagreements with other faculty members, the fundamentals of WAC took shape. Writing needs to continue beyond freshman composition. Students gain critical thinking skills when they write. Disciplinary conventions of writing must be taught to students. The narratives in *Composing a Community* provide the details of the individual experiences that led to these commonalities, the chance discoveries that occurred when faculty members came together from many disciplines in workshops, retreats, and conferences to talk about the needs of their students. By bringing together personal accounts, the collection captures the sense of “serendipity and community” that would most likely be missing from a textbook history of the movement. Readers can identify with stories like Barbara Walvoord’s humorous account of the birth of the movement: “In spring of 1970, when my Chaucer seminar failed to make its enrollment quota, I was worried that the department chair would give me another section of comp with another 25 weekly themes to read. So, ironically, WAC began when a young, overburdened faculty member tried to escape having to deal with more student writing” (144).

Beyond history, the book offers useful models for those involved in the development or restructuring of WAC programs. The collected experiences of the contributors provide powerful insights because these teachers from widely varying institutions have had similar successes and failures. What comes through most clearly in the narratives is the significance of setting up faculty development workshops. Although a relatively simple idea, this is the most common model of spreading WAC pedagogy. Faculty from different disciplines so rarely have a chance to sit down and talk to one another, and again and again the contributors write about their excitement in being able to facilitate these discussions. The bottom-up nature of these workshops is another common theme in the book. Indeed, much of WAC’s success has relied on faculty to faculty relationships. Although these early programs sometimes had the support of administrators, several of the narratives point out the dangers in top-down directives. Teachers are likely to try writing-to-learn assignments when they hear of the successes their colleagues have had; attempts at administrative mandates are bound to meet with anger and resistance. Several of the contributors stress the need to involve K-12 teachers, to introduce them to WAC concepts, but also for the insights that these teachers can bring to the table. Other helpful points in the narratives include the importance of communicating with other institutions, the value of gathering assignments and student writing to provide models, and the necessity of keeping WAC workshops interdisciplinary.

While *Composing a Community* offers much wisdom to those involved in building a WAC program or interested in the history of the move-
ment, it is not a handbook. The narrative structure that makes the collection compelling for the reader already participating in the community makes it impractical for the classroom teacher interested in trying out WAC concepts. The book is not meant to be an introduction to the basic principles of WAC. It does not offer an array of writing-to-learn assignments. This is a history of the movement told by those who were there, and, as such, is a collection of accounts that are to be read as stories. Even for the intended audience, the book can be, at times, tedious. The narratives are bursting with names of organizations, grants, conferences, WAC programs, schools, and individuals. This archiving of facts may be indispensable for the historian, but for other readers, the amount of detail is often distracting, particularly as many details are repeated from one narrative to the next.

*Composing a Community* is meant for a relatively narrow audience already invested in the WAC community. At a time when many programs are moving away from WAC’s grassroots beginnings, the collection provides a resource for those who are concerned with the direction the movement now takes. Because this is a history, the majority of narratives do not speak to the current situation. Chris Thaiss is the only contributor who hesitantly considers the question of WAC’s future. At the conclusion of his second chapter in the book he wonders whether WAC might now benefit from a more formal structure than the National Network of WAC Programs he helped build. A national organization, he argues, could “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” (139). As one of the early members of the WAC community, Thaiss understands the bottom-up history of the movement, but he worries that the lack of a central organization has sometimes lead to misunderstandings about fundamental ideas. WAC pedagogy has spread because it works. As WAC grows, those involved in the community need to discuss the future of the movement. *Composing a Community* allows that discussion to be grounded in an understanding of the movement’s past.

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