

**University of Windsor
Senate**

5.8.2: **Action Plan Working Group on Writing Across the Curriculum – Final Report**

Item for: **Approval**

Forwarded by: **Academic Management Group**

Background

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Committee was formed in September 2001 in response to a generally acknowledged need for more attention to students' writing at the University of Windsor.

Writing Across the Curriculum is a practical and theoretical stance that views writing as both a means of communicating and a way of making knowledge, thus implicitly acknowledging the need to help students improve their writing and to become active learners and makers of knowledge within their own disciplines. (For more information on the Writing Across the Curriculum approach at the University of Windsor, please see appendix A).

During the academic year 2001-2002, two experts in the field were brought in to provide some expertise on how we might proceed in addressing this issue in our own context. In addition, we conducted a literature review of current approaches to the goals of proficiency in writing in the disciplines in Canada and United States and sent two faculty members to attend national conferences on WAC. In short, we developed some internal expertise to inform our own action plan, which was started in September of 2002.

Based on these initial investigations, and assessing the internal needs and climate of this institution, the committee decided to adopt a writing-to-learn focus during the 2002-2003 phase of development of WAC on campus. First, we initiated a three-pronged approach, which included: faculty exposure through visits to departmental meetings; two articles in CFL Explorer; and a mini-session at the recent Cracker Barrel session. Secondly, 46 faculty members participated in two 2-hour workshops on writing-to-learn strategies (See appendix B & C). Thirdly, we began to collect data on current writing practices through an examination of course outlines on campus. The multi-faceted WAC initiatives served to promote WAC as a multi-perspective approach and allowed faculty to reflect on their own teaching and to explore ways in which to incorporate WAC into their curriculum. The WAC Committee envisages the next phase of the process as one that will build on the foundations that have been established over the past two years, and to create a cohesive link between WAC and other units and departments on campus that share the goals of WAC.

Our report includes:

1. Recommendations for Implementing Writing across the Curriculum
2. Appendix A: Essential Understandings and Assumptions
3. Appendix B: Three Basic Strategies for promoting Writing in the Disciplines
4. Appendix C: Identifying Thinking Skills Developed through Writing across the Curriculum Approach

Recommendations for Implementation of Writing across the Curriculum:

The following recommendations are made for 2003-2004 based on feedback received through the various WAC initiatives during 2002-2003. The recommendations include a consolidation of the important outcomes of the previous year, an expansion of the development process to incorporate campus initiatives from interested faculty, and an incorporation of other Canadian expertise in the field as part of the knowledge gathering and sharing process.

1. Dovetail with multiple agendas/needs/initiatives on campus that are already focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Dovetailing would involve formalizing the inherent connections between a Writing Across the Curriculum approach; the work of CFL; the recent workshops sponsored by PDC; the Leddy Library information literacy policy as well as the work of such committees as the First Year Committee, Teaching Recognition and Support Committee, etc., affording a more coherent approach to faculty development and improved learning for students.

One example of a possible cohesive link is evident in the report from the Teaching Recognition and Support Committee, which suggested creating a Faculty Associate position in CFL: “possibly one per faculty through matching funding, who would be given teaching release time to work with the CFL on teaching development projects designed to support teaching and learning in their own faculty... [These projects] should have a broad applicability beyond the Associate’s own classroom.” This recommendation would encourage faculty, who are exploring the WAC options within their disciplines, to integrate their work into the wider campus community. This will have an impact on interdisciplinary networking on campus.

2. Offer workshops on writing discipline specific discourse tailored to the pockets of interest and need on campus.

Two discipline specific workshops will be presented next year (for example, one in the Arts and Social Sciences, and the other in Science and Engineering). This would afford faculty opportunities to see and develop concrete examples of teaching writing in specific discourses. Also we propose an annual one day WAC institute either before or after CFL annual institute.

3. Continue data collection conducted by doctoral student on faculty and students’ current experiences and practices on writing.

A doctoral school in psychology (Melanie Gallant) is currently collecting data on campus regarding faculty and students’ current experiences and practices in writing. This information will be used to inform the content of workshops so that the design of future workshops will be targeted more appropriately to specific needs of faculties and departments. In this way, the workshops would be more relevant and focused. Another important outcome of the research will be to develop a WAC website for the University of Windsor and to link this to the CFL. Workshop materials which could be posted on both the CFL and WAC websites.

4. Continue to develop internal expertise on writing across the curriculum by sponsoring professors from a variety of faculties to attend conferences.

5. Involve the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) in the WAC process.

It is necessary for AWC to be an active partner in the WAC process on campus. An AWC representative will present writing samples to the WAC Committee that will inform the design of the faculty workshops. The AWC has an important role to play in WAC and must be recognized as a key player in the process of identifying topics and areas of focus for workshops.

6. Offer one workshop that addresses the issue of implications for assessment and evaluations in writing intensive courses.

One of the first questions posed by faculty regarding writing across the curriculum centred on the issue of time and the approaches to assessment and evaluation of the workload. It is critical to offer a workshop and resources which explicitly address the pragmatics of providing appropriate feedback and marking of students’ written work.

7. Videoconferences will be held to bring together experts in the field to discuss WAC initiatives on other Canadian university and college campuses.

At least one videoconference will be scheduled for 2003-2004.

8. Initiate an annual WAC Institute in Winter 2004 (April 8-11).

A two-day WAC Institute will be held at the end of the winter semester in order to consolidate the WAC activities for the year. Faculty will have an opportunity to learn from experts in the field as well as faculty who may have attempted new and different ways to integrate WAC into their teaching.

9. Appoint a part-time tenure line WAC Director to work under the new Directorship in CFL.

Consistent with successful WAC initiatives at other Canadian institutions (for example, UPEI and McGill)we recommend the hiring of half-time tenure line director of Writing Across the Curriculum to work under the Directorship of CFL half-time and part-time in a faculty.

Appendix A

Writing Across the Curriculum — some essential understandings and assumptions regarding professors at the University of Windsor:

- Professors want their students to write coherently.
- Professors do not necessarily see it as their job to teach students to write coherently in the discourse of their field.
- Professors want to use effective teaching strategies that will augment student learning.
- Professors want meaningful, reliable, feasible ways to assess their students' understanding of core concepts.
- Professors are juggling multiple responsibilities and have a myriad of demands on their time. This reality requires us to develop awareness on campus of the significance of writing and its explicit links to learning outcomes, as well as the potential for merging professors' current teaching practices with WAC strategies.
- Professors require collegial support to integrate Writing Across the Curriculum into their teaching. When such support is in place, WAC not only helps students improve their learning and writing, but also provides opportunities to perpetuate and strengthen faculty conversations about teaching and learning.

Some parameters: Writing Across the Curriculum does not...

...ask professors to teach students *how* to write; rather, it asks professors to *use* writing as a way of teaching and learning core concepts in their discipline.

...serve as a *quick-fix solution to student writing deficiencies*. To be effective, WAC must be fully and deeply integrated into the teaching practices and culture of the institution as a whole.

...expect professors to *spend significantly more time* on assessing students' written work; rather, professors are invited to consider a range of specific strategies so students may engage more fully in their learning in class and outside of class.

...ask professors to *sacrifice content*. In other words, professors do not have to teach less content; they are simply inviting students to process content in a different way.

...require professors to *know the language of revising and editing*; rather, the focus is on learning approaches that facilitate connections in writing/thinking that lead to increased understanding of content.

Appendix B

Three Basic Strategies for use in all Disciplines

Below are three basic strategies that have been introduced at workshops on campus. These include: quick writes, journal writing and précis writing.

1. Quick Writes (also see CFL website)

What-ifs or Quandary-posing

Students are given a scenario in which some natural process is altered, or some change is required of a standard procedure or well-entrenched assumptions. They asked to write about the implications in a journal.

Examples:

Oceanography: Suppose that the earth rotated on its axis in a clockwise direction (looking down on the North Pole) instead of its actual counter clockwise one. What would be the effects on the climate of North America and Europe?

Mathematics: What if a younger friend asks you to mark the following problem correct or incorrect. Explain why in no more than three sentences.

$$(a+b)^2 = a^2 + b^2$$

Psychology: What if both the bio-medical and learning models studied in this course were infused into Mark Vonnegut's account of schizophrenia in *The Eden Express*? How might this reshape the attribution described by Vonnegut?

What is an example of a what-ifs or quandary from your discipline?

2. Journals

Important learning can occur in the use of:

Reaction/Response Journals

Elaboration/Explanation/Contemplation Journals

Transformational learning and the most substantive learning requires the use of:

Reflective Journals

Questions that Journal Writers Need Answered

What is it?

What do I write? Open-ended journals are doomed to failure. Students need specific prompts, guiding questions, provocative quotes etc.

Why bother? (Memory aid, learning documentation, learning through making connections, a tool for negotiating curriculum with your instructor etc.)

How will it be used? To share with a peer of choice, with the professor only? To generate material and give direction to teaching and learning in the course.

Will surface features of written language matter?

Journals are not the place to focus on spelling, grammar etc. Journals are meaning-making places; places to make sense of the content, and ultimately to reflect on how this learning is useful, purposeful, worth knowing and applying in my field of study, in my life.

Will I get any marks for it?

To encourage maximum focus on writing-to-learn consider giving a mark for completion of the quick write or better a set of quick writes. It is usually not feasible or desirable in large undergraduate classes to mark journals in detail.

Consider doing a random quick read to spot a pattern of misunderstanding, queries, and concerns and give a verbal summary at the beginning of the next class.

3. **Précis Writing**

A well-written précis should be a serviceable substitute for the original work. The goal is to preserve the core essence of the work in a manner that is both clear and concise. At a minimum, the précis should include the topic or main thesis, the purpose of the research, what was studied, what methods were used, what results (or insights) were gained, and a conclusion.

Discuss the goals of the précis with your students. These are:

- ◆ Compress and clarify a lengthy passage, article or book, while retaining important concepts, key words and important data.
- ◆ Remove what is superfluous and retain the core essence of the work.
- ◆ Give a brief description of key terms.
- ◆ Give a brief description of methods – an idea of the general approach used by the researchers.
- ◆ State the purpose of the research or piece of writing (Why was it important to conduct this research or write on this topic?).

Discuss the finished product with students emphasizing that the précis should clearly state:

- ◆ This is what was studied (argued, discussed).
- ◆ This is how it was done (this was the focus).
- ◆ This is what was learned.
- ◆ This is what it means (why it is important).

Provide an in class authentic example of a passage central to the course content and have them do a précis in class.

Appendix C

Identifying Thinking Skills Developed through Writing across the Curriculum Approach

Identifying the thinking skills that you (professor) wish to emphasize/develop/nurture in your course is key to helping students focus their writing and therein focus their thoughts about the topic of study.

Instructions for *Thinking Skills* List

1.) Based on your teaching experiences with undergraduate students, which of the following thinking skills do you believe students bring to your course? More pointedly, in the early weeks of your course, which of these skills do you find adequately developed in your students for the conceptual and content understandings of your course?

Please place a check mark beside each one.

2.) Secondly, please identify the three thinking skills which you consider to be inadequately developed among your students at the beginning of your course, but which you would most want to have them develop by the end of the course.

Please place a circle beside each one.

Thinking Skills

- Memory
- Concentration
- Asking questions (of a text, a lecture, a video, etc.)
- Pinpointing main ideas (in text, lectures, discussions, videos, etc.)
- Amplifying a main point
- Reconstructing overall structure (of a text, lecture, video, interview, etc.)
- Distinguishing between objectivity and subjectivity (where meaningful)
- Analyzing content
- Reasoning between cause and effect
- Discerning similarities and differences
- Conceptualizing
- Using inductive reasoning (moving from the particular to the general)
- Using deductive reasoning (moving from the general or abstract to the particular)
- Understanding how parts (of a text, lecture, video, interview, etc.) relate to each other
- Creativity, invention and imagination in problem solving; thinking *outside the box*
- Questioning assumptions and authority (awareness of conformity and nonconformity, willingness to challenge foundational beliefs and established expertise)

Additional points of your own:

Example from Chemistry

Everyday Reactions Chemistry Journal

Choose from the following list of everyday reactions (or choose your own) and classify the reaction type according to the four major reaction categories studied in class: acid-base, nucleophile-electrophile, oxidation-reduction, and free radical. Explain the reaction structure of the starting materials to indicate why they could undergo the assigned reaction type.

- Formation of peroxide-based hair dyes
- Combustion of gasoline (or propane, methane, butane...)
- Smog formation
- BHT function as an antioxidant
- Lemon juice as a fruit browning preventative
- The browning of cooked foods (Maillard reaction)

Based on the above assignment what do you think was one of the professor's key learning outcomes for this course?

What type of journal writing is the chemistry prof. asking students to do?

Reaction/Response Journals

Elaboration/Explanation/Contemplation Journals

Reflective Journals

This chemistry professor reported in an article entitled: *"Everyday Chemical Reactions: Promoting Interest and Learning Through Relevant Writing Assignments"* (Parrill, 1998)

The following challenge the first time he used this teaching technique.

"Students were asked to meet with a peer group to discuss each other's journal entry and wrote a critique of one another's explanation followed by a revision of their own journal entry. While many students discussed the difficulties they had with understanding their peer's explanation/rationale; they did not adequately address the scientific shortcomings of the papers. [I concluded] that the many students were equally poor in applying scientific concepts to the new reactions and that peer review was insufficient in this case."

Parrill revised his use of this assignment in subsequent semesters to avoid this problem. What do you think she did?

Or what would you advise her to do?