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Writing Centers and Writing-for-Learning

Richard Leahy

Where are writing centers going in their support of writing across the curriculum? I ask this question instead of “what are they doing?” because what they are doing is well documented in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*. The more we share such ideas with one another, the better. But in this essay I want to try for a look at the bigger picture.

On many campuses, writing centers have become intimately connected with writing across the curriculum. Often, the writing center director serves on a campus-wide writing committee, consults with faculty about designing writing-intensive courses, and trains faculty in the uses of writing. Some centers attach tutors to content courses to act as writing consultants. Most of the time this cooperation seems to be working well.

One matter keeps nagging at me, though. It is the danger that WAC programs can become one-sided, losing sight of the purpose of writing across the curriculum as a whole. And when a WAC program drifts off the mark, the writing center can drift with it.

To explain what I mean, let me go into some basic principles and problems involved in writing across the curriculum. This will take some time, but I think it’s important for writing center personnel to be aware of these issues. They are issues the instructors must deal with. How they deal with them affects their students, who in turn affect the writing center by coming there for help.

The WAC movement, in its best form, has two distinct purposes: to enhance learning by means of writing and to improve students’ writing abilities. These two purposes are roughly equivalent to two of the three main functions of writing identified by James Britton, expressive and transactional (the third being poetic).

Expressive writing, as Britton describes it, is close to informal talk, relaxed, free of demands imposed “by the reader or the nature of the task” (93). It is the kind of writing found in private journals and personal letters, and in such in-class activities as freewriting and written dialogues between students. The relaxed nature of expressive writing is conducive to thinking-on-paper. The writer can sort out her attitudes toward a subject, rehearse her understanding of it, question and speculate, without the burden of having to present the result in finished form. In expressive writing, the writer’s own consciousness is as much the subject as is the nominal subject about which she is writing.

Transactional writing, by contrast, emphasizes not the writer’s thinking processes but the finished product of that thinking. Britton summarizes it as “language to get things done”: to inform, advise, persuade, or instruct (88). Virtually all writing done in the world of work—business letters, reports, proposals, etc.—is transactional, and so are almost all academic tasks, including term papers, research reports, and most writing done for English composition classes. In transactional writing the subject itself is paramount; the writer’s personal voice is muted or absent altogether [1].

In expressive writing, the writer looks for connections between ideas, explores them, and clarifies them. In transactional writing, the writer orders and explains ideas so that other people can understand, evaluate, and (or) act upon them. The two purposes are often given other labels: writing-for-learning vs. writing-for-evaluation, exploratory vs. explanatory, informal vs. formal.

The important point for WAC programs is that expressive and transactional writing can be used to complement each other. A well-designed content course uses both. The instructor uses informal, expressive writing throughout the term, in the form of journals, in-class freewritings, and written dialogues between students, and may also assign formal, transactional writing in the form of essays, summaries, reports, or whatever genre fits the subject. The idea behind mixing the two function categories is that the informal writing is both a beginning from which the formal writing can grow and a means toward understanding a subject. By developing the *habit* of dealing with the subject in writing, students not only engage in valuable preparation for writing the formal assignments but also learn the subject better. In a balanced WAC program, expressive writing should get at least as much attention as transactional writing.

But introducing informal, expressive writing into the classroom also has implications for which the instructor may not be prepared. For it leads away from traditional prepared lectures and toward collaborative learning. To illustrate, let us say that Professor Sally James has her students freewrite for five minutes at the end of the hour, summarizing what they got out of the

class. That night, skimming through the papers, she finds that several students missed the main point of the lecture. So the next class period she has to go back and clarify the point before going on. Or if she asks the students to write at the beginning of class in order to raise questions about the assigned reading, she has to give over much of the hour, perhaps all of it, to the questions they raise. She may never get to her prepared lecture.

Sally realizes that when she asks for this kind of informal writing, something has to be done with it. It has to be read, discussed, and responded to, either by her or by other students in the class. The next thing Sally knows, she has begun to rethink her whole approach to teaching. Used to lecturing and then giving exams to see if the students can regurgitate the information correctly, she now finds herself involved in a collaborative effort. Her students are working in groups. She is monitoring their understanding and helping them along. She is also learning, for the first time, what works and doesn't work in her teaching. If she decides to commit herself fully to the concept of learning-through-writing, she ends up a different kind of teacher: moderator/coach rather than lecturer/authority figure.

This shift brings with it much that is desirable, including a new energy and enthusiasm for teaching. It also can bring unsettling side effects, including static from faculty in the instructor's department, who may complain that the instructor is not covering enough material, and lower evaluations from students, who are not used to evaluating an instructor who is not the traditional authority figure (and from some who resent being asked to write anything at all).

Most faculty who are trained in effective WAC programs manage to make the change successfully. Others do it on their own or catch the fever from their colleagues. Some never change. On my own campus, and on many of those I have visited that have WAC efforts, only a minority of the faculty are actively practicing writing-for-learning. Outside this knowledgeable cadre, there are many faculty members who think they are doing something for their students' writing skills by merely tacking a term-paper assignment onto a lecture/exam format.

Many instructors have learned that just assigning a term paper is not enough; they also have to nurture the project along. They have learned a number of ways to do this: by distributing sample papers, assigning and responding to drafts, setting up draft-response groups, and scheduling individual conferences. Still, even these instructors are missing part of what WAC is all about. If the end product of all this activity is a gradeable term paper, then all the writing done for the class is essentially pitched toward a transactional product. The instructor has employed writing as a mode of learning, but only in the narrow range of material leading to the term paper, not in the general subject-matter of the course.

If a WAC program promotes all the strategies used to teach the writing process, but does not also require abundant journal-writing, in-class free-writing, or other forms of informal, exploratory writing, it is still stressing only one purpose: improving students' skills in transactional writing. Expressive writing, writing-for-learning, is still being neglected.

The obvious cause for this neglect is that transactional writing needs so much more explaining than expressive writing. There is a great deal to know about selecting topics, revising drafts, and evaluating finished products. Expressive writing, by contrast, is fairly simple to explain. The difference can be seen in any WAC manual published on any campus: transactional writing takes up by far the greater bulk; expressive writing takes only a few pages. In some manuals it takes up less than a page. Judging by its physical presence in the manuals, expressive writing barely exists. Beyond these problems, there is the fact that the material on transactional writing shows faculty better ways to do what they already do, whereas the material on expressive writing asks many of them to do things they have never tried before.

There are a number of other powerful reasons why writing-for-learning is neglected. First, administrators may not be inclined to support it. They respond easily to the idea of improving students' transactional writing, because they like the idea of their graduates' writing better when they enter the working world, thus reflecting well upon the school. But writing-for-learning is a less product-oriented concept, harder to explain, and it promises no immediate, obvious rewards. Second, faculty may deceive themselves into believing they are doing a lot for WAC just by assigning more transactional writing. They can support the cause of improving writing, because that motive by itself requires few changes in the way they teach. Third, expressive writing suffers from a tainted image. Many educators misunderstand it as "personal" (in a bad sense), sloppy, and unable to carry the freight of important ideas. In this, as anyone involved in WAC knows, they are profoundly mistaken.

The fourth reason is more subtle but no less powerful. It is that the classroom, though ostensibly a public forum, is from the professional point of view a very private place, where instructors expect to be able to do what they want without interference. Unsolicited suggestions on how to improve their classroom methods often result in resentment and resistance. This reasoning does an injustice to the general openness and flexibility of the faculty on my campus and probably any other, but the undercurrent is still there.

Therefore, although most WAC programs are improving writing skills, forces militate against the spread of writing-for-learning. On some campuses these forces contribute to a massive inertia that prevents significant

changes in teaching from taking place. This can be especially true at large universities where close intercommunication with any sizable proportion of faculty is difficult. For the shift in teaching to take hold, it has to be a grassroots movement, a change in individual teachers. Except in rare instances, it cannot be legislated from above with any hope of general success.

The writing center, at least in its usual mode of operation, does not do much for the cause of writing-for-learning. Tutors deal mostly with students trying to write papers, not trying to learn subject-matter. As a result, the writing center deals almost exclusively with transactional writing. It has little influence on how writing-for-learning is used across the campus but rather takes writing assignments as they come and does its best to help its clients deal with them.

Tutors in the writing center encounter clients from classes that are taught from every possible kind of approach. On one extreme, they see clients for whom a writing assignment is an integral part of the course, growing out of journals and other forms of writing they have been doing all semester; on the other, they see clients for whom the assignment appears to come out of nowhere and to bear little relation to anything else going on in the course. (The tutors may secretly feel that some instructors should not be allowed to use writing in their classes at all.) Students coming from these various classes are likely to feel different degrees of ownership over their writing. It is good that tutors learn to be flexible, but it bothers me that the writing center should always be responding to situations and not actively working to change them. My purpose so far has been to express some cautions about the writing center's role in WAC, and about how the writing center can become unintentionally involved in preserving a one-sided emphasis on writing-for-evaluation at the expense of writing-for-learning. Let me try to be more constructive now by proposing some what-ifs.

(1) What if the writing center offered to help students learn to write productive journal entries?

I have students in my classes who have never written journals and have no idea how to use a journal to enhance their learning. Many instructors solve this problem by devoting plenty of class time to nurturing the journals along. Many instructors do not; they leave the students to struggle on their own. Writing centers could solicit good examples of journals from faculty in various disciplines, as they do with formal papers.

(2) What if the writing center offered to coach students in freewriting, showing them how to focus it and get the most out of it? Or what if the writing center offered to help students write productive responses to textbooks and lectures—not just notes, but active responses, dialogues with the text?

Some centers, particularly those that work with study skills and those that are part of larger learning centers, already offer this kind of help. But couldn't more centers do so? Especially on campuses where writing-for-learning is widely promoted? Students—all of us—are sometimes afraid to take chances and play with ideas on paper. Getting over that fear is rather like getting over computer fear. It takes plunging in, with encouragement from the sidelines. Tutors could provide the encouragement.

(3) What if writing centers appealed directly to students in writing-for-learning courses and worked with them on the new methods of learning being used in their classes?

Some students resist writing-for-learning as much as some teachers do. They prefer the comfortable format of lectures. They see the professors as “vast storehouses of knowledge” (a quote from one of my own students) and want only to soak up the stream of information pouring forth. Some of them resent class time given over to writing and discussion, counting it only as time when information is not flowing. These students need help to conceive of learning in different, deeper ways.

Such help might get rid of the residual anxiety a student might have that “Professor James, no matter what she says, is secretly grading my journal, and if I look like a fool in this week’s entries, she’ll remember, and it will somehow be figured in my grade.” If students talk with a tutor about how writing-for-learning really works, they might begin to trust it and benefit from it.

(4) What if more writing centers sponsored ongoing education of faculty in writing-for-learning?

On my campus, we started a monthly newsletter on various WAC topics, written by writing center staff. The newsletter has received an enthusiastic response from faculty. Admittedly, most of the issues are about transactional writing; that’s hard to avoid. But we try to keep a balance. Writing centers on other campuses have been successful in attracting faculty to mini-seminars and workshops. Writing-center directors (at least those who are not also teaching heavy course loads) sometimes wangle invitations to department meetings around campus to demonstrate writing-for-learning and explain the writing center’s services.

I admit some of my suggestions are untested, and some are not even new to all centers. It might be hard to attract a clientele of students interested in learning how to learn through writing. But more of us might try going in that direction. Preparing tutors to help with writing-for-learning should mesh easily with existing training programs.

Aggressive promotion of writing-for-learning would keep a WAC program on target. It would also make the writing center a more influential force in the program.

Note

[1] Poetic writing (poems, short stories, etc.) does not figure prominently in writing-for-learning. A poetic writing is "a verbal artifact, a construct. . . . Attention to the forms of the language is an essential part of a reader's response" (Britton 93).

Transactional and poetic writing are really the extremes of a continuum, with expressive occupying a broad (and difficult to define) middle. Informal academic writing naturally lies toward the transactional end. It tends to move back and forth between expressive and transactional within a single piece of writing.

Work Cited

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Richard Leahy directs the Writing Center at Boise State University, Boise, Idaho, and is completing a term on the NWCA Executive Board. He has recently organized writing center conferences in the Rocky Mountain and Inland Northwest Regions.