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Rethinking the WAC/Writing Center Connection

Michael A. Pemberton

At first glance, it might be difficult to find two writing programs that seem to work together more harmoniously than Writing Across the Curriculum and writing centers. WAC engenders more writing in more classes, and writing centers help students to improve their writing skills and produce, presumably, better papers. Administratively, the two programs are often seen as complementary if not conjoined. If more writing is going to be demanded of more students in more classes, then those students will need additional support services as they work to complete their assignments. And though there may, in some cases, be the money and motivation necessary to create intradepartmental tutorial services for the benefit of students within each major, most often the responsibility for writing assistance either falls on (or is specifically delegated to) the campus writing center.

This approach may appear to have significant merit and may, in fact, be looked on with a good deal of satisfaction by interested parties on all sides. Administrators will likely be pleased because they won’t have to create a brand-new support system for WAC; at most institutions, writing centers have generally been in place longer than WAC programs, and in some cases, writing centers may actually have been starting points for early writing across the curriculum efforts (Griffin 400). Faculty will generally be pleased because they have the somewhat illusory impression that writing centers will reduce the additional workload imposed by an increased number of writing assignments. And writing center directors will generally be pleased because their integral role in helping to implement and sustain WAC programs provides the center with more students coming in; an increased sense of

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budgetary and political security; and, in some cases, additional funding for tutors, supplies, and equipment. Difficulties are generally downplayed, and much of what is written about the relationship between WAC and writing centers concerns itself with descriptions of specific programs and the ways in which instructional articulation is played out. Dinitz and Howe, for example, describe the “evolving partnership” between WAC and writing centers at their respective institutions, suggesting that some of the weaknesses in each institution’s models can be fruitfully addressed through the use of “group critiques” (49-50). Ray Wallace, in a similar fashion, details the tutor-training program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, stressing the important links that need to be forged between the writing center and the disciplinary faculty; and Carino, et al. and Walker echo this point of view. The popular and, perhaps, conveniently pragmatic impression seems to be that writing centers have, in some senses, always been writing-across-the-curriculum centers. They have always opened their doors to students working on writing projects for any classes that those students happen to be enrolled in, and they have always had to engage students on a wide variety of topics that vary on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis.

I would like to question, however, whether this arranged marriage between WAC and writing centers, enacted at a growing number of institutions across the country, demonstrates true love and a natural compatibility or merely a disturbing kind of administrative expediency. There are compelling reasons, I think, to reconsider the nature of the relationship between these two programs, particularly when WAC is construed as WID or Writing In the Disciplines.1

Though WAC and writing centers have clear pedagogical similarities in their joint focus on text production and writing-as-learning, their underlying epistemologies and resulting assumptions about what qualify as significant rhetorical and textual features remain strikingly different. Much of the current scholarship about WAC programs, for example, focuses on the diverse rhetorics which students are expected to master during their college careers. Drawing from the work of rhetorical and social theorists such as Burke, Foucault, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin, many composition scholars (Bartholomae, Bruffee, and McCarthy, among others) have situated WAC programs in the paradigm of polyvocalism, reflecting the diverse nature of specialized conversations in the “content-area” disciplines and rejecting the notion that a general-purpose “academic discourse” exists. WAC pedagogies often tend, therefore, to address the needs of multiple discourse communities, situated knowledge, and complex, socially-constructed conventions of language by treating each discipline as if it were a separate entity with its own set of practices to be explored.

Writing centers, on the other hand, seem grounded in an opposing set of assumptions, including the widely held tenet of practitioner lore that many
aspects of text production (such as tone, awareness of audience, coherence, use of specific detail to support arguments, grammar, etc.) are "generic" in nature and, for the most part, extend across disciplinary boundaries. Tutors who work in writing centers are usually not trained as experts in the rhetoric of a particular discipline (other than their own), and they are expected to work with student writing in a wide variety of disciplines, many of which they may know very little about. Their ability to provide writing assistance to students working in specialized discourse communities often depends upon their ability to draw from their own experiences as writers and readers in a discipline, to work with the aspects of text production they interpret as "common" to virtually all academic texts, and then to apply these common principles to new and possibly unfamiliar academic subjects or genres. In this regard, then, writing center practice operates as if an "academic discourse" does indeed exist, a discourse that can be explained and utilized successfully in student conferences no matter which interpretive community a particular student might be addressing in a given paper. (See, for example, Clark II-12.)

The epistemologies that inform each of these instructional programs are oppositional but not necessarily in direct conflict. The existence of situationally-embedded, discipline-specific features in academic texts may not, in itself, preclude the possibility that some "transdisciplinary" textual or rhetorical features also exist, features that might be addressed successfully by tutors in a writing center. The need to support generalizations with specific evidence, for example, may display some subtle variations depending upon the discipline and audience addressed in particular texts, but the fact that there must be some relationship between generalizations made and evidence offered in support is a feature common to virtually all academic writing. Other "generic" concerns such as sentence- and paragraph-level coherence are also potential subjects for tutorial conferences, and some higher-level rhetorical features which may be shaped only partially by disciplinary conventions—organization, evidence, logical development, tone, introductions, conclusions, etc.—can, perhaps, be discussed acontextually or as "general rules" that must be adapted to specific texts, audiences, or purposes.

Though this pedagogy of the generic may be a useful and effective approach for some students, assignments, and contexts (particularly first-year composition courses), I am concerned that it may do a disservice to students who are writing in a multidisciplinary WAC program, particularly because—as I indicated above—the central purpose of writing across the curriculum is to familiarize and train students to become fluent in exactly those discipline-specific rhetorical features that a "generic" writing center pedagogy is geared to overlook. Let me make clear that I do not wish to dismiss the generic pedagogy out of hand; I can envision a number of circumstances—particularly in the case of first-year composition students—when this particular
approach and set of tutorial practices might be especially useful and appro-
priate. But in the context of a writing center that wishes to address the needs
of students writing in a WAC program, this approach is insufficient.

My concern over this issue is exacerbated by what I see as compelling
evidence that a number of WAC programs often fail to live up to their own
foundational principles and slip carelessly into writing pedagogies that
provide students, particularly undergraduates, few opportunities to rehearse
disciplinary modes of inquiry or forms of discourse. The reasons for these
institutional failures are many, but two of the most significant—conscious
myopia and the myth of disciplinarity—may be especially pervasive and
worthy of review. As I will show, these failures may actually make it easier
for writing centers to work within WAC programs, and they certainly
provide some justification for the generic tutorial approach described above.
But they paint, I think, an incomplete and somewhat jaundiced picture of
how WAC programs and writing centers might work together productively.
The differing goals and epistemological perspectives advanced by WAC
programs and writing centers will complicate any sort of pedagogical
interrelationship we might wish to propose between them. We are obligated,
therefore, to consider very carefully what social and instructional roles the
writing center and its tutorial staff should assume in conferences with WAC
students. These considerations will be the focus of the latter portion of this
paper.2

Conscious Myopia

One disturbing yet all-too-common way that WAC and writing centers
can work together is through a kind of conscious myopia, by simply choosing
to ignore any problems, pretending they don't exist, or rationalizing them
away. For most people, especially the instructors and students who are
enmeshed in WAC programs and institutional requirements, this may be the
easiest thing to do. Though WAC faculty training programs often work hard
to stress the important role faculty play in constructing assignments and
guiding students through the conventions of a new discipline, these lessons
may be conveniently forgotten after the training is over, especially if they were
never fully believed in the first place or if the practicalities of implementing
WAC pedagogy appear too complex or burdensome in retrospect (Fulwiler,
"How Well" 114-120; Mayher, et al. 89). Instructors, students, and tutors
may wish to believe that there really is such a thing as Writing with a capital
"W" that either transcends or can be attended to separately from content
issues that are the sole province of the content-area faculty. WAC instructors
may require more writing from their students and use writing as a learning
tool in their classes, but in spite of assurances from writing specialists that the
instructors themselves are the best persons to comment on student writing
within a discipline, they may continue to feel a good deal of anxiety about
their ability to do so in a useful or helpful way. Reports from faculty workshops tend to bear this out (Kinneavy 15; Knoblauch and Brannon; Mallonee and Breihan). Many successful, publishing academic professionals do not think of themselves as writers and, consequently, doubt their own ability to comment on and respond effectively to student writing. They are also uneasy about spending time on “writing” in their classrooms when there is so much other “material” to be covered in their courses, so the writing center becomes an important resource by default. The refrain is a familiar one: “I don’t have time to teach English in my class; that’s your job” (Russell 297; Raimes).

And the people who work in writing centers may be perfectly happy to accept this construction of their identity. It does, after all, give them an identity as well as a sense of authority and expertise—precious commodities for tutors in otherwise low-paying and low-status jobs. In order to maintain this sense of expertise, tutors may consciously resist the social-constructionist theory that undergirds WAC programs. The social-constructionist paradigm argues, in part, for the distribution of writing expertise within and among the disciplines, locating the sites of textual authority in many diverse fields and interpretive communities. As a result, it also deconstructs and decentralizes the traditionally-accepted, institutionally-constituted authority of the writing center, the writing teacher, and others who claim to know something about “writing” as a subject in itself. Writing center tutors, in this distributed model, are almost never allowed to be authorities or insiders; they are perpetually outside the conversation (not unlike the students they are trying to help), and they will never even be extended an invitation to enter the Burkean parlor. In the face of this disempowering construction of writing center reality, it would be small wonder if the people who work there chose to embrace an alternative construction.

The Myth of Disciplinarity

A second and perhaps more insidious way that WAC programs and writing centers can work together depends on what I call the *myth of disciplinarity* in undergraduate education. As I have indicated above, WAC is grounded, in part, on social-constructionist tenets about knowledge construction, social practices, and education. One of the most important of these tenets is that since different disciplines comprise different discourse communities with different sets of discursive practices, it should be the responsibility of instructors to acquaint students with those practices and associated modes of inquiry. Certainly, this is the case that Art Young makes when he says that

> writing is a social activity; it takes place in a social context. If we want students to be effective communicators, to be successful engineers
and historians, then we cannot separate form from content, writing from knowledge, action from context. We should not teach writing generically, in a vacuum, as if it were a skill unconnected to purpose or context. Student writers need to join a community of learners engaged in generating knowledge and solving problems, to join, even as novices, disciplinary conversations and public-policy discussions. WAC programs, therefore, began to stress the role . . . of social context in learning to write and writing to learn. (60-61)

As admirable as these principles might be in theory, in practice the idealistic vision of WAC they present may be just that—an idealistic vision. The truth of the matter may be that on the one hand, undergraduate WAC courses, no matter how well-intentioned, do not and will not offer students the opportunity to participate in disciplinary conversations, and on the other hand, undergraduates are, for the most part, unprepared and unable to do so even if the opportunity were allowed them.

As a general rule, the locus of much undergraduate (and pre-undergraduate) instruction remains rooted in the Freirian “banking model.” Instructors and textbooks are regarded as repositories of content information which is disseminated to students, and the students are expected to absorb this information and, on command, to replay—some would say regurgitate—it. (Applebee; Nelson; Sherrard; Geisler) This model, of course, ignores the social, cultural, and interpretive forces which shape the knowledge structures that are embraced by a discipline, just as it overlooks the value of collaborative learning as an instructional methodology. Nevertheless, for WAC instructors in the content-area disciplines who are particularly concerned with the issue of “coverage,” the banking model is a powerful and persuasive one (Russell 295-7; Waldo 23; Mayer, et al. 87). And in keeping with this model, many of the writing assignments that students are asked to complete, even in WAC courses, may not ask students to do more than parrot information gleaned from sources or to “analyze” this information in anything other than a superficial way. My own experience working in writing centers with students from WAC courses indicates that students are often given assignments that allow them to write, for the most part, in pre-disciplinary forms that use the traditional modes of discourse—comparison and contrast, classification, definition, description, etc.—to report or analyze information in generic ways rather than to master the rhetorical conventions of a particular field. A survey of academic writing tasks conducted by Bridgeman and Carlson in 1984 suggests that this practice may, indeed, be widespread. In this study, the researchers investigated “the kinds of writing skills that might be expected of students at entry level, or in early training in their academic fields.” Of the ten possible “expected writing skills” to choose from in this survey, seven of the ten were variations on description, comparison and contrast, or summary (255). As David Bartholomae laments, “[m]uch
of the written work students do is test-taking, report or summary, work that places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise” (144). Though this approach may do a disservice to students and, as Bartholomae claims, be “a failure of teachers and curriculum designers who, even if they speak of writing as a mode of learning, all too often represent writing as a ‘tool’ to be used by an (hopefully) educated mind” (144), it nevertheless alleviates the problem of discipline-specific rhetorics for tutors in writing centers. Tutors can be trained in the generic modes of discourse, in the structure of argument, in the form of the “standard” research paper, or in the shape of the “typical” lab report, and apply them with some confidence to student papers in political science, biology, chemistry, or sociology. Since undergraduates will not be asked to participate in specialized discourse, tutors need not worry about their own unfamiliarity with it.

Further, there is some evidence that the representations students build about specialized discourses in the early stages of their undergraduate education are relatively naive and that these naive representations impact heavily on the students’ own writing (Fulwiler, et al. 61; Walvoord and McCarthy; Hare and Fitzsimmons; Geisler). Beginning writers, as Pat Bizzell has noted, are often “unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered” (230), and as a consequence, students’ written texts do little more than duplicate the informational structure of the texts they will be examined on. “Students know intuitively that to do more [than this sort of duplication] would jeopardize their mastery of content knowledge they will be required to demonstrate on tests” (Geisler 42-43). Since undergraduate students are not likely to recognize a rhetorical dimension to knowledge construction in the discipline they are writing for, they are not likely to reproduce that dimension in their own work other than trying to incorporate what they see as the “jargon” of the field. (See, for instance, Schwartz; McCarthy.) If this assessment of students’ cognitive representations for specialized discourse is correct, then the disciplinarity problem raised by WAC is once again greatly diminished for writing centers. Since students are not likely to write using discipline-specific discourse conventions, tutors will not have to worry about addressing them. And since instructors will not overtly expect their students to write like experts who are fully conversant with the “commonplaces” of the field (to use Bartholomae’s term), tutors need not worry—for the most part—about such deficiencies in student texts.

The Question of Responsibility

Now, as I said before, these two perspectives on the WAC/writing center relationship are unsettling, partly because they depend upon certain kinds of
instructional failure in WAC programs and partly because they depict writing centers as institutions that are willing to embrace these failures and avoid confronting complex, discipline-specific rhetorical issues that would undoubtedly problematize writing conferences. But is the passive role adopted by some writing centers under these circumstances necessarily a bad thing? Is it really the responsibility of a writing center staff to introduce and address matters of disciplinary discourse when WAC courses and their modes-based writing assignments fail to do so? To my mind, the answer is a yes, but a tentative and qualified one. Some research, for example, indicates that even though instructors in the disciplines may give assignments that enable students to fall back on conventional, generic strategies for academic papers learned in high school, those instructors nevertheless may evaluate the papers on the basis of how well they conform to discipline-specific rhetorical standards. (See Faigley and Hansen; Walvoord and McCarthy.) This being the case, then it may very well be the responsibility of writing center tutors to attend to such standards.

The need to attend to matters of disciplinary discourse is even more pronounced when writing centers must support WAC programs which are enacted successfully, when dedicated, progressive instructors work diligently to make their students “insiders” rather than “outsiders,” and when students are both enthusiastic and active learners in a new and unfamiliar discipline. But this returns me to my original questions: If WAC is working as it should, theoretically, then how do we resolve the opposition between its epistemological assumptions about texts, discourse, and writing and those which inform the operations of writing center practice? If we accept the fact that writing center tutors will never be able to master all the discursive practices of all the disciplines which students are writing in under the auspices of a fully-realized WAC program, then what exactly should the tutors’ role be in these writing conferences? What benefits can the writing center and its tutors provide in conferences that would not be more fully realized in meetings with professors or other experts in the field? These questions strike at the heart of what we do in writing centers, and I cannot help but approach them with a certain degree of trepidation. They resist simple answers and all-purpose solutions. I would, however, like to suggest two perspectives—the environmental and the cognitive—that can provide at least partial and provisionary answers.

Environmental: The Role of the Writing Center

Much has been said and written about the nature of the power and authority relationships which are enacted in tutorial conferences. Though it is sometimes tempting to talk about the writing center conference as if it were completely egalitarian, a site where students and tutors can interact as peers or co-authors, this representation is clearly naive. Characterizations of the
writing center as a "rhetorically neutral ground" where tutors “do not have the rhetorical agenda common to one discourse community . . . [and] can thus resist imposing what they value about writing on other departments” (Waldo 18-19) overlook the dynamics of power inherent in any tutoring session. Many power relationships, instantiated along a multitude of dimensions, come into play in all tutorial conferences. Some of these dimensions are economic, some gendered, some cultural, some institutional, and some situational. As John Trimbur and others have remarked, the very term “peer tutor” is itself a contradiction in terms. Students come to the writing center for assistance, and tutors are presumably there—authorized by some sort of institutional power structure—to provide it. Tutors, in the very act of giving suggestions, offering advice, or asking pointed questions, are de facto imposing what they value about writing on students and, by implication, on other departments. Nevertheless, the authority granted tutors by their institutional status as tutors may be counterbalanced by other dimensions of authority that lean more heavily toward the students. The students, for example, own and control the texts they choose to discuss. They are also likely to know more about the papers' subject matter and discipline-specific conventions than the tutors and therefore be able to speak more knowledgeably about what material is relevant and what is not. The ideal tutorial conference, then, is characterized by parity, a balance of power, rather than egalitarianism, where power relationships are either absent or dismissible.

The tutor’s very ignorance of discipline-specific subject matter and rhetorical conventions, then, can be seen as an equalizing force in writing center conferences (Hubbuch). Tutors can ask what rhetorical conventions exist for a particular discipline, and students can articulate and explain them, checking at the same time to see that these conventions are being followed in their own texts. The tutor’s authority and the student’s authority can strike a balance which allows the opportunity for questions and advice (on the tutor’s part) and considered judgment (on the student’s part). This balance of power is facilitated by the tutor’s unique status as an interested, disinterested other—someone who attends to and focuses on the students’ papers in the context of the tutorial session but who has no real stake in the papers’ success or failure. This is quite different from the relationship which is likely to hold between students and instructors, where such a balance of power can rarely be achieved. When conferring with instructors about their papers, students can no longer claim the same authority over the subject matter since the instructor will probably have a greater level of expertise, and they can no longer claim the same control over their texts since the instructor’s power to evaluate and grade the final product will exert a tremendous pressure on how rigorously the student will feel compelled to follow the advice given. The student-teacher conferences transcribed and analyzed by Sperling, for example, reveal conspicuous differences in how the instructor, “Mr. Peterson,”
worked with three students, but they also show the alacrity with which these students were willing to follow the teacher's lead in making revisions to their drafts (136-154; see also Marsella, et al. 182-3). What can be concluded from these observations, perhaps, is that although writing center tutors may not be the best people to comment on papers produced for courses in WAC programs (in terms of their subject-area knowledge and familiarity with discipline-specific conventions), they may very well be the one quasi-authoritative source that students feel most comfortable with, and this, I think, places them and the writing center in an important and worthwhile position.

**Cognitive: The Role of the Tutor**

Cognitive perspectives on the study of writing and conferencing practices also suggest important ways in which WAC and writing centers can work together productively. When writers try to think about or "generate" material that they can use in their writing, they begin by searching their long- and short-term memories, looking for information that can provide them with new ideas, appropriate plans for their writing tasks, or relevant information that can be included in their texts. As writers search their memories, they do so in ways that are both recursive and associational (Hayes and Flower; Flower and Hayes, "Cognitive Process"; Scardamalia and Bereiter). That is, each piece of information they retrieve from their memories becomes, in turn, the basis of a new probe they can use to look for more information. A student writing a paper on the Clinton health plan, for example, might first recall that one of its critical features has to do with catastrophic health coverage for all Americans. This recalled memory ("catastrophic health coverage") is linked, associatively, to the first probe ("the Clinton health plan"), and may, in turn, become the basis for a further memory search. Catastrophic health coverage may bring to mind topics such as medical costs, the insurance industry, or grandma's last stay in the hospital. Each of these may, in turn, lead to further memory searches and further associational chains. The recursive nature of this operation—called "spreading activation"—makes it a powerful search strategy, since it may be modified as needed or redirected to more productive types of search as the goals of the textual plan are themselves met, unfulfilled, or modified.

But this search strategy, in and of itself, may be insufficient to generate the information necessary for successful disciplinary writing. The type and quality of information retrieved from memory are dependent upon the type and quality of the probes which are used to search it, but more fundamentally, these memory probes are dependent upon the nature of the task representation which students construct to guide the search process. Students who do not have functional and productive representations of their writing tasks or textual goals will have difficulty generating ideas or evaluating specific
memories for appropriateness. One of the features which distinguishes "novice" from "expert" writers in Flower and Hayes' cognitive model of writing process behaviors is the richness of the task representations which those writers construct for their developing texts. Rich task representations generally take into account factors as audience, rhetorical goals, and alternative views, while less-rich representations are often "writer-based" and egocentric—seemingly unaware of the textual and rhetorical needs of an audience other than themselves. For novice writers whose potential task representations are entirely dependent upon the limited range of textual options and constructions of audience which may available to them in their own memories, the struggle to become "expert" writers may be a long and tortuous one. Not only will the types of probes they construct to search their memories be limited by their own cognitive processes and perspectives, but the means by which they learn and assimilate new rhetorical strategies will usually be implicit and diffuse, slowly internalized from detectable patterns of reading, writing, and talking behaviors in a discourse community, rather than explicit and focused, derived via an interactive engagement with writing tasks and supportive collaborators.

One important contribution which tutors in writing centers can provide for WAC programs, or more pointedly, for students writing papers in WAC programs, then, is to support and enrich students' cognitive processes by offering them new perspectives for thinking about their tasks (Harris, "Writing Center and Tutoring" 167). When writers confront new writing tasks, they often draw on familiar representations and strategies that have proven useful in the past, hoping that they will prove equally productive in the present. These cognitive constructs may be the result of their previous writing experiences, the social and cultural forces that shape their cognition, or their sense of the rhetorical and discursive conventions they are trying to satisfy. Often these familiar strategies work well for writers; other times—such as when the representations of the writing task are poor or misdirected—they can trap writers in blind alleys.

Writing center conferences can provide opportunities for writers to break out of these representational dead-ends. Each comment, each suggestion or observation made by a writing center tutor can enable student writers to engage their topics in new ways, ways that would not likely occur sui generis. Each new probe from a tutor can help writers to break out of conditioned patterns they find themselves immersed in, offering the possibility, on the one hand, of a solution to a perplexing writing problem or, on the other hand, of a dramatic new insight. In this way, a writing tutor's unfamiliarity with discourse conventions can be seen as one of his or her greatest strengths. Not only can the tutors provide access to new pathways and search strategies, but they can also help students to attain what Arthur Koestler has referred to as "bisociative thought"—the ability to discover
previously-undetected connections between the knowledge structures of two different fields.

The experience of a tutor in my own writing center can help to illustrate this phenomenon particularly well, I think. As she explains it,

I was working with a civil engineering student, Rashid, on a paper about housing construction practices in Saudi Arabia, his native country. Rashid had written the paper in conjunction with a survey he planned to conduct when he returned home, a survey which asked questions about personal preferences in architectural style like, “Do you prefer open or enclosed spaces?” and “Do you prefer natural or artificial lighting?” As we worked through the paper and the survey questions, I had to ask Rashid several times to explain some of the construction and architecture terms, since I don’t really know much about the field myself. And I also had to ask him to clarify exactly what his point was in the paper. He didn’t seem really sure about it either, probably because there were so many questions on so many different topics in the survey that the paper had a lot of trouble pulling them all together. As we kept going through it, I noticed that a lot of the questions had to do with gender issues—”Do you think women should be seen in public?” “What rooms in the house should be for women’s use?”—and the like. I thought this was really interesting, given my interest in women’s issues, so I started asking him questions about it, and the more we talked, the more he began to see that gender could be a focus for his paper, and he really started to pull it together.

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, I think, this is the kind of thinking that WAC—and a college education in general—strive for, and it seems clear that writing centers can play an important role in helping to forge these new, revealing, and insightful connections in student writing. Questions about discourse communities, discursive practices, and discipline-specific conventions will continue to be the subjects of debate in writing centers and in WAC programs (as well they should), but they need not be seen as reasons for despair. Under less-than-perfect circumstances, when WAC programs stray from the principles of writing-in-the-disciplines or writing-to-learn, then writing centers can—if they wish—take a proactive role with students, encouraging them to confront issues of disciplinarity through pointed questions about audience, tone, style, and format. Under more ideal circumstances, when WAC programs are working hard to immerse students in a particular discipline’s modes of inquiry and rhetorical tropes, then writing centers should feel confident that their institutional position (the environmental role) and their pedagogical
practices (the cognitive role) can supply significant, concrete benefits to students even though their tutors may not share the content knowledge of the students they work with.

In sum, though WAC programs and writing centers may work well together when there are administrative, institutional, or pedagogical failures involved in their operations, they function together best and most productively when the instructional mission of each is enacted fully, when the epistemological differences between the two programs are seen not as points of contention but as alternative positions of strength.

Notes

1 For the purposes of this paper, I wish to focus on the difficulties that emerge from WAC programs that are construed as WID, or Writing In the Disciplines, rather than as WTL, or Writing to Learn. Though related in some aspects of their pedagogy, the two WAC approaches have distinctly different goals and generally employ writing for quite different purposes. WAC as Writing to Learn encourages the use of writing as a tool to help students learn subject matter and, often, to make personal connections to their own experience and interests. It employs personal journals, short in-class writing activities, and writing-process teaching strategies to facilitate learning, and since much of the writing students produce as a consequence is relatively short, personal, and ungraded, writing center tutors see relatively little of it. A WID program, on the other hand, though it may use some Writing-to-Learn activities as a part of classroom process, has professionalization as its focus, a desire to teach students what it means to write, talk, and think as members of a particular discipline. The writing projects students undertake in these courses may be collaborative, but they are also, presumably, longer, more complex, more centered in the activities of a discipline than those in WTL courses, and writing center tutors are more likely to encounter and engage with the results. When I refer to WAC in this paper, then, I wish to make it clear that I am referring explicitly to the practice of Writing In the Disciplines.

2 I should emphasize once again at this point that the commentary and critique I am advancing are directed specifically at the problems which arise from the epistemological differences between WID classes, with a primary focus on disciplinary discourse and discipline-specific modes of inquiry, and writing centers. It is not my intention to argue that the WID model is or should be adopted by all undergraduate courses, and neither is it my intention to suggest that conscious myopia or the myth of disciplinarity are endemic—or even applicable—to the majority of classes in an undergraduate curriculum. Nevertheless, I would maintain that whenever tutors are asked
to work on papers in subject areas that are unfamiliar to them, they will confront difficulties similar to those they would face with WID papers (which would be even more deeply immersed in the language, tropes, and modes of inquiry in the field).

3 I realize, of course, that no tutorial conference will ever be completely generic or limited only to those aspects of writing that can be abstracted from all texts. Each tutor will have a wide range of knowledge that intersects many subject areas to a greater or lesser degree. In this respect, no tutor is likely to be completely ignorant about the topic or field of a given paper. However, to the degree that he or she is unfamiliar with the discipline, generic strategies will undoubtedly play a more prominent role in conferences.

4 Richard Leahy offers a strongly proactive model in his article, “Writing Centers and Writing-for-Learning.” He, too, notes that many WAC programs run the risk of “losing sight of writing across the curriculum as a whole,” noting that many WAC courses and faculty slip quickly into purely transactional writing assignments that deny students the opportunity to make personal connections with their subject matter. He argues that writing centers can take up the slack, as it were, by actively promoting—among both students and faculty—the value of more expressive writing assignments.

Works Cited


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