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*Review: Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy:  
Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs*

Mark L. Waldo  
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003

by **Bob Barnett**

In *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy*, Mark Waldo argues for establishing discipline-based writing programs that a) preserve the integrity of a unique set of rhetorical values inherent in each discipline, b) acknowledge the need for specialized languages to solve universal problems, c) foster a shared responsibility for teaching writing, and d) situate themselves in a Writing Across the Curriculum-based writing center. Along the way, Waldo takes direct aim at what he terms the process-expressivist proponents and at writing to learn activists who, in his view, counter the fundamental principles that his version of WAC would advance. After all, this is an author who minces no words in presenting his agenda and who makes no apologies for the provocative nature of his arguments.

The central theme of Waldo's book, that each discipline has its own specialized language and that a WAC-based writing center is in the best position to help disciplines incorporate written forms of this language into their curricula, is not entirely new. Waldo has been building this argument for many years, both in theory and in practice. *Demythologizing Language Difference* combines the arguments in his earlier scholarship, adds to it the University of Nevada-Reno's WAC workshops and portfolio assessment project (chapters 6 and 7) and presents a full picture of his WAC mantra—that by establishing discipline-based writing programs we are preserving the values of each discipline and creating a shared responsibility for teaching writing. Whether readers agree or not with his zealous attack on process-expressivists (a term Waldo uses to describe proponents of expressive rhetoric) or with his claim that writing centers are not yet disciplines, and therefore less likely to impose their own values on others, Waldo builds a compelling case for establishing discipline-based writing programs. The writ-

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ing center community should give serious consideration to the case Waldo makes because, as writing center administrators who work to help define the role of writing on an institutional level, our work with writing across the curriculum will inevitably continue to define who we are as writing center directors now and who we will be in the future.

Waldo opens the book by recounting the Tower of Babel story (he uses the word "myth," but some may feel less inclined to see it as such) and by pointing out the obvious connotations associated with multiple, scattered languages. Waldo challenges what he considers the traditional interpretation of this story and in doing so lays the foundation of his discipline-based theory of WAC. His claim is that a project as complex as the Tower of Babel could not have been achieved by one language and one imagination. Waldo lists the many professions that would have participated in the project. Using Vygotsky, he points out, for example, that "Stone masons, then and now, talk the work they do." They also "think their talk, and the language they use as professionals in a real sense guides their activities" (2). His very definition of language is much broader than the story probably intended, but the importance of language specialization is what Waldo extracts and applies to the modern academy.

Just as specialization is key to Waldo's revisionist theory of the Tower of Babel, it becomes the bedrock for his revisionist theory of WAC. While others have written more generally about the importance of specialization (Russell, Kuhn, Geertz, etc), Waldo is the first to make it so central to WAC work. He is stalwart in his belief that we need specialized languages to solve the complex problems of the world, a belief that also grounds the sometimes ferocious criticism he launches against the process-expressivists. One might find it difficult to argue with his discipline-based approach to writing in higher education because of the strong theoretical and practical evidence that informs it, but many will no doubt take umbrage at the criticisms he levels against composition specialists who, in his view, have long worked against the WAC agenda he so passionately promotes.

In the first few chapters of *Demythologizing Language Difference*, Waldo offers advice to the field of composition regarding its role if it is to play a part in his vision of writing in the academy. He insists that "it is helpful when experts in writing pedagogy resist imposing their values for writing on faculty in other disciplines and search instead for the values and goals of their colleagues" (9). He continues: "As a now identifiable field, composition should open itself up to the need for multiple languages and the possibility of their positive consequences. At least with regard to WAC, it should work not from its own agenda, but within the writing agendas of the disciplines" (11).

Considering the cornerstones of his own theory, this advice comes as no surprise. As he deconstructs the motives of process-expressivists as he sees them, he reveals the problems inherent in their approach: a limited understanding of multiple values and multiple languages beyond their own field; the potential for colonizing other departments; the potential to silence faculty and students, and the potential to stand in the way of disciplines' needs to promote critical thinking within their own contexts.

Much of his criticism is connected to the use of process-expressivist writing-to-learn strategies that he argues are owned by composition. He claims that "writing to learn 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). Anyone even peripherally knowledgeable of WAC scholarship would argue that writing to learn strategies have been shared across disciplines. And while a writing-to-learn approach may not produce the same dramatic effects on critical thinking and problem solving that a discipline-based approach can, it is probably too strong an argument for Waldo to make that this model cannot contribute positively to a learning to write approach. In moments like this, which are fairly frequent in *Demythologizing Language Difference*, Waldo seems to attack the process-expressivists with the same missionary zeal he assigns to them. The problem with such zealotry is that it weakens the otherwise strong evidence of Waldo's theory. My argument is not with the content of his claim so much as it is with the way his claim unfolds and is thus weakened in its presentation to the reader.

Waldo does acknowledge, within the framework of his own theory, that faculty must commit voluntarily to writing within their disciplines, and they must commit to incorporating writing into the larger goals of courses, programs, and departments. Such a commitment by faculty underscores their commitment to help students begin thinking in the language of their discipline and to help them practice that thinking through multiple approaches; writing is, after all, one of many ways to immerse students in the language of one's specialized community. The argument that WAC efforts depend upon disciplinary faculty's commitment is certainly not new, but a continued push toward specialization is necessary for Waldo, because specialized languages, he asserts, will help us solve the complex problems of the world. Understanding the differences in multiple languages, according to Waldo, will speed up our ability to address the problems (global, local, etc.) we currently face. If we accept Waldo's notion of specialization (the evidence for it is well-founded), then we must feel compelled to view writing in the academy as a shared responsibility, not owned by any one department and, for

Waldo, certainly not owned by English. Composition programs cannot own writing any more than the other disciplines across campus.

In chapter 4, Waldo brings his criticism of the process-expressivists into a useful and applicable focus. He articulates the three prevailing models for administering WAC programs, with an obvious bias toward the discipline-based approach. In the first model, WAC is housed exclusively in the English Department. In addition to the shortcomings he points out in earlier chapters, here he articulates other complications that arise: composition faculty cannot teach writing in all disciplines; faculty at large would expect composition instructors to teach all writing; and the impracticality of first-year writing courses designed for specific disciplines has already been well documented at major universities.

Waldo's displeasure with the second model, writing-intensive WAC programs, is equally obvious, mainly because it, too, lends itself to "a central control or administration" (65). While arguably a cost-effective approach, the top-down writing-intensive model creates problems on par with its English only counterpart: "It frees English from the onerous responsibility of teaching all students to write... Intensive programs grant English the opportunity to avoid serious problems while freeing its writing experts to forward a value-based agenda, often involving writing to learn" (66). The potential is also great to relegate the teaching of designated courses to adjuncts, lecturers, and junior faculty, thus freeing up senior faculty to conduct the "important business" of the department. If initiating students into the discourse community of a discipline is a fundamental goal of a WAC program, then surely these students will be shortchanged in their introductions, an argument Waldo makes quite convincingly.

In his third model, discipline-based WAC, Waldo confesses that this approach takes much more time to institute (as long as 3-5 years). He warns would-be discipline-based WAC administrators that anyone considering this model "must recognize that immediate results sometimes drive the thinking of those who budget the money. Consequently, the time it may take to achieve results must clearly be part of the negotiating process" (69). Waldo believes, however, that the advantages far outweigh the challenges. For example, all departments share responsibility for writing, the practice grows from sound theory, and the process creates the greatest potential to "enfranchise students as well as faculty" (69). Waldo builds a powerful case for this approach, both in theory (chapters 1-4) and in practice (chapters 6 and 7), but the unique twist to his model comes in chapter 5, where he claims that WAC programs should be housed in autonomous writing centers, free from the constraints of any one discipline.

Waldo's push for WAC writing centers dates back to his 1993 *WPA* article, "The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum: The Writing Center." He argues now, as he did then, for a writing center characterized by independence from all departments, with a tenured director, skilled tutors from across the disciplines, and "an ambitious writing across the curriculum consultancy, steeped in language and cognitive development, critical thinking, postmodern theory, assignment making, and writing assessment" (82). He was convincing then as he is here in advocating for the most neutral site for carrying out the discipline-based WAC agenda. Yet in the most neutral environment, Waldo cannot escape the fact that he, like most WAC writing center directors, has been formally trained in composition and carries the burden of his own set of rhetorical values, his own assumptions about the role of language within his discipline, and his own ways of immersing students in the discourse community of that discipline. Leaving our biases behind is simply inescapable, and while he acknowledges the need for WAC writing center administrators to work even harder at setting those biases aside, in reality they still exist. What measures, then, are put in place to assure the objectivity with which directors (even those not trained in composition) must facilitate discipline-based writing programs? This

question was unanswered for me in 1993, and it remains unanswered now. Perhaps as our theories and practices evolve beyond their current limitations, we will be forced to consider a new "last best place" for writing across the curriculum. Until then, Mark Waldo's *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy* will serve as a good resource for debating the necessity of a more clearly defined role for writing centers in discipline-based WAC models.

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