

CHAPTER 16.

WAC COMPARED TO OTHER “ACROSS THE CURRICULUMS”

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WAC is one of many “across-the-curriculum” reform movements in U.S. higher education. There have been efforts to extend specific content or skills across the curriculum in mathematics, the Great Books, philosophy, information literacy (e.g., library skills), oral communication, diversity, multiculturalism, ethics, global studies, and others. In addition, there have been broader reform movements: progressive education, general education, assessment, and professional development (“teaching excellence” centers). This chapter compares WAC to several of these in order to notice ways that WAC has been similar to and different from others, and what those similarities and differences might tell us about options for the future. I will begin with the movements based on specific disciplinary content or skills and move to broader educational reform movements.

WAC has had a much longer and more extensive reach than any of the other specific “across the curriculums.” Most remained very small and confined to relatively few intuitions. For example, the critical thinking across the curriculum movement, organized in 1980, splintered early, and generally has an institutional presence more ephemeral than WAC even in its early years. Where critical thinking across the curriculum is organized, it primarily sells teaching materials and training seminars (Paul, n.d.). The notable exception is the Quinipiac University Writing and Critical Thinking (QUWACT) initiative, which is a central part of their Center for Teaching and Learning. It provides materials for faculty and has held seven biennial national conferences on Critical Thinking and Writing. The Great Books movement began much earlier, with John Erskine’s course at Columbia in 1920, but its spread was sporadic (today only about 200 universities of over 4000 offer a Great Books course or program, even as an option) and its organization is left to what are essentially publishers, such as the Great Books Foundation (*College Great Books Programs*, n.d.; *The Great Books Foundation*, n.d.).

The closest comparison with WAC is the movement in mathematics, called numeracy education or quantitative reasoning (QR) across the curriculum. In an excellent article, Cinnamon Hillyard (2012) points out that the numeracy

education movement followed a similar pattern to WAC (in part because of WAC's influence) although it was about 15 years later. Like WAC, it was sparked by nationally publicized complaints: for writing, "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Sheils, 1975) and for math, *Innumeracy* (Paulos, 1988). Each produced discussions and reports in the profession. A few institutions began (or developed) programs to address the newly salient need, supported by national grants (NEH WAC grants in 1977 and following; NSF MATC grants in 1994 and following) to fund faculty workshops and other initiatives. A SIG formed in the national professional organization (WAC Network in 1981; SIGMAA-QL in 2004), followed by a regular national conference (Steen & Madison, 2015)—WAC starting in 1993; NNN starting in 2005 in conjunction with various related professional organizations (National Numeracy Network, n.d.). NNN founded the journal *Numeracy* in 2008.

In terms of structure, both have worked to move first-year courses toward a different conceptual orientation: to focus on writing to learn and preparation for writing in the disciplines in FYC, and to focus on quantitative reasoning and applications in introductory math. Both have also worked toward outreach to faculty in other disciplines and departments.

The differences are equally striking. On the one hand, WAC has had a remarkable impact, with more than 50 percent of institutions reporting some program in 2008 (up from 31 percent in 1988), while numeracy education has had far less reach thus far (perhaps not surprising given the 15-year lag), though there have been no national surveys (Thaiss & Porter, 2010). On the other hand, numeracy education founded an incorporated National Numeracy Network in 2005, some 15 years before WAC created a formal organization (apart from an annual 90-minute special interest group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication). Another difference is that WAC is often supported by—and supports—a large network of writing centers, with a long history of service to the wider university community, whereas mathematics tutoring centers typically do not have that campus-wide history or outreach (Palmquist et al., 2020).

Oral communication across the curriculum (styled CXC) is another movement that was inspired by WAC. It began only a few years later and has important similarities. Programs began at a few institutions in the late 1970s. They aim to change the orientation of introductory speech (what they call "the basic course") from public speaking to interpersonal, organizational, group, intercultural, gender, nonverbal, and other types of non-written communication. And they offer their expertise to faculty in other disciplines, to improve not only their students' speaking but also their learning, especially through improved interpersonal and group communication (Vrchota & Russell, 2013). They have

followed the lead of WAC by founding communication centers to foster “speaking across the curriculum”—the title of the newsletter of the National Association of Communication Centers, founded in 2001 (with a journal published since 2004). Some 70 communication centers were identified in 2012 (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012), with many more founded since due to the efforts of the national association.

Clearly the number of CXC and QR centers is far fewer than writing centers, but this only points to the recency of the efforts in communication and mathematics and, more importantly, to the potential for combining efforts. There have been many successful across-the-curriculum programs and centers that combine two or more of the three. For example, Carleton’s QuIRK program (Quantitative Inquiry, Reasoning, and Knowledge) was in large part successful because it aligned its efforts with the campus writing program (Hillyard, 2012, p. 15). Similarly, the Campus Speaking and Writing Program at North Carolina State is a decades-old collaboration between the departments of English and Communication (Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2010). All three of these disciplinary and skill areas are foundational to students’ success across the curriculum and offer multi-section first-year courses, so it is not surprising they have been the leading movements across the curriculum.

As an option for the future of WAC, combining efforts with CXC and QR is obvious, not only because of the importance of the three but because of their increasing synergy. QR is essential for representing information visually, and this is now central to the digital environment. Similarly, oral and written communication are merging as tools for converting oral, written, and visual information to one another increase in quality, quantity, and reach. This change has of course been central to recent writing studies. (Indeed, the shift from written to multi-modal communication in writing studies is behind speech communication using “CXC” instead of “communication across the curriculum,” to distinguish the two efforts.) WAC as the leader has much to share, in terms of dealing with skeptics within and beyond the discipline, for example.

Now that WAC, CXC, and QR all have national organizations, it is possible to begin at least informal communication among them. One initial effort might be to identify programs that combine two or three media and put them in communication with one another. They might share successes and challenges, develop best practices, and even collaborate on research and outreach to national higher education (HE) organizations.

Turning now from movements focused on specific disciplines, content, or skills to the broader movements that have worked across the curriculum in U.S. higher

education in the last half century or more, one finds two very early predecessors that stand out: the progressive education movement and the general or liberal education movement.

The progressive education movement began in the late 19th century and had a formal structure, though it lasted only 36 years (1919–1955). It was revived in the 1990s and again in 2014 as the Progressive Education Network (PEN) (*History*, n.d.). Its ideas are still profoundly influential and controversial—and a brief listing of them shows their influence on WAC:

- Emphasis on learning by doing – hands-on projects, experiential learning
- Integrated curriculum focused on thematic units
- Strong emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking
- Group work and development of social skills
- Understanding and action as the goals of learning as opposed to rote knowledge
- Collaborative and cooperative learning projects
- Education for social responsibility and democracy
- Integration of community service and service learning projects into the daily curriculum
- Selection of subject content by looking forward to ask what skills will be needed in future society
- De-emphasis on textbooks in favor of varied learning resources
- Emphasis on lifelong learning and social skills
- Assessment by evaluation of projects and productions [over exams] (“Progressive”, 2022)

Clearly WAC fits in that tradition (Russell, 2002), but the PEN is not a large or influential organization, and its influence is diffuse. Moreover, it is focused on K-12. Yet WAC can still draw inspiration from its long history, as WAC is at bottom an attempt to reform pedagogy—though a reform that takes disciplinary more seriously than the progressive education movement has tended to.

The general or liberal education movement was founded after World War II, to counteract authoritarian regimes and defend democracies. That movement had the *Journal of General Education*, founded in 1946 by Earl J. McGrath, who was the driving force in the movement (Russell, 2002). A formal organization did not arise for another 14 years, the Association for General and Liberal Studies, but it now has an annual conference, a working board, and an executive director (“Association,” n.d.). As an organization, it is like progressive education in that it has relatively few members and little direct influence. But as a concept and a tradition, it carries a great deal of weight. Indeed, a number of WAC

programs were founded as part of a general education reform on campus or took advantage of that effort to get a seat at the reformers’ table. Some are even housed in general education administrative units and central to these efforts (Condon & Rutz, 2012).

As Sue H. McLeod and Eric Miraglia (2001, p. 11) pointed out 20 years ago, WAC is part of a third wave of general education reform movement that swept the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, which included many of the other “across-the-curriculum” disciplinary, content, and skills movements discussed above. General education was traditionally about curriculum, what students are taught, but as McLeod and Miraglia noted, that third wave was also about pedagogy. And that is even more true today. In that sense, WAC is like general education in that it tries to reform both what students learn in all their courses (“adding” writing) but also how they learn (through writing—and the concomitant writing pedagogies of revision, group work, peer review, assessment beyond machine-scored tests, and so on). The two movements are more than ever ripe for collaboration.

It is worth pointing out here that there is a learning community movement, active since the 1980s, that has been closely associated with WAC. Like other “across the curriculums,” learning communities are formed in any discipline with the aim of changing pedagogy to more student-centered forms. A number of WAC programs grew out of or supported learning community initiatives (McLeod & Miraglia, 2001), including one of the very first learning communities, at the University of Washington (Graham, 1992).

WAC also bears a close and complex relation to two more recent national reform efforts: professional development and assessment. Both have a large reach and exert powerful influence from the top down on higher education.

What has been called the faculty development movement in higher education began in the 1960s and was organized officially in 1976 as the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD), as part of the American Association for Higher Education (with its own journal, the *POD Quarterly*). This makes it roughly the same age as WAC. It has more than 1400 members. POD, like WAC, has a significant institutional presence. In the most recent survey, 2010, some 20 percent of all 2-year and 4-year institutions had an active faculty development program (Kuhlenschmidt, 2011), with 21 percent overall, 72 percent in doctoral institutions versus 14 percent in bachelors. By comparison, the 2008 WAC program survey showed 51 percent overall, 65 percent doctoral, and 60 percent bachelors. WAC is at bottom a form of professional development, and it is not surprising that many WAC programs are housed in POD units and share personnel (how many is unclear). Indeed, one of the most important studies of faculty development was done by a team

that included WAC researchers and program developers Carol Rutz and William Condon (2012). Clearly there is room for continuing and expanded collaboration and integration—though there are dangers in an integration that may leave a WAC program without a secure identity and funding, as we shall see.

A final higher education reform movement that has had an effect on WAC is what is called the assessment or accountability movement, which took hold with the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s. With national funding for WAC drying up in the Reagan era, WAC turned to the assessment movement as a way to leverage faculty and department/curriculum reform—an alternative to mass testing that put the power into the hands of the faculty who were teaching the curricula. Pioneering work began in the 1990s at North Carolina State, spurred by new interest in assessment (Anson & Dannels, 2009). The founders of that program consulted widely, advocating for WAC programs based on the faculty in a department or curriculum assessing their students and developing a recursive plan for improving curriculum and teaching. In some places such curriculum/department-based WAC found a very strong and sustainable foothold. Perhaps the most successful of these department/curriculum-based programs is at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, where a Ford Foundation grant allowed Pamela Flash and her team to create the Writing Enriched Curriculum. Consultants work with the faculty who teach a curriculum over a three-year iterative cycle, through a recursive process of gathering data (e.g., surveys of students, faculty, alumni, employers); analytically mapping current uses of writing in each course; and collaboratively planning further enhancements, implementing them, and assessing them, by gathering more data, and so on through another three-year cycle (Flash, 2016).

A common variation of this—also pioneered at North Carolina State by Chris Anson—is to have a working group of faculty members who teach a particular curriculum carry on a multi-year research project on writing in their field among their students, along with a writing consultant. The University of Central Florida, for example, has a program that has reached most departments. A team of department faculty analyze the uses of writing for learning in their department, identify a problem, institute a solution, and evaluate it—all repeated over the next three-year cycle (Zemliansky & Berry, 2017). And most recently, Elizabeth Wardle at Miami of Ohio has improved upon this through involving departments even more fully (Glotfelter et al., 2022).

In these programs, the faculty teaching a curriculum truly own writing and are responsible for it; thus, their values are central. The faculty members have the expertise in writing in their discipline, and must define and redefine writing for themselves, their curriculum, and thus their students. Full integration is the goal—learning through writing. Although writing consultants may teach mini

lessons initially, with faculty present, they work behind the scenes mainly, to consult and support. In this model, faculty members teaching a curriculum are held accountable—and hold each other accountable.

The concern over assessment in WAC, so prevalent in the 1990s, as part of the larger standards and accountability/assessment push in higher education, has not been so prevalent in 21st century discussions. One way assessment has played out in 21st century WAC is through alternative forms of assessment, now often organized around an ePortfolio. But documenting the value of programs through directly assessing the writing of individual students has given way to a variety of options, direct and indirect, for assessing programs, courses, and students’ performance. A range of measures often brings in a range of stakeholders, such as alumni, employers, departments (as we have seen), students-as-peers, students-as-tutors, and so on. Perhaps because WAC programs in many places have endured the test of time, the goal is often not assessment per se (for rendering a judgment on whether a program should be funded) but rather providing data—and forums where stakeholder discussions happen—for long-range improvement of programs. Assessment then becomes a tool for creating sustainability (Carter, 2002; Condon & Rutz, 2012; Willett et al., 2014; Yancey, 2018).

All of these depend on developing a consultancy (rather than a missionary) relationship with faculty in the disciplines, which Jeffrey Jablonski (2006) analyzed in his helpful how-to book for WAC practitioners. More recently, an analysis of programs led to the book, *Sustainable WAC: A whole systems approach to launching and developing writing across the curriculum programs*, which lays out a range of options for continuous evaluation and change. As we shall see, these efforts have produced a national organizational structure to facilitate professional development for WAC practitioners (Cox et al., 2018).

In the first edition of my history of the WAC movement, published in 1992, I noted that WAC was a remarkably long-lived educational reform movement in the history of American higher education, and was all the more remarkable because it did not develop a formal organizational structure. Even more remarkably, that situation continued another 25 years. However, in 2018, WAC finally gained a formal organizational structure, the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC). The movement is no longer purely grassroots, and I will give some reasons here why that is a very good thing, in terms of its future longevity.

In many ways, the grassroots served WAC well. Many people may not have noticed, over the last 50 years, that WAC had no national organization because it had other structures. It had a special interest group of the CCCC, the

International Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs (INWAC), founded by Christopher Thaiss in 1981. INWAC met for an hour and a half once a year for table discussions, led by a group of experienced WAC consultants and Thaiss, who also published an annual directory of programs. A listserv, WAC-L, has existed since the 1990s. And the WAC Clearinghouse, at Colorado State University, operated as a kind of quasi-official website for the movement, with its own board and funding sources (Thaiss, 2004).

The other longstanding national organization, the biennial WAC conference, was passed from one volunteer institution to another without a formal organization. That conference remained quite successful, attracting several hundred participants every two years. It over time changed to reflect trends in writing studies, especially diversity and inclusion, and supported research on student writing with a particular emphasis on disciplinary differences, especially in STEM fields. There was also one regional organization, the Northeast Writing Across the Curriculum Consortium (NEWACC), founded in 2007 by a group of WAC directors (“Northeast,” n.d.).

Moves toward a national organization began in 2012 with the development of a national Statement of WAC Principles and Practices by an ad hoc committee of INWAC, spearheaded by Michelle Cox of Cornell. Ratified by INWAC in 2014 and CCCC in 2015, the seven-page introduction to WAC basics served a number of purposes, particularly in making arguments for resources to administrators and other stakeholders (“Statement,” 2014).

Led by the same group of mid-career researchers who had spearheaded the Statement, there were efforts to broaden the leadership of WAC and make it more accessible to newcomers by adopting a formal mission statement, goals, structures for rotating elected officers, permanent volunteer committees, and so on, building on the ad hoc grassroots structure the founding generation had successfully pursued.

Formal discussions about creating an umbrella organization for WAC began in 2016, prompted by the impending retirement of the founder of INWAC, Thaiss, and other pioneers of WAC. After getting feedback on bylaws at CCCC 2018, a call for members went out, and the first official meeting of AWAC took place at IWAC in June 2018, followed by incorporation as a non-profit. Elections were held, and a rotating leadership took over, with ten committees, a website, and perhaps most importantly, a three-day summer professional development institute, which quickly sold out. The new umbrella organization included as committees WAC-GO (a graduate student organization), the IWAC conference, and the new WAC Summer Institute (“History of AWAC,” n.d.).

AWAC represents an important development. WAC now has a national organization parallel to similar writing organizations that are independent of

CCCC and NCTE, such as those for writing centers, writing program administrators, and so on. As Thaiss noted in 2016, WAC has previously been unable to create “an agenda to focus efforts, issue position statements, establish and publish standards, conduct statistical surveys of members, and, maybe most basic, ensure continuity through an orderly process of succeeding leadership” (p. 139). In addition, a dues-paying membership—both individual and institutional—provides support.

The work that a national organization can do is nicely summarized by the committees of AWAC. In addition to committees for the biennial conference, the summer institute, and graduate students, there are committees for advocacy (in such areas as equitable working conditions for those teaching WAC courses), communication, diversity and inclusion (e.g., to make AWAC and WAC practitioners reflect better the student population), international collaborations (responding to the tremendous expansion of work noted above), mentoring (of WAC consultants and other stakeholders), partnerships (with the many other writing-focused organizations, at all levels), and research and publication (which has flourished but has been dispersed and unorganized).

Before the founding of AWAC, I was concerned that, as Rita Malenczyk argued in 2012, WAC might be “disappearing”—absorbed into the broader general education reform, or one of the many other reform efforts with which it is associated, such as faculty development programs. Those involved in WAC are also involved in those efforts, and often wear several professional “hats” (as almost everyone who does WAC work does). They might come to identify mainly with other efforts, or WAC might be so integrated into larger agendas and programs and would lose their identity and specific funding. As Condon and Rutz (2012) argue in their excellent analysis of types of WAC programs:

WAC becomes seamlessly incorporated into an institution’s approach to teaching and learning—seemingly a positive development—WAC can disappear as an entity, throwing the institution back into some of the problems that gave rise to WAC in the first place. As a given WAC program progresses into Type 4 [full integration and beyond], momentum threatens to consume it, so that those who are in charge of WAC must continue to emphasize its location. (p. 379)

WAC disappearing is always possible, in that collaboration might become absorption, perceived as a “natural” function that requires no sustaining, no special identity as a movement.

But there is now a national professional organization, which can allow WAC to be an intimate partner with other initiatives while maintaining its

organizational and institutional identity. Although such absorption can and has happened at the local level, at the national level WAC has not been absorbed into general education or faculty development. Indeed, it has perhaps a larger presence than either of the other two within higher education institutions. In my view, this is mainly because WAC has taken seriously the profound organizing principle of higher education and of modern knowledge: disciplinarity. In other words, WAC has depended on WID, though that has always been a tension within the overarching WAC movement, a productive tension. The general in general education and the universal in professional development are necessary to take into account—but rarely sufficient, at least to secure their institutional relevance and longevity. It is necessary to work with faculty on their own terms and in their own terms, and the WAC movement has continued to do that, messy as it always is. The assessment movement allowed WAC to capitalize on the value of specialization—and faculty control. Recent developments in the writing-enriched curriculum, where WAC professionals take a consulting role in ongoing iterative development by faculty teaching a curriculum (not only a course), bode well for the sustainability of WAC in the long run (Cox et al., 2018). None of the other “across-the-curriculum” efforts have taken disciplinary knowledge and practices as seriously and as thoroughly as WAC, in my view. They have tended to remain at the level of general strategies. And that has limited their reach and, perhaps, longevity.

One might rightly argue that the deeper reason none of the other “across-the-curriculum” movements has had the reach or staying power of WAC is that writing is so very important to the work of higher education and of every profession students enter. But organizationally and institutionally, WAC was and is supported by the overall presence of composition/writing studies, with its writing courses, writing centers, and writing programs, all organized nationally. Chris Anson and Karla Lyles (2011) did a statistical examination of writing-related articles in 14 disciplinary journals that publish on pedagogy. They found that WAC’s growth “coincided with—and in many ways helped create and shape—the professionalization of composition as a field” (Anson & Lyles, 2011, p. 8). This is an advantage that none of the other “across the curriculums” has had.

In summary, the WAC movement has taken its place with other educational reform movements of the late 20th century and is now more firmly established than ever in the 21st. In 2002, I wrote that the future of WAC would be about “forging alliances, expanding with new connections” (p. 332). Some 20 years later, the new organizational structures in place for WAC at last allow those alliances to be formalized and the connections developed over time, systematically between organizations and their various committee structures, as well as through personal connections at the grassroots level.

Yet there remain crucial needs in terms of alliances and connections. One is that WAC be more responsive to the other “across-the-curriculum” themes that have occupied general education: diversity, multiculturalism, ethics, global studies, and so on. Making common cause with those organizations in higher education that study and promote these will allow WAC to address as never before issues of nationality, race, gender, class, and more generally the very problems that inspired the formation of general/liberal education after World War II: the battles between democratic and authoritarian government, between liberty and tyranny. Fortunately, AWAC has committees charged with addressing these issues.

Another is the organization of research, at three levels. First, there are some fundamental questions about how writing relates to learning and to development over time, which WAC research might help to answer if there were a concerted effort that involved researchers in K-12, psychology, and other fields, both in the US and internationally. There has been relatively little collaboration of that type (as there often has been in other regions of the world, notably Latin America and Europe). Second, there are programmatic questions that involve large-scale institutional research—a scale that would require cooperation with national organizations. In my view, the model in the US is the collaboration between WAC researchers and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provided the largest-ever study of the effects of writing on students’ perception of their engagement with learning. Third, WAC can partner more effectively with research on learning in the disciplines conducted by the disciplines. While there has been research in most every discipline on ways to improve learning through writing (including, for example, mortuary science and forest pest management), relatively few disciplines have taken on board writing as an important project of ongoing research and theorizing over time. The exceptions, though, are important ones. Engineering, science (particularly at the secondary school level), and mathematics have large-scale research efforts stretching back many years into the relationships between writing and learning specifically in those fields. WAC researchers have in some cases partnered with them, but much more is possible. The AWAC committee on research and publications now exists to do these very things.

A final crucial need is that WAC form, at last, those alliances and connections with other organizations involved with educational reform and accreditation, such as The Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education, American Association for Higher Education (AAHEA), and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), as well as American Association of University Professors (AAUP) potentially. There might be sessions on WAC at every meeting of these organizations, as there have been

at times in the past. Indeed, this would be going back to the future. It was the NEH that sponsored the seminars that in many ways gave birth to WAC. And it was Carol Schneider, a long-time president of the AAC&U, who organized a decade of conferences on Writing and Thinking in the late 1980s through the early 1990s at the University of Chicago—featuring Wayne Booth, Joe Williams, and Elaine Maimon. Teams attended from all over the nation to learn WAC principles (Soven, 2006). And yes, there are AWAC committees for advocacy and partnerships.

General education, critical thinking, faculty development, the assessment movement, and a number of other powerful and ongoing reform efforts did not absorb WAC, as Malenczyk in 2012 predicted general education would. And all indications are that WAC will be able to continue to hold to its identity while aligning with and connecting with other reforms, perhaps for another half century.

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