

Is It Still WAC? Writing within Interdisciplinary Learning Communities

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It's almost a cycle—every several months or so, someone just starting a learning community program at his or her institution queries the writing listservs about how WAC and, in most cases, first-year composition fit into this new model. Besides all the helpful advice, what is perhaps most interesting to the two of us are the new voices that respond each time around, as more and more institutions design learning community (LC) programs in an effort to reform curriculum and pedagogy, particularly as these relate to the first-year experience. The most commonly used definition of a learning community, as well as descriptions of an array of LC models, comes from the pioneering work of Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith (Gabelnick et al.). In brief, learning communities are curriculum change initiatives that link, cluster, or integrate two or more courses during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and involve a common cohort of students. Although LC structures are quite variable, they all have the common goal of fostering greater academic coherence and more explicit intellectual connections among students, between students and their faculty, and among disciplines.¹ With LC rapidly becoming a paradigm for curricular reform, the time seems right for an

examination of how both WAC and first-year composition (FYC) are being transformed by their inclusion in these communities.

In “The Future of WAC,” Barbara Walvoord suggests that we reexamine WAC within the frame of other educational reform movements—assessment, critical thinking, cross-curricular initiatives—in order to think more creatively about “its characteristics, strengths, and problems” (61). We also need to work within these movements in order to accomplish our goals. WAC must “dive in or die” (70), Walvoord argues, a process that involves locating WAC “skillfully, powerfully, visibly or invisibly, among the complex forces and discourses of the academy” (74). This process has not been one-sided for the LC movement, which from the outset has not only pointed to WAC as a valuable model for pedagogical reform, but has also seen writing as foundational to its cross-disciplinary aims. As we will show in this chapter, however, when WAC is incorporated into LC models, it can be transformed in complex, sometimes unrecognizable, ways.² To illustrate, we describe our experiences with WAC in two LC models—the Linked Courses Program³ and the New Century College at George Mason University. In examining these new sites for WAC—a program and a college—we argue that WAC has become a much more reciprocal process, with writing faculty and faculty in the disciplines engaged in a sustained conversation about writing processes and products. In the case of New Century College, where writing is infused in the interdisciplinary curriculum, we suggest we may need new terminology to describe writing within innovative curricula.

We begin by discussing the robust tradition of WAC and its influence on curricular and pedagogical innovation at George Mason University, including the learning communities that are the focus of this chapter. As various contributors have observed on the electronic listserv for writing program administrators (WPA-L@asu.edu), learning communities tend to reflect the individual campus cultures. Similarly, the richness and complexity of the two LC programs we discuss reflect our campus culture—the willingness of our faculty to take risks, cooperation across disciplines encouraged by WAC, and, not least, institutional flexibility. Next, each of us discusses how writing occurs in her particular learning community and the complex issues that tend to surface,

including the issue of assessment—of writing, of learning communities, and of WAC in learning communities: the egg inside the egg inside the egg, to paraphrase Bill Condon (Chapter 2, this volume). Condon’s metaphor is particularly apt because, as he notes, “each larger egg is one more level of difficulty above the difficulty of ‘simply’ assessing writing ability” (p. 29). We suggest that the work of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Flashlight Project on evaluating the relatively new technology-across-the-curriculum movement can provide some useful guidelines for assessing WAC in learning communities. We close with a vision of WAC for the new millennium as Writing Across Curricular Cultures, a good description, we think, of what happens to writing instruction and, more important, writing practices in learning communities when new alliances are formed—among faculty, students, and other campus professionals—and disciplinary genres merge and expand.

Robust Tradition of WAC

WAC enjoys a robust tradition at George Mason dating back to 1977, when a faculty task force, concerned about student writing, called for workshops to help faculty across the disciplines learn to use writing as a tool of teaching. Early WAC activities included workshops conducted by Elaine Maimon and others. The presence of the Northern Virginia Writing Project on campus also encouraged WAC activities, in particular through faculty institutes during the summers of 1980 and 1981. One result of this effort was the publication of *Writing to Learn: Essays and Reflections on Writing Across the Curriculum*, edited by Chris Thaiss, in 1983. By 1990, when the faculty senate mandated a writing intensive requirement, the university’s experience with WAC, marked by these and other developments, was fairly typical of a number of WAC programs nationally (see Griffin; McLeod, “Writing”). Significantly, for much of its history at George Mason, WAC provided virtually the only organized forum for conversation about teaching across department lines, conducted mainly through workshops and brown-bag discussions.

Closely intertwined with the history of WAC at George Mason is the history of curricular revision, particularly in general education, which includes the creation of a number of interdisciplinary initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s. Not surprisingly, faculty involved in WAC have also frequently been involved in curricular reform in general education. The cornerstone of these reform efforts was the establishment in 1982 of the Plan for Alternative General Education (PAGE), later revised into an honors program, which offers a forty-five-hour comprehensive, interdisciplinary, writing intensive program for approximately two hundred students. At about the same time that PAGE was being pioneered, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS)—where general education resides—was also experimenting with a small cluster-course program, offering a limited number of first-year students and sophomores “clusters,” which linked two or three courses from different disciplines and included a monthly integrative seminar. This program was supplanted after two years by a pilot of a general education core curriculum, funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), offering limited opportunity for cross-disciplinary connections. In this program, the first two courses for first-year students were linked, so that five composition faculty members worked as a group to link up with humanities faculty teaching a Western culture course. Assessment of the core pilot showed higher student and faculty satisfaction with the two linked courses than with the stand-alone courses. Armed with these assessment data, composition faculty in the pilot proposed to the CAS dean that the linked arrangement be continued between existing introductory courses and the composition course even though faculty rejected the core initiative as a model for general education. We comp teachers were convinced that our students were more invested in writing courses when they were asked to write about ideas and texts they were studying in another course. Perhaps even more persuasive was our own sense that we were no longer teaching writing skills in isolation; we were creating enhanced communities for our students and for ourselves. In the next section, Terry describes the Linked Courses Program more fully.

Linked Courses Program

While we in the core pilot believed we had created a new model, when I took over direction of the Linked Courses Program, I discovered the extent to which other institutions had also created linked or clustered courses within general education programs. Typically, the clusters are aimed at first-year students and include a first-year composition course as an integral part of the learning community, the space in which students can process the information they are learning in the other course(s). This is the case partly because first-year composition is usually the only small class first-year students will have in their first semester and partly because of its flexible content, as writing teachers tend to be more concerned with the “how” of learning than the “what.” For this reason, as Tim McLaughlin points out, writing teachers often play key roles “not only as learning community organizers but as creators of connective tissue between courses” (7).

From its inception in 1992, Mason’s Linked Courses Program has been fully endorsed and supported by the College of Arts and Sciences, which is now actively seeking to expand the program beyond the students’ first semester. A sample of linked courses includes first-year composition linked variously to introductory courses in psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, engineering, government, history, and so on. The more ambitious links, three of which I will discuss in this section, include a third course in the link: first-year composition (FYC), government, and philosophy; an e-mail mentoring link designed for psychology majors, which includes FYC, psychology, and a peer-mentoring component; and FYC, sociology, and a one-credit community service course. Before I turn to a discussion of writing within these linked courses, however, I want to explore the way the traditional first-year composition course has been influenced by the linked program.

In his 1997 WAC conference presentation, “A ‘Linked-Courses’ Initiative within a Multi-faceted WAC Program: Administrative Problems and Solutions,” Chris Thaiss discussed the pressure that a linked writing course puts on the writing pro-

gram director to reexamine the content and “integrity” of first-year composition. To what extent, he asked, can unlinked composition courses “effectively prepare students for other environments,” and, conversely, what “separable content” must be maintained? These questions about FYC—whether linked or unlinked—have been the focus of numerous articles and presentations in WAC and composition journals and conferences. Many of us in comp are familiar with the “new abolitionism,” one term used to describe the movement to eliminate required composition courses. Proponents of abolishing required writing courses typically see a strong WAC program as the best alternative (see, for example, Connors and Crowley, among others). Faculty in other disciplines, even those most committed to WAC aims, do not, however, necessarily support the elimination of the first-year writing requirement. Joan Mullin, in “WAC and the Restructuring of First Year Composition,” a 1995 WAC conference talk, discussed some faculty objections: their belief, for example, that the writing skills we “should be” teaching in writing courses can be decontextualized. Furthermore, Mullin pointed out, faculty in other disciplines, while understanding that they employ a specific disciplinary discourse, are reluctant to acknowledge themselves as “teachers of language.” One solution, according to Mullin, is an arrangement whereby writing and content teachers collaborate as mentors and resources on writing in the disciplines.

It is this kind of collaboration and mentoring I see occurring in the Linked Courses Program where, in the best arrangements, the writing teacher retains the integrity of the composition course and also works proactively as a “WAC change agent,” a term Thaiss used in his talk to mean teaching writing and rhetorical skills within the context of another course yet also showing how those skills can transcend specific disciplinary discourses. When I say in the “best arrangements,” I am referring to links in which there is a one-to-one correspondence in class size, making it possible for all of the teachers in the link to assign, talk about, and be responsible for writing. In George Mason’s linked program, however, as well as in most of the LC programs I am familiar with, the correspondence among classes (in all senses of the word) varies. In the remainder of this section, I describe three linked variations, showing how the composition course functions in each

variation and how responsibility for writing—from creating to evaluating assignments—gets allocated.

Variation One—Sections of FYC Linked to a Large Lecture Course

One of the dean's main objectives in funding the Linked Courses Program is to increase first-year student retention by creating a comfortable, less isolating learning environment. For this reason, over half of the thirty or so linked packages offered each fall semester are made up of FYC and a large introductory general education course (150 to 300 students), such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, in which there is no writing assigned and Scantron tests are the norm. In these links, all responsibility for writing falls to the composition faculty, who teach, in two sections, 44 of the students enrolled in the lecture course. While this is not an ideal WAC situation, students are writing in the context of a discipline and there is an exchange of ideas and methods between the two teachers (one reason it is especially important to employ experienced writing teachers). In this exchange, then, both teachers stand to gain. The noncomposition teacher engages in discussions about writing and writing assignments. At the same time, the FYC instructor gains valuable WAC experience, something that is not generally a feature of traditional programs, in which FYC is disconnected from WAC (see Christopher Thaiss, Chapter 12, this volume).

In a presemester workshop, the linked-course teachers work together to coordinate their syllabi. Though there may not be much flexibility on the part of the lecture teachers, they often see ways they might incorporate writing-to-learn strategies in the lecture class, or they may visit the writing class to talk about a particular assignment. Sometimes they redesign assignments based on their discussions with a writing professional. An anthropology teacher, for example, who had stopped using a micro-ethnography assignment because he was disappointed with the results, worked with his composition partner to redesign his assignment instructions and to articulate criteria for evaluation. He began using the revised assignment, giving it to students as an alternative to one of his multiple-choice tests. As David Russell

points out in his review of WAC/WID research (Chapter 11, this volume), we know that the “very process of studying writing in conjunction with faculty helps faculty to critically reflect on their practice and change that practice” (pp. 290–91). I see these kinds of changes occurring again and again in linked planning sessions and in collaborative work throughout the semester.

In another iteration of the large lecture/small FYC link, we have experimented with assigning first-year writers who are also enrolled in Introduction to Psychology to e-mail mentors, upper-level psychology honors students who receive internship credit in psychology for their participation. When I originally designed this link, I was most interested in its e-mail aspect. I anticipated that the FYC students, who had declared psych as a major, would learn the conventions of e-mail communication, increase their writing output, and learn more about writing in their major. In turn, the upper-level mentors would be engaging in a writing-to-learn review of the discipline, a useful preparation for taking the Graduate Record Exam (almost all were headed to grad school); I also speculated that they would gain by becoming more reflective writers themselves. The mentors performed as expected, writing volumes in response to their mentees’ rather short questions. To encourage her first-year students to write at greater length, FYC instructor Mary Kruck began requiring them to send paper drafts to their mentors for comments and suggestions. She also held a short online “workshop” for the mentors to discuss some ways they might respond to their mentees’ drafts. Interestingly, Kruck—a very student-centered, well-liked teacher—noticed that once her students began sending drafts to their mentors, they seemed to transfer allegiance from her to the mentors, questioning her comments and grades. Some of the mentors also questioned her, wondering why she didn’t comment on all of the surface errors each time. Why wasn’t she, for example, teaching them subject-verb agreement and simple punctuation rules? In the process of working out the intricacies of this particular link, the psychology professor, the writing instructor, the mentors, and the first-year students all became involved in discussions about writing. Among other observations, the psychology mentors reported that they gained invaluable knowledge about themselves

as writers and learners in their chosen field as well as about the writing and learning processes of less experienced students.

Variation Two—Fully Linked Sections of Two or More Courses

Perhaps the most typical LC models are those in which students are enrolled together in two or more courses with teachers who have created overlapping syllabi and reading and writing assignments. In the most successful versions of fully linked courses, the faculty members meet often to plan, rethink, and revise their assignments in light of the students' learning needs. Engaging in this kind of collaborative process, beginning with the presemester planning workshop, tends to make all of the teachers in the link much more conscious of how they approach student writing. "Every time I teach in a link I learn more about how to teach writing," a history professor tells me enthusiastically whenever he sees me. He has high praise for the two writing teachers he has linked with; he has always assigned lots of writing, he says, but now he understands the importance of building in a processing component even in his courses that are not linked. If a WAC aim is for teachers in other disciplines to help their students "process" writing, then fully linked courses help achieve that aim. Once again it is worth noting that WAC aims are also achieved in the composition course. As Dennis Young (an experienced composition teacher) reported at the 1997 WAC conference, teaching collaboratively in a three-way link with Social and Political Philosophy and Introduction to American Government courses helped him realize the importance of students having "a frame of reference, a sense of one's place in the dialogue of disciplines, a ground for discussion in any writing course."

Yet Young's course was far from a service course designed to accommodate the philosophy and government teachers' course materials. Rather, all of the teachers benefited as they struggled to create assignments in which, as Young emphasizes, rhetorical choices are integrally related to political and ethical choices. One such assignment, for example, asked students to appeal to Socrates, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson to sign the

Declaration of Independence and support the suffrage movement. The government teacher, who had always instructed students *not* to use “I” in their writing because it “encourages them to rely too much on personal opinion,” was persuaded by Young and the philosophy teacher that the personal must always be an aspect of the political and philosophical debate. Instead of forbidding the use of “I,” she began talking with students about how to position the “I” in their writing. Not surprisingly, this particular linked package produced some fascinating hybrid assignments—that is, assignments calling for papers that crossed disciplinary ways of thinking and challenged the teachers to formulate different evaluative criteria.

Assignments like these, as Young pointed out, would not be possible in stand-alone courses, not only because they require a great deal of shared context but also because they rely on mutually formulated expectations and criteria for writing. The three teachers had decided, for reasons of expediency, to read the papers independent of the others, and each gave his or her own grade; they found, however, that they each had to explain their evaluative processes to the students. Explaining meant that the individual teachers needed to be aware not only of their own disciplinary assumptions and expectations for writing but also of their personal likes and dislikes and how these might differ from the other teachers’ personal preferences. To their satisfaction, the teachers reported only minor discrepancies in their grades. All was not perfect, however, as Young is quick to acknowledge; too often, he was cast as the “grammar cop” by the philosophy and government teachers, who were happy to discuss matters of content and structure with students but wanted him to work on the intricacies of grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. “I got them to try their hand at conferencing and allowing early drafts and the chance for revision,” Young noted, but it was much harder to convince them that “helping students to improve their communicative style is our work, not just the work of the English teacher.”

As writing teachers involved in WAC know all too well, the perception that our job is primarily “dealing with” grammar and mechanics is difficult to overcome. After all, if we have no “real” content and we expect teachers in other disciplines to assign, pro-

cess, and grade writing, what is left for us to do? This question, for me, is at the heart of discussions about required FYC and its role in a strong WAC program. Do students need a required writing course when teachers in other disciplines are committed to and knowledgeable about working with student writers? What specific kinds of expertise and understanding do writing teachers and writing courses provide? The next linked-course variation I describe provides some partial answers to these questions.

Variation Three—Fully Linked Sections with a Service Learning Component

In the linked courses described earlier, students are using writing to engage with the discipline content. While they may be asked to include the personal, ultimately they are still writing to display their knowledge and their ability to analyze and synthesize information, whether from experience or from sources. They are not, in other words, philosophizing, constructing histories, or making policy statements. But when linked courses or fully integrated learning communities—like a number of New Century College classes—include an experiential learning component, students often have the opportunity to write “the real thing”—that is, the kind of writing practitioners in the field might be doing. In the linked cluster with FYC, Introduction to Sociology, and a one-credit service learning course, the students are not only enhancing their own literacy, but they are also helping others become literate and then analyzing that process through the lens of a discipline. The sociology course is taught by a faculty member deeply committed to social action agendas and experienced in using writing-to-learn strategies in her courses. In addition to a similar commitment to community service, composition teacher Ruth Fischer brings her background in ethnographic research to the writing course and to the experiential component she also teaches, which consists of students working twenty hours a semester in a racially and ethnically diverse magnet school close to Washington, D.C. Together the two teachers plan a series of writing assignments framed by sociological concepts and based on field research in the magnet school; in turn, the students’ reading and writing serve to frame their volunteer experiences.

Underlying most experiential learning theory, according to its practitioners, is a basic process: action-reflection-action. In this cyclical process, each action is transformed as a result of observations and reflections on previous actions (Eyler and Giles). The writing process is integral to service learning because writing captures the reflection and also leads to more and deeper reflection. Yet, as David Jolliffe points out (Chapter 4, this volume), keeping a journal and/or writing a reflective paper does not necessarily entail critical thought on the part of the student. Fischer's expertise in teaching composition, then, is an important component in this particular link. Central to all of the work Fischer's students do are their field notes. In a presentation on writing in this linked cluster at the 1997 WAC conference, Fischer explained that the field notes—submitted to both teachers—were an essential tool for teaching writing skills. The notes required students to be careful observers, write factual descriptions of what they observed, reflect on and analyze these observations, and pose questions arising out of their observations and reflections. Their questions ultimately led to topics for their research papers, which were focused on some aspect of education as a social institution; students were then encouraged to “test out” these topics in their community service experience. “We found,” Fischer said, “that because of the support students received in their writing class and our ongoing faculty interaction and subsequent negotiation of writing assignments, students were able to write effectively about highly complex sociologically oriented topics.” As we have learned in the Linked Courses Program and as Ashley will show in her discussion of New Century College, this kind of faculty interaction and negotiation around writing and writing assignments is critical if students are to be successful writers in learning communities.

New Century College: An Integrated Studies Baccalaureate Degree Program

As the description of learning community models (see note 1) suggests, the coordinated/integrated studies structure creates an intensive learning environment and a changed dynamic between

students and teachers. In turn, this new and different learning situation suggests interesting possibilities for examining how WAC continues to evolve. Because much about New Century College is highly innovative, it is necessary to provide some background and description before considering the writing environment.

New Century College (NCC), which belongs to the genre of the experimental college, was established at George Mason University in 1995 in response to a state mandate for new initiatives in higher education. NCC currently houses several interdisciplinary baccalaureate programs, the largest being integrative studies, on which I focus here. All classes offered by this program are set up as learning communities, many taught by two or more faculty from different disciplines. The structure of the general education learning communities is distinctive. Students who enroll in NCC as first-year students take a sequence of four interdisciplinary team-taught learning communities (based on the coordinated studies model) and thus complete virtually all general education requirements in one year. Each of these first-year LC courses lasts seven weeks and conveys eight credit hours; for most students, this one course constitutes a full academic load. The titles of these courses are informative: Community of Learners, The Natural World, The Socially Constructed World, and Self as Citizen. Each course is team-taught by eight to ten faculty members drawn from various disciplines and faculty ranks, including teaching assistants, all of whom work together to create the writing requirements for the course. (For the online writing guide for integrative studies students, see <http://classweb.gmu.edu/nccwg/index.html>.)

After completing general education courses, integrative studies students have a wide variety of courses from which to choose, including upper-division NCC learning communities and traditional courses offered by other university programs. Students must complete twelve credit hours in experiential learning, choosing among service learning, internship, and study abroad options. In conjunction with faculty and academic advisors, integrative studies students construct interdisciplinary concentrations (majors), many of which clearly reflect the changing world of work. Not surprisingly, a number of these concentrations include significant technology components.

A description of the first course in the general education sequence, Community of Learners, suggests the scope of the first-year learning communities. This course is about college habits of mind, notes John O'Connor, founding dean of NCC and a former director of composition with expertise in computers and writing. Successful completion of this course conveys full credit for first-year composition and additional credits in communication, computer science, and analytical reasoning. In addition, this learning community incorporates elements of a first-year success course, with student services professionals facilitating sessions on intercultural communication and student life issues. As many as two hundred students at a time are enrolled in this learning community. Most mornings they meet in groups of approximately twenty with their seminar instructors in inquiry-based discussion, finding connections and disjunctions among and between assigned readings (for example, from Plato, Frederick Douglass, and Jane Goodall) and other course experiences (such as workshops in information literacy and collaborative problem solving). In the afternoon, students may meet in the full cohort of two hundred to hear a faculty panel discuss changes in higher education. The next day students may make group presentations to their seminar sections in the morning and spend the afternoon in a writing workshop. In all phases of the course, the key grouping is the five-person study group, assigned for the duration of the course; in each of the three subsequent general education learning communities, students will likewise be assigned to study groups.

Though logistically and thematically complex, with many components, Community of Learners is only one course in the sequence. Three elements help students create coherence out of the complexity: the small seminar section (in which the instructor is mentor and facilitator), membership in the study group, and writing. Kenneth Bruffee says, "Writing is not ancillary to teaching with collaborative learning, as it is to traditional teaching. It is central" (53). Writing, he explains, helps create the interdependent conversation in which knowledge is constructed and provides a means of acculturation, enabling students to become part of the academic community. While the course syllabus calls for several "formal" writing projects (including a sequence of assignments related to the year-long research project described

later), the daily writing assignments—e.g., response journal entries, abstracts, e-mail, and integrative logs—take on a major role in helping students construct meaning from course content and activities. Writing to learn and to speculate helps students analyze, synthesize, and make connections across multiple perspectives and get their minds around big ideas. This kind of writing, which is assigned almost every day the seminar meets, prepares students for their roles as seminar participants and nourishes the conversation of the course. Students refer to or read from their daily writing in study groups and seminar discussions and often revise portions of this work into longer assignments. In turn, seminar instructors read and respond to this daily writing, asking questions and making brief comments—optimally in the manner of the teacher-facilitator/empathic mentor Susan McLeod describes (“Pygmalion”). Although the motive for assigning this writing is to help students navigate through complex ideas in a way they find intellectually, ethically, or practically important, the writing also serves a transactional purpose, giving students practice in communicating their ideas. Additionally, in a course with little or no conventional testing, this writing functions as an accountability measure.

Writing-to-learn activities are highly valued in WAC practice. What is striking in the NCC experience, however, is the degree to which writing to learn, speculate, and integrate is crucial to meaning making. The central role of this kind of writing and the multiple purposes it serves suggest the need for a more robust understanding of writing to learn and also new thinking about how such work can be categorized. The expressivist-transactional dichotomy that emerged as an unintended oversimplification of complex discussions in composition (see Christopher Thaiss, Chapter 12, this volume) is inadequate to describe student writing in learning communities such as those in NCC. In the changing social and power dynamics created by collaborative and experiential learning and by “wired” writing, our students’ work occupies a different space. In their examination of electronic communication and WAC in Chapter 3, Donna Reiss and Art Young speculate about how student writing might be charted along a continuum from personal/expressive to public/transactional. They describe a middle ground of “classroom discourse” in which stu-

dents “gain knowledge, develop scholarly habits of mind, and acquire rhetorical and communication competence in a variety of public and academic contexts.” This concept of “classroom discourse” in which students “combine their existing knowledge of content and inquiry with new knowledge and experience” aptly describes the writing that students do in NCC learning communities. As Reiss and Young explain, in this middle ground students combine their own discourse with that of the academy (p. 62).

Although successful completion of this first learning community fulfills the FYC requirement, students enrolled in NCC will encounter a diverse array of writing assignments in the three succeeding general education learning communities, each of which is writing intensive. During these courses, they will write in a number of genres, some fairly typical of academic writing and others less so. Students will conduct and summarize interviews, write advocacy letters, annotate bibliographies, participate in an online asynchronous conferencing environment, and write versions of the three- or four-minute essay suggested by classroom assessment strategies (Angelo and Cross). They will compose a poem, write lab reports and essays, create posters for poster presentations, and collaborate in researching and writing press kits for a mock press briefing on a public policy issue. They will also create several portfolios during the year.

Any analysis of such a rich writing environment must acknowledge the challenging discursive scenes and rhetorical situations students face (and which faculty need to take into account in evaluating student work). Some writing assignments in the first-year learning communities are explicitly disciplinary in nature (e.g., lab reports and literary analysis). Others are created to cross (or even transcend) disciplinary lines. Most assignments, however, are graded by individual seminar instructors who, despite their commitment to the integrative gestalt of the course, are nevertheless informed by their respective disciplinary traditions. While faculty are encouraged (for example, in WAC discussions) to articulate their expectations for student writing (and to explain why they hold these expectations), students are sometimes baffled about “what the teacher wants.” As students negotiate this complicated terrain, where they sometimes believe every

teacher has a different set of expectations, many must feel like strangers in a strange land. No doubt some students might identify with Dave, the general education student who struggled with the demands of writing in three courses (and in three versions of academic discourse) as documented in Lucille Parkinson McCarthy's study. In contrast, integrative studies students in their first year of college are faced with writing across and at the intersections of multiple and sometimes competing discourses in a writing intensive course lasting only seven (packed) weeks.

Although NCC students face formidable challenges as first-year college writers, many seem highly motivated by active learning and close collaboration with peers and teachers. Most develop fluency and flexibility in dealing with varied writing contexts, and when faculty come together to read portfolios in year-end evaluation sessions, they often see significant growth in student writing across the year. In an essay on genre in the writing class, Charles Bazerman says: "Once students learn what it is to engage deeply and write well in any particular circumstance, they have a sense of the possibilities of literate participation in any arena" (26). What is most important in assigning genres, he believes, is finding those that give students a site where they can engage with and solve problems that are important to them. I would suggest that the central role of writing-to-learn activities—in several genres—may provide students with one such site of engagement in NCC, and that students learn in the process how powerfully their writing can serve them.

When NCC was inaugurated, a number of faculty involved in creating the first-year courses had participated in previous curricular revisions and at least some WAC activities. Other faculty had little experience in teaching writing, particularly in interdisciplinary settings, and expressed concern about their ability to do so effectively. Despite these anxieties, teachers of these first-year courses have demonstrated an impressive commitment to teaching writing. As a member of the faculty teams for the Community of Learners and Self as Citizen courses, one of my roles has been to assist faculty by planning WAC workshops, creating WAC materials, and being available for consultation, just as my colleagues from other disciplines share their expertise in teaching and content areas. From my experience in WAC activities at

the university prior to the organization of NCC, I had learned to value what I came to call “the other side of WAC.” When I was a returning graduate student a decade before NCC began, I initially understood WAC as the means by which writing teachers took the new knowledge in composition studies (chiefly about writing process) to less enlightened but well-intentioned colleagues in other disciplines. Later, I began to appreciate the reciprocal nature of WAC when I taught advanced composition classes focused on writing in the disciplines. Attending WAC discussions and learning more from colleagues in other disciplines about writing in their fields was vital to my growth as a writing teacher. A third stage of my understanding of WAC developed when I began to collaborate with colleagues from across campus in curricular revision and assessment projects. In common with other composition faculty teaching in learning communities at George Mason, I have found this WAC experience key to learning how to do the difficult but rewarding work of collaborating across epistemologies and perspectives.

In her description of linked courses, Terry observes instances of growth in writing instruction by noncomposition faculty. Likewise, faculty in NCC learning communities note changes in the way they teach writing—revisions that can be described as ranging from local to global. From her experience in NCC, a political scientist responds differently to writing, which includes no longer editing her students’ journals. A psychologist who teaches both general education and upper-division learning communities reports that she incorporates a significant amount of reflective writing “along with A.P.A. [American Psychological Association] writing.” A professor of religious studies describes how he revised the values thread he taught in the fourth first-year learning community, *Self as Citizen*. This component was designed around writing assignments; the writing, he emphasizes, was more integrated into the course than in courses he had taught in the traditional curriculum. Like Terry, I believe composition teachers have valuable knowledge—about writing processes, language, rhetoric, critical inquiry, and pedagogy—to share with faculty teams. I also believe that experienced writing teachers can be WAC change agents while learning in turn from their colleagues. In addition, I believe significant growth in the teaching of writing can occur

whenever faculty are committed to collaborative learning and attentive to student outcomes.

Cross-Unit, Year-Long Writing Assignment

As the introduction to this volume notes, one of the aims of learning communities has been to help students achieve a more coherent and integrated educational experience, in part through making connections between and among various components of the curriculum. In each of New Century's four general education learning communities, students are asked to find connections between and among course readings, themes, ideas, and experiences and to be self-aware constructors of knowledge. One of the ways students integrate their learning and make connections across the entire first-year curriculum is through a year-long research and writing project known as "Transformation." This assignment, created by an interdisciplinary faculty team representing each of the four first-year courses, is described by a math colleague as "a biography with numbers." At the beginning of the year, students identify an individual whose life they would like to learn more about. This subject may be either a famous person or someone personally known to the student. After completing a sequence of assignments culminating in a research proposal in the first course, students continue to research and write about their subjects in the context of the issues and questions of the three subsequent courses. For example, in the second learning community, The Natural World, students identify a population of which their subject was or is a member and perform statistical analyses of that group. At the end of the year, students place all four chapters of their research project in their year-end portfolios, along with self-evaluation and a reflection on their learning throughout the project.

This project gives new meaning to the phrase "writing across the curriculum" because it asks students to write within and across an entire year's course work and to begin to consider how discourse and research conventions vary from one context to the next. In addition, the Transformation assignment creates a sustained "research across the curriculum" opportunity by systematically integrating instruction in information literacy throughout

the year. University instructional reference librarian Jim Young has a central role in mentoring this project, for both the faculty team and students. In a year-end assessment of this assignment, students frequently cite Young not only as a valuable source of information about research but also as a guide and facilitator of their learning. Students sometimes ask Young and other instructional reference librarians to read and respond to their drafts. In addition, Young works with faculty, helping us refine the project and design appropriate research exercises. As the information age advances, “literacy” increasingly implies sophisticated acquisition, evaluation, and use of information. The linkage of WAC and information literacy then would seem a natural alliance, one that would benefit teaching and learning on all campuses. In the next section, Terry and I discuss what assessment of both the Linked Courses Program and NCC has shown us about changes in faculty and student practices around writing and writing assignments.

Assessing WAC in Learning Community Programs

While writing and/or writing courses may be the “connective tissue” holding learning communities together, as we noted earlier in this chapter, we have rarely seen listed as criteria for measuring LC programs either growth in students’ writing abilities or faculty growth in using writing in their teaching.⁴ This is not to say that samples of faculty assignments and students’ writing are not collected and measured; they are. Generally, however, these data are being used to measure criteria other than gains in writing and teaching with writing. Typical assessment criteria for student success and satisfaction in learning communities may include, for example, persistence, course completion, cognitive development, appreciation of diversity, involvement in the campus and wider community, ability to work in groups, and intellectual focus. Faculty development tends to be measured by factors such as whether the program stimulates teaching and curriculum improvement both within and beyond the LC program, degree of collaborative effort, willingness to continue teaching in the program, and so on. (See the Washington Center’s report on “Ele-

ments of Effective Learning Community Programs,” for example.) With slight revision, the criteria for faculty could also be applied to WAC programs. Criteria for measuring administrative support for LC programs are also quite similar to WAC programs, e.g., the program has an administrative “home,” departments get behind the program, faculty are recognized and rewarded for their efforts, and budget resources are allocated for workshops, curriculum planning, and staff assistance.

By contrast, there is an entire body of literature on students’ gains in writing in composition courses. In 1998 Richard Haswell posted a bibliography on “Gain in First-Year College Composition Courses” on the WPA listserv that lists almost one hundred entries divided into three categories: Quantitative Studies Finding Gain, Exit and Alumni Reports, and Theoretical Problems of Measuring Gain in a Writing Course. Nearly half of the citations fall into the last category. Problems of reliability and validity in measurements of growth in writing are intensified when the effectiveness of entire programs is being assessed, as Condon discusses in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 2). Early in the development of the Linked Courses Program, in which FYC has always played an integral part, we attempted to design assessment criteria to measure student gains in writing in the disciplines as well as teachers’ attitudes about writing. We asked students to agree or disagree or rank their satisfaction with aspects of their writing in the linked courses. While the categories we included for measuring student attitudes reveal a great deal about the influence of expressivist writing theories on our teaching practices at that time, we found that most of the student responses could just as easily apply to unlinked FYC courses. We also ruled out the idea of comparing students’ grades on writing assignments in linked and unlinked courses. Attempts to interpret grades on writing assignments and/or to use those interpretations as data are fraught with problems. (For example, when students in one link wondered why they had received higher grades on a dual-submission assignment from the government teacher than from the writing teacher, even though the evaluative comments were quite similar, they were encouraged to ask the government teacher. He told the students that he gave them a higher grade than they actually deserved on their writing because he

wanted to compensate for the low scores they had received on their midterm Scantron exam.)

Not surprisingly, in its 1992 report on the linked program, George Mason University's Office of Institutional Planning and Research concluded that the question of whether students in linked courses perform better in writing remained unanswered. The report did note, however, that students said they liked the idea of being able to write on the same topic for two classes, and that some linked faculty said they were asking students to do more writing and that their students seemed to be more receptive to feedback. For a number of years following this initial foray into assessment, we attempted to get at attitudes toward writing in linked courses by conducting student and faculty focus groups and by asking select faculty to keep logs with observations about students' writing processes and products. These faculty logs provided useful insights into how WAC was working in linked courses. A philosophy teacher wrote, "Students showed remarkable ability to handle some quite complex texts and to summarize philosophies and synthesize material. The papers were lengthy and much more complex than most first-year writing." A government professor reported her discovery that "students seem to appreciate the one-on-one [conferencing on papers,] and it helped me to establish a relationship of sorts with students and point out my way of responding to their work." A history professor said he learned to "make reflection a routine part of the course" by asking students to write about the strengths of a paper, their growth in writing, and what they learned from doing the writing.

Albeit anecdotal, these kinds of self-reflections do provide useful assessment data, as Jean MacGregor argues in her 1998 address to AAHE on "Assessment of Powerful Pedagogies: Classroom, Campus, and Beyond," and they are, in themselves, a "powerful pedagogy" enabling faculty to "deepen their conversations about teaching and learning."⁵ Consistent with NCC's commitment to powerful pedagogies, both students and faculty engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation as part of an ongoing assessment process. Students create portfolios of their work, accompanied by self-evaluation, at various points in their academic careers. Some individual learning communities require portfolios, and

students also construct portfolios at the end of their first year and again as a graduation prerequisite. In the latter two portfolio assignments, students include samples of work from across an extended period of time, accompanied by self-evaluation and commentary about how these samples demonstrate their work in nine competency areas.⁶ Faculty likewise engage in self-assessment by constructing course portfolios, in which they explain and reflect on choices they make in creating learning communities, choosing and using texts, structuring assignments, and so on. Together with findings from classroom assessment exercises, the course portfolio provides teachers with an important means for learning and teaching.

While these practices produce valuable information for program assessment as well as for curriculum and faculty development, as MacGregor noted, accomplishing meaningful analysis of writing outcomes in learning communities presents special challenges, especially when faculty assessors come from different disciplines. In order to design effective assessment, it is crucial to consider how writing may be different—and more complex—in these settings. Genre, in particular, is a source of complication. In a 1996 focus group of NCC first-year students who entered college with advanced-placement credit, students expressed pride in the amount of writing they did (in contrast, they maintained, to friends and roommates in the traditional curriculum), but they also indicated they needed more help with “the different kinds of writing” they were assigned. Likewise, a focus group of a 1998 senior capstone class revealed that students had difficulty keeping straight the different kinds of writing in some learning communities. Students said the confusion stemmed in part from the amount of writing required and from the overlapping nature of some of the genres they were assigned. Because of the innovative nature of collaborative and experiential learning, teachers often create new and different writing assignments, including writing projects for which they do not have models. In some cases, the differing perspectives of faculty partners or team members making the assignment may also contribute to the confusion students experience. As David Russell notes (Chapter 11, this volume), writing tasks are more difficult when students lack clarity about the underlying motivations and epistemological values.

Not only do the forms of writing often differ in learning communities but, as we have said earlier in this chapter, both the social dimensions and the uses of writing often differ as well. In many of the linked-course clusters and in NCC, students write to integrate, reflect, connect, find oppositions, and construct knowledge, and they frequently do so in a collaborative and public way. One of the implications seems to be that we need to attend carefully to understanding what students see as their purposes in writing. For all these reasons, it is crucial that we continue to include the affective domain in our assessment plans, both for the information it provides about how students perceive their learning experiences and for the insights it provides into teaching. In sum, the inventive nature of most learning communities requires new and creative approaches to assessing what and how students learn through writing. We suggest that Stephen Ehrmann's work on the Flashlight Project, a set of evaluation tools for studying the effects of technology on higher education, offers some useful guidelines for thinking about WAC and LC assessment (Ehrmann and Milam).

In his introduction to the Flashlight materials,⁷ Ehrmann, who is affiliated with AAHE's Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group, says that the project developed out of a felt sense that new evaluative tools and paradigms were needed to find out what happens when technology is integrated into the curriculum: "[T]he educational consequences of technology investment are notoriously difficult to detect," he writes, likening the difficulty to attempts to assess the results of any education innovation. How does one isolate the effects of technology from the effects resulting from the entire program, he asks. "The process of evaluation is *always* like using a small, dim flashlight to glimpse what sort of animal might be in front of you in a huge dark cave. The cave is the nature of the whole innovation—everything that is happening." Ehrmann's metaphor is applicable to the effort to assess WAC in LC programs, in which, as Ehrmann says about technology use, "each evaluative question is the equivalent of pointing the tiny beam in a particular direction in order to see what walks into the light" (Ehrmann and Milam ix).

The principles and assumptions Ehrmann lays out in a talk on evaluating technology projects seem especially relevant to the

issues surrounding measuring the effectiveness of both WAC and LC programs as well as WAC within LC programs, beginning with debates over the definitions of the terms “traditional” and “innovative.”⁸ Education—“traditional” or otherwise, Ehrmann points out—is never uniform and certainly not always well understood. In fact, he argues, the labels “traditional” and “innovative” are not particularly useful when they are attached to programs without accompanying descriptions of individual program objectives and the learning outcomes expected of students. Similarly, a WAC or LC label does not begin to capture the variety of these programs, as we have shown in our descriptions of the linked program and NCC, and as Thaiss discusses in “Theory in WAC” (Chapter 12, this volume). Part of the difficulty of assessing WAC programs, Thaiss notes, is that definitions of “writing,” “learning to write,” and “writing to learn” vary “from school to school, teacher to teacher, class to class, assignment to assignment, even from thought to thought within a teacher’s response to a group of papers or to a single paper” (p. 303). Far from being a liability, most WAC adherents argue, the variety of definitions ensures the vitality of WAC programs; when WAC is confined to narrow definitions in order to derive a set of assessment criteria, programs run the risk of becoming inflexible and obsolete. Assessment might best be left to individual disciplines and perhaps even individual teachers, as Thaiss suggests.

Whether left to individual teachers or disciplines, good assessment is generally tied to program objectives. In the case of new or innovative programs, however, the objectives might be articulated one way at the beginning of the project and reshaped as the program evolves. Evaluation paradigms, according to Ehrmann, assume that we understand “what the innovation is and what it’s for in advance,” meaning, in a sense, that we are trying to hit a moving target, given that the innovations themselves change as the project evolves and “underlying ideas emerge” (Ehrmann and Milam 2). Moreover, as Ehrmann argues, most program evaluation occurs well before much of the impact on students’ lives has begun (2). Additionally, the paradigm assumes that the learning objectives are the same for every student, that the objectives will affect all students in the same ways, albeit with varying degrees of achievement, and that the impact can be

measured apart from all the other variables that may have influenced learning and students' lives (14–15). Ehrmann calls this assumption a “uniform impact” perspective. As difficult as this perspective might be in the academic settings we are accustomed to, the difficulty is multiplied in learning communities, in which students are given many more educational choices, and it cannot be presumed a priori what constitutes “important” things learned. Instead, we suggest, we need to look for “unexpected learning,” designing measures that focus on the individual participants in learning communities—students, faculty, and other campus professionals (e.g., librarians, information technology specialists, student services staff).

Ehrmann calls this a “unique uses” perspective, one that asks: What were the most important outcomes for each learner? A “unique uses” perspective is, we believe, most consistent with the goals and values of LC practitioners (although we hesitate to make that claim for WAC practitioners whose funding typically depends on concerns about student writing and a desired outcome of *uniform* “good writing”). Ehrmann’s general question can be paraphrased as, What happens to individual writers? What do they say were the most important writing outcomes they experienced—both with writing to learn and written products? NCC’s self-reflective, self-evaluative portfolios, which Ashley described earlier, are a step in this direction. Another way to get at student and faculty perceptions of important, individual outcomes is through focus groups. As we have mentioned, both linked-course and NCC students and faculty have participated in focus-group assessment. Their responses, some of which we have already reported, can be used to provide a more detailed picture of important outcomes as experienced by individual learners. But what is to be made of those individual outcomes in terms of our LC programs?

In order to evaluate a program—whether a grant-funded technology project such as those Ehrmann discusses or, in our case, WAC in LC programs—the question of individual outcomes needs to be followed by another question, which is, according to Ehrmann, “How plausible is it that what I’m seeing is an outcome of the program being evaluated?” The program evaluators must then consider what the individual cases imply about the

success of the program being studied. While learning is always cumulative, Ehrmann believes that “coherent patterns of instructional events . . . are more likely to have a predictable, perceptible effect on most graduates’ lives than are single assignments or courses that are not related to anything else in the college” (Ehrmann and Milam 17). One of the common goals of LC programs is to foster cross-curricular connections and thereby create for students (and faculty) a more coherent academic experience than is typical with stand-alone courses; thus, we can say with some confidence that the changes we see in faculty and student attitudes about and approaches to writing are, at least in part, a result of their LC experiences, just as changes in their attitudes about themselves (both faculty and students) as learners might be attributed in part to their writing experiences.

One type of program assessment, then, might entail looking for patterns in faculty and student responses to questions about important individual outcomes. So far, individual students are telling us—in written assignments, portfolios, and focus groups—that their relationship to writing is shifting in important ways. In both linked courses and NCC, a large number of students seem to have a greater confidence about writing, a sense of themselves as “college writers,” compared to students in stand-alone FYC courses. They value the experience of having learned to ask new and different questions in their writing—“hard” questions—and they are proud of what they write in response. In turn, they sense that they have become more fluent writers with more to say than their peers in stand-alone courses. Faculty seem to share the perception that students are writing in more complicated ways about complex topics.

Like the students in our LC programs, writing instructors in LC arrangements tend to experience their professional role and their work quite differently from instructors in traditional courses. At our university, as at most institutions, those of us who teach composition—whether in learning communities or stand-alone courses—tend to be non-tenure-track faculty. While we acknowledge that there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about non-tenure-line faculty (who are typically women) being further subordinated when they teach in linked arrangements, more often these instructors say they feel they have a more visible—and

valued—role in learning communities than they do when they teach in isolation. They also list as important outcomes professional growth and the sense of connectedness they experience when they work with colleagues across the campus. One important result of this collaborative work, faculty note, is that their writing assignments tend to become more complex and interesting; along with more challenging assignments, however, come higher expectations for what students can produce. The downside for some faculty is that students don't always meet these expectations. In the case of linked courses, the downside for students is that their grades are sometimes lower than those of their peers in stand-alone FYC courses, as comparisons of grades for linked and nonlinked FYC courses reveal. It is interesting to consider the reasons one experienced writing instructor gave for refusing to sign on for a second year of teaching in a three-course link. The interdisciplinary assignments—developed by all three instructors—were, he felt, too difficult for first-year writers and the expectations for what they would produce too high. An assessment of WAC in LC programs needs to account for all of these competing, and sometimes contradictory, outcomes and expectations.

Is It Still WAC?

If at the end of the 1980s Susan McLeod could speak confidently about the “second stage of some WAC programs” (“Writing”), now, at the beginning of a new century, we find it difficult to know what generation, stage, or phase of WAC might apply to writing in LC arrangements. And, given the variety of LC programs, it seems clear that even if one could confidently apply this terminology, some learning communities would belong to a different generation than others, just as linked courses and New Century College seem to belong to different branches of one very large extended family. While we have used WAC throughout this article as a descriptor of what happens to writing instruction and, more important, writing practice in learning communities, we realize that the acronym does not accurately characterize the reality. Not only have new meanings accrued to “across the cur-

riculum,” but also the “cast” at the scene of writing has expanded to include librarians, information technologists, student services staff, and other campus professionals, each representing different discursive cultures. A more apt descriptor, as we suggested in the opening, might be Writing Across Curricular Cultures. Yet no matter how we play with the acronym, we argue that WAC may be most fully realized within the LC movement, which shares its values of inclusiveness, conversation, and collaboration, and the belief that writing should be a central mode of learning in a learning-centered pedagogy.

Notes

1. Gabelnick et al. describe three typical structures for learning communities: student cohorts in larger classes, such as “freshman interest groups” and “federated learning communities”; paired or clustered classes; and team-taught coordinated studies programs. Freshman interest groups—FIGS—generally consist of a trio of courses offered around an area of interest, an interdisciplinary theme, and/or courses related to a major. Most FIGS also include a breakout discussion section led by a graduate student or peer advisor. Federated learning communities register a cohort of students (not just first-year students) in a three-course cluster organized around a common theme and linked by an integrative seminar. These typically occur within the student’s major.

Linked or paired courses focus on curricular coherence and on integrating skills and content learning. Faculty coordinate syllabi and assignments and teach the same cohort of students, but they teach their classes separately. Similarly, learning clusters entail coordinated syllabi and separately taught courses with an explicit thematic link rather than a skills link.

A team-taught integrated studies program is the most complex and labor-intensive LC model. The goals of this model include intensive student and faculty involvement in the interrelated topic under study. Faculty are explicitly positioned as learners as well as teachers. In a “full-time” coordinated studies model (New Century College at George Mason University, for example), faculty teams work with students who take their entire course load within the coordinated community, making scheduling for collaborative projects, experiential learning, and so forth quite flexible.

2. We don’t want to be overly optimistic, however. As Walvoord notes, although both writing intensive and linked courses can be used to point

out WAC achievements, they have sometimes led to a narrower vision of WAC when faculty and administrators limit WAC support to these initiatives (66).

3. In 2000 the Linked Courses Program was redesigned and renamed the Mason Topics Program.

4. We also acknowledge that we have not looked systematically nor looked at a wide range of LC assessment reports to determine whether growth in writing has been measured. Our sense is that it has not.

5. In the list of "powerful pedagogies," MacGregor included collaborative and cooperative learning, active and interactive learning strategies such as writing and technology, problem-centered learning, service and civic learning, interdisciplinary courses and learning communities, capstone experiences, and assessment as learning.

6. These competency areas are communication, critical thinking, problem solving, valuing, social interaction, global perspective, effective citizenship, aesthetic response, and information technology.

7. This essay, a summary of a talk given to NEH in April 1997, is taken from a packet of materials Ehrmann distributes when he gives workshops on the Flashlight Project. Included in this packet is a section called "Resource Essays and Case Studies," a collection that covers essays and presentations Ehrmann has developed in connection with his work for FIPSE and AAHE.

8. We recognize, of course, that instructors drawn to teaching in LC arrangements typically already share many of the same learning-centered values and teaching practices.

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