

## Recognizing and Using Context as a Survival Tool for WAC

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"As quiltmakers remind us, reconsideration of existing materials generates new ideas and images."

Ann Ruggles Gere

Over the last fifteen years, the writing-across-the-curriculum movement has grown into one of the largest education reform movements in the United States. In her 1986 book, *Composition and the Academy: A Study of Writing Program Administration*, Carol Hartzog found that 41% of the schools surveyed had instituted WAC programs. Susan McLeod, in her 1989 WAC survey, "Writing Across the Curriculum: The Second Stage and Beyond," found that 38% of the colleges and universities responding had some version of WAC, and another 10% were planning programs in the near future. McLeod points out how startling these figures are, "considering just a decade ago, only a handful of such programs existed" (338). Cynthia Cornell and David Klooster affirm in a recent WPA article that "in terms of numbers of participating institutions, the WAC movement has never been stronger." More currently, the February 19, 1992, WAC Videoconference, "Writing Across the Curriculum: Making it Work," the second sponsored by PBS and my home institution, Robert Morris College, has received enthusiastic response from viewers across the country. PBS administrators estimate that the almost 200 downlink sights in the United States and Canada allowed more than 12,000 people to participate. Such numbers qualify it as among the largest conferences ever produced for PBS Adult Learning Services.<sup>1</sup> One surprising aspect of the videoconference participation was the level of sophistication of the call-in questions. Viewers' interests centered around such issues as how to most effectively structure assignments to achieve cognitive goals in specific disciplines, an issue raised by Lee Odell some ten years ago as under-examined yet crucial to WAC research (43).

Writing across the curriculum has spread widely and quickly because it appears to be a useful tool for many college and university teachers. WAC continues to offer much hope for improved literacy, thinking, and learning about subjects across the disciplines, and increased interest in writing in the disciplines. Several experts at both RMC/PBS videoconferences also

referred to the pedagogical power of WAC. At the February 1992 telecast, Elaine Maimon called the present movement, "the reform pedagogy."

It remains true, however, as James Kinneavy wrote in 1987, "the jury is still out on writing across the curriculum. . . . Further cases must be brought to the courts to test the movement" (377). Kinneavy's advice to gather more information on WAC is still good; but is there time for the jury's thoughtful deliberation of cases?

Perhaps the most pressing question the movement faces concerns its longevity: How can colleges and universities keep programs going long enough to access their value? Disturbing reports about the viability of WAC are appearing in the literature. Cornell and Klooster warn that continuation of writing-across-the-curriculum programs is seriously threatened. This ominous warning singles out older, and presumably more successful programs, where a number of problems are emerging, including a gradual decrease in faculty willingness to share responsibility for students' writing, a shifting focus of administrative interests, and a realization that initial assumptions about WAC are faulty, that WAC is temporary, that WAC courses are no more work to teach than traditional courses, and that WAC is cheap (8-12).

Increasingly, scholars find that WAC goals conflict with others already established at colleges and universities (Cornell and Klooster; Young). In *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, David Russell cites a basic incompatibility between universities and WAC programs, arguing that attitudes and organizational structures threaten the very existence of WAC. Lacking the training, security, and inclination to use the power they have, WPAs are often at a loss to protect programs (White). Further compounding the problem is the drying up of grant money used to implement and sustain many programs (Russell 291). In light of these reports, Cornell and Klooster's warning seems accurate: "All but the most committed institutions will experience tensions that can threaten the existence of ambitious writing programs" (14).

Richard Young and others correctly point out that the school contexts of WAC are often at odds with the programs; but correctly understood and used, these contexts can also be opportunities. In a recent WPA article, Elizabeth Rankin underscores the necessity of understanding local context in order to bring about change. Our stories have common elements, but "local factors shape our separate academic communities" (62). Ann Ruggles Gere gives us a useful analogy for using contexts when she suggests "quiltmakers remind us that reconsideration of existing materials generates new ideas and images" (4). Rather than always looking outside the institution, we can help assure the longevity of our programs by finding and better using opportunities that the college or university has already

provided. My suggested use of context is a variation of David Russell's argument that WAC programs, to survive, must be more strongly woven into the fabric of our institutions. Russell argues that failure to integrate our programs into the organizational structure of the university will result in their demise after the powerful personalities who started them leave. To do this weaving, we must find ways to reconsider existing materials that will generate "new ideas and images." My analysis of the Robert Morris story attempts to do just that.

Exploiting context for persuasive purposes is nothing new. A colleague, John O'Banion, reminds me that emphasis on context is simply recognizing the power of narratio, the ancient persuasive strategy. In *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialect of List and Story*, O'Banion demonstrates that ancient rhetoricians understood the power of the story. Cicero and Quintilian, for example, used the narration to orient audiences and make them more aware of the peculiar circumstances of cases under consideration. One way to see my in-depth examination (and case histories in general) is as an argument by story, a narratio. By examining one instantiation of WAC, we see how such a program begins and remains a reality on an individual campus and how WAC "is developing as an idea or set of ideas" (Hartzog 38). We also see the importance of context to WAC programs. O'Banion tells us that in classical times, "contexts were understood as the frameworks within which particulars make sense" (89). We can help the particulars of WAC programs make sense to administrators and faculty by better connecting them to the contexts of their environments.

Writing Across the Business Disciplines (WABD) was started at Robert Morris under a grant from the Buhl Foundation. The grant money was used chiefly to provide stipends for a series of seminars where RMC faculty from across the curriculum studied ways to integrate WAC concepts into targeted courses. Each iteration consisted of approximately fifteen faculty. Within four years, more than one-third of the RMC faculty had completed the program. As the grant money dwindled, seminars became economically impossible. The central questions for the survival of WABD became how can new faculty be attracted and trained and how can interest be maintained among those already trained now that the outside support for seminars is gone?

Our answer was to replace the seminars with a departmental-level plan called the "Mentor Phase." Under the system, new participants choose mentors in their academic departments who have already been through the program. The individual mentor acts as a guide and resource as the new participant works her way through four video tapes and a workbook. The videos, workbook, and mentor relationship are supplemented by writing-across-the-curriculum workshops sponsored by the WABD Advisory

Committee. The criteria for completing the program remains the same as under the grant-sponsored faculty seminar system. Each participant must develop a full course plan of a redesigned, targeted course that includes a rationale, explicit goals, and a matrix that brings together the goals of the course and the material to be covered into enabling objectives. These enabling objectives often become opportunities for writing to learn. The full course plan also requires a detailed syllabus and a plan for evaluating the course.

As the Director of WABD during this "Mentor Phase," I have been entrusted with the care of an eight-year-old program that was called by an outside WPA evaluation team one of the best writing-across-the-curriculum programs in the country (Arkin et al.). My case study of this program allowed me to examine closely what happened and what can be learned from the Robert Morris experience that can be helpful to others attempting to implement and sustain WAC programs (Carson). My examination suggests several ways to help programs survive by exploiting the contexts in which the programs began, including the following: attachment of programs to the bureaucracy of the school, extensive evaluation of programs, communication, record keeping, and histories. As schools and their needs differ, so do WAC programs' responses to those needs; understanding local context is key to bringing about change (Rankin). Despite the difficulties of generalizing for many different campuses, I suggest the following means to exploit the contexts found in a variety of school environments.

### **Attachment of Programs to School's Bureaucracy**

Ed White argues recently in *WPA* that a central problem facing writing directors is dealing with powerful bureaucracies. He maintains that WPAs should refuse to accept the condition of powerlessness, and he offers several suggestions on becoming "canny with power"(5). This power often can be used best, as White uses his, to weave the program more tightly into the organizational structure of the institution. Bureaucracies are rich areas to mine for ways to help WAC programs survive. For example, a university or college bureaucracy can provide: 1) a campus-wide forum to discuss writing across the curriculum and to spread the good word about it, 2) a departmental structure into which WAC programs can be woven, and 3) a reward system to encourage participation.

1. *WAC study groups*: Start a WAC committee or a study group. It can offer an intellectual arena where writing across the curriculum and its

possibilities on a particular campus can be examined and discussed. If a program is already in place, such a forum allows all faculty and administrators to exchange ideas concerning WAC. Those who disagree with the concepts of WAC or with the local instantiation can sometimes be won over with information or by the chance to air their reservations. Those who agree can always learn more about WAC theory, practice, and the political realities of implementing a program on their own campus.

The Robert Morris WABD Advisory Committee attempts to strengthen the WABD program throughout the College. The Committee's principal focus has been design and implementation of faculty workshops that will interest new and past participants in the possibilities of writing across the curriculum and our particular approach. Last year (1991-92), the RMC WABD Advisory Committee held five faculty workshops where about 15 Robert Morris faculty from various disciplines made presentations, chiefly on their application of WABD to targeted courses. Many faculty were surprised at the variety and helpfulness of WAC methods already in use, including assignments and evaluations. This year (1992-93), Faculty Workshops have focused on showing RMC/PBS Resource Videos (comprised of a number of experts discussing WAC and related issues, as well as segments showing teachers at various campuses across the country using WAC approaches in their classrooms). In the workshops, the videos, sometimes supplemented with individual faculty presentations, become points of departure for discussing WAC and how to implement it in individual RMC courses. The Committee also advises the Director on ways to help more faculty complete the program.

Certain people should be strongly encouraged to join and remain permanent members on such committees. Among those holding ex-officio membership on the RMC WABD Advisory Committee are the following: two members of the board of Trustees, the Academic Vice-President, two students who have participated in WABD-targeted classes, and all faculty mentors. Other members are interested parties, usually former faculty participants who are not presently mentors. In such a mix, budget- and decision-makers participate with faculty, therefore developing a sense of ownership of the program. Active participation on WAC Committees also teaches administrators and faculty the importance of these programs to improved literacy, learning, and pedagogy, as well as reminding them of the difficulties in keeping such programs going. Planning is important. Both the Advisory Committee and the departmental status of the program were provided for in the original WABD grant proposal.

What if a committee has not been built into a program? Colleagues at other schools tell me that creating a committee and ensuring the

participation of important administrators is not always easy or even feasible. More modest beginnings are possible. A faculty study group can begin a dialogue on writing across the curriculum and can develop specific plans that are congenial to its own context. For example, an informal study group can examine WAC literature to find analogies to its campus needs. Such information can be used to argue for committee status, the implementation, or the continuation of a program. As Elaine Maimon suggests on a PBS/RMC resource video, "How to Start" (available through PBS), a WAC program almost always begins with a few faculty members starting to talk about writing across the curriculum. She argues that this "bottom-up" approach is a better way to start than a "top-down," or administration-directed approach. Perhaps the most important requirement is a room and interested people, both readily available in the context of all schools.

2. *Departmental structure:* Try to exploit the structure of your school by introducing WAC at the departmental level. Under the RMC mentor system, a new participant is free to choose any member of her department who has been through the program to help her complete the series of videos and workbook (created in-house for the Robert Morris context). Such relationships in the various disciplines can make use of the school structure to help departmental faculty work together, using WAC-related tools to solve disciplinary problems. This kind of work helps improve teaching of discipline-specific material and increases collegiality. Several faculty participants at RMC have mentioned an increased awareness of and a pride in the work colleagues are doing.

While a formal mentor approach might not be appropriate to some campuses, informal exchanges with members of one's department can be most helpful in broadening the understanding and practice of writing across the curriculum. Departmental subcommittees also offer opportunities for this kind of interchange. Discussions about discipline-oriented problems, pedagogies, and writing assignments can solve problems and help break down the isolation that sometimes accompanies teaching.

Ideally, WAC advocates should try to achieve departmental status for programs. Russell and others have pointed out that departmental structure is perhaps the most powerful organizing principle of the modern university, a division that often works against writing across the curriculum. The Robert Morris experience shows that sustainability for WAC lies in joining rather than fighting this context. Writing Across the Business Disciplines is a department at RMC, with its own modest budget. The Director reports to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. Such status gives programs some permanence and financial consideration at budget times. Also, directors may become privy to administrative meetings, which can make

them aware of specific departmental concerns that should be considered when planning WAC activities.

Departmental status may be difficult to achieve in some contexts. Certainly, creating a department at a large university may be nearly impossible. Building on the work of Ed White mentioned above, Rebecca Moore Howard has presented in WPA a theoretical approach and a practical plan for achieving departmental status for a writing program. From her successful experience at Colgate, Moore offers several proven instruments, as well as methods of converting the "institution-changing power" writing programs often have to "institutionally sanctioned power."

If establishing departmental status proves futile, alternatives remain. Since occasional access to key administrators has been the most valuable part of WABD's departmental status, getting on the right agendas could prove a good substitute. Requests to present WAC-related material to the academic administration, another department, or one's own department might be welcomed. Such presentations broaden and deepen understanding of WAC at all levels and help to make the school's departmental structure an ally rather than an enemy.

3. *Faculty reward:* Try to get some kind of reward for faculty participation. One of the reasons our program succeeded is that it became attached to the reward structure of the College. Originally, stipends were paid to WABD participants. In an interview with the RMC President, I found that, although he was very willing to continue stipends for participation, he was unwilling to pay stipends and consider such participation grounds for merit pay under the new RMC-AFT faculty labor agreement. In my next budget, I suggested all stipends for WABD participation be discontinued. A 1% raise in a faculty member's base pay amounts to much more in two years than the average \$300 stipend being paid just before the change. As well as helping weave WAC into the fabric of the institution, a merit reward system also helps ensure commitment of faculty to complete the program, especially since merit pay decisions are more clearly attached to firm deadlines (in our case, the submission in early April of the Professional Development Report, which is the basis for merit consideration).

The present tight budget circumstances might make merit reward now seem meaningless. Nonetheless, indications are that such systems will become increasingly common. For political, economic, educational, and social reasons, evaluation and accountability are more and more popular notions in private and public institutions. Writing across the curriculum, with its emphases on improved learning, literacy, and teaching, is especially well positioned to help schools and individual faculty succeed in such evaluations.

Even when budgets are tight, however, possibilities exist to reward participation. Writing program administrators or department heads can sometimes find money in their budgets for full or partial funding to conferences. Many department chairs and WPAs can provide lunches for faculty. I know one adjunct faculty member at a small school who asks writing program committee members to her home for coffee and cake. My colleague maintains attendance is higher when she provides even this modest consideration. Some reward, no matter how small, is better than none.

When advocating programs and attempting to attach them to the bureaucracy of the school, WAC advocates should consider their chief tool to be the request. Don't be afraid to ask. Ed White saved WAC on his campus by asking one dean to take responsibility for the program when another was abandoning it. My predecessor as Director succeeded in establishing the membership for the WABD Advisory Committee by asking people to participate. This year, the President of the College, who teaches one course a year, is a new participant in our program, redesigning a course with a mentor. I invited him to participate, and he agreed. Robert Morris is a small school where accessibility to decision-making administrators is possible. Nonetheless, asking seems a fundamental heuristic in any context.

## Evaluation of WAC Programs

Evaluation is another way of using context to keep WAC programs going. Such evaluation is the best way to justify budgetary outlays for WAC programs. The first Director of WABD and the outside advisor began an elaborate multi-measured evaluation process while they were still under the budget for the first grant from the Buhl Foundation. The funding agency was impressed by the plan and awarded WABD a supplementary grant to carry it out. Consisting of inside and outside evaluation of teachers' and students' attitudes and practices and of the program as a whole, the final evaluation was extensive and convincing enough to get additional commitments from the RMC administration to continue the program for another four years (up to and including this year).

Although not every school is fortunate enough to have a grant to conduct such an elaborate process, possibilities to implement evaluation exist within the context of any college or university. Each faculty participant in WABD has been responsible for evaluation plans for her own targeted course. By clearly establishing the goals of their courses, teachers know what to evaluate. The plans can be as rich and varied as the faculty

itself. If faculty need help, specialists in quantitative or qualitative evaluation can be found on any campus. Similarly, writing directors can take advantage of on-campus experts for program evaluations. More extensive evaluation by outside sources can be achieved through consultants. Robert Morris continues to be helped in its evaluation by experts at Carnegie Mellon University. WABD was also evaluated by an on-site team from the Writing Program Administrators, which offers such a service at a reasonable cost.

## Communication

Good communication helps attach WAC to the college or university by increasing the sense of participation and ownership of the program. Such communication possibilities abound in the contexts of our institutional environments. Printed or copied announcements of upcoming faculty seminars have proven to be less powerful at Robert Morris than individually directed memos. At a bigger school, though, announcements could work well to gain interest among a larger audience of full-time and adjunct faculty, as well as graduate and even undergraduate students. Committee reports on seminar, committee, or study group actions and plans reinforce the local program's message, help recruit interested faculty, and let the school community know that WAC is their program. Many schools and even departments publish newsletters covering the activities of meetings. Where no such publication exists, minutes can often be posted on departmental and school bulletin boards along with notification of group meeting times and places.

Even the most obvious tools of communication are sometimes overlooked. I started with personal meetings, telephone calls, the committee newsletter, and letters to new faculty. Less obvious but equally effective have been my more recent use of thank-you notes for faculty presentations, voice mail reminders of upcoming meetings (the technology makes it easy to target just participants or blanket the whole faculty), and follow-up memos after faculty seminars or conferences. I believe that all of the above methods have helped our program. Other possibilities that exist in the context of most schools are computer mail and mailed announcements of meetings to key personnel, including administrators and members of the board of trustees.

Where communication has been clear and open, the RMC program has flourished; where communication has been weak, WABD experienced difficulty. The original Director achieved much initial success for the program through early and full disclosure of information. Memos and

letters show that in the first stages of the planning, key members of the administration knew step-by-step how the grant proposal was progressing and were sometimes asked to participate in its preparation. The advantages for and responsibilities of faculty who wished to participate in WABD were thoroughly advertised well before the program began. The President of the RMC faculty union was thoroughly informed of the plans for the program. He attributes the lack of any labor trouble to the good communication between the program and the union leadership.

Although I have talked about faculty reward under a separate heading, such reward can also be considered communication because it sends a powerful, indirect communication to faculty defining how the administration values participation in WAC programs. Carefully thought-out communications and reward systems can create an inviting context to attract faculty.

## Record-Keeping and History

Finally, keep records and histories. Accurate record-keeping provides the documentation necessary to construct histories that may be crucial to the continuation of programs. Beginning with the earliest plans for your program, save everything, in duplicate. Memos, letters, thank-you notes, announcements, proposals, and other documentation of the program can tell you or others what happened at a certain time and can be the basis of a history of the program. That history should be written as a coherent narrative that pulls all that information together to build a framework within which the particulars of your program make sense. Histories explain how programs interacted with their contexts, especially for future administrators and teachers. For example, they can remind future administrators of the theoretical basis of the program and show what practices have worked and those that have not worked in the past.

Histories can also remind administrators of their commitments. In the large bureaucracies of colleges and universities, where decision-making is limited to a few, often only that few know what happened to programs that were begun with great enthusiasm. It becomes easy to explain a program's demise by saying that it did what it was supposed to do, or that the program outlived its usefulness, or that it was just discontinued. As I started my study, a colleague from the history department pointed out that without history there is only myth. Histories are an antidote to such institutional amnesia and myth-making. With this knowledge and a growing tradition of keeping records and histories, administrators may become more responsive and accountable to writing-across-the-

curriculum programs and their own places in the histories of those programs.

This analysis is not intended to be exhaustive. Our literature presents other ways to understand and use individual contexts. Elizabeth Rankin, for example, suggests and details a systematic "local action research" approach to understanding context as the basis for bringing about change. Here, I have told the Robert Morris College story, a narrative intimately connected to its own context. The story argues that you come up with your own ideas to help start and sustain programs by better attaching them to their own contexts. I believe it is the only way we can make these programs survive.

## Ways to Connect WAC Programs to their Context:

- A. Attach WAC Programs to the Bureaucracy of the School:
  1. Start a committee or study group
  2. Lobby for departmental status
  3. Use the school reward system
- B. Evaluate the Program
- C. Use the School Communication Possibilities
- D. Keep Records and Histories

## Note

1. The 1992 RMC/PBS WAC Videoconference, "Writing Across the Curriculum: Making it Work," won the *Teleconference Magazine* TeleCon XII award for "Best Distance Learning." RMC and PBS, which have since collaborated on a third videoconference in 1993 that reached more than 100 university and college downlink sites, are presently engaged in preparation for the fourth, "How Schools and Colleges—and Communities—Collaborate to Improve Learning." RMC has also developed two series of resource videos available through PBS on developing WAC programs and writing in the disciplines.

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