

A Retrospective on Two Articles Published in the 1980s on Writing Across the Curriculum

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Two articles that I have written for *WPA*, “Writing in all the arts and sciences: Getting started and gaining momentum,” (1981) and “Collaborative Learning and Writing Across the Curriculum” (1986) set an early WAC agenda, much of which has been fulfilled. WAC, once thought to be a niche movement, has become mainstream, making many first-year writing courses foundational for cross-disciplinary writing programs. WAC is now considered a generative movement that has fundamentally transformed the way we think about both writing and curriculum. WAC has inspired the implementation of a new epistemology in college teaching, emphasizing the assessment, connection, and application of knowledge. Many 21st-century reforms had their origin in WAC, which can be considered the first high impact practice (HIP). WAC is also the reference point for the “infusion model” (Maimon, *Leading Academic Change* 41)—integrating goals rather than proliferating discrete courses. Many campuses now use “across the curriculum” for many initiatives including math, citizenship, art, and oral communication.

Nostalgia mixes with a sense of accomplishment as I reread these two *WPA* articles. My personal context—that of a young, beleaguered WPA—has in some ways changed radically. I am now the president of Governors State University, a comprehensive public in the Chicago area. I’ve often said, however, that everything I know about being president I learned as a WPA. My own grassroots efforts all those years ago to bring about reform in teaching and learning created a career-long appreciation for faculty leadership and involved participation.

These articles take the position that first-year writing courses should be foundational for cross-disciplinary writing programs. My 1981 article analyzes WAC in terms of “fundamental definitions of the two essential words: writing and curriculum” (Maimon, “Writing in All the Arts and Sciences”

9). In the thirty-eight years since the article was published, I wish I could say that we have succeeded once and for all in expanding the definition of writing beyond its surface features. However, we still have professorial colleagues in disciplines other than English who have been scarred by humiliating memories of their own freshman composition experience that emphasized grammar and literary analysis. But that number has become smaller every year. Janet Emig's groundbreaking 1977 article, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," has done its work—even for those who have never read or heard of the article—in establishing writing as an essential feature of learning across the curriculum.

The "dirty little secret" of our profession used to be, as I wrote in 1981, that "the department that may prove most difficult to convince of these points is the English department" (9). I referred to the fact that many English instructors had never studied or even thought systematically about teaching composition. That situation had already started to change back then. Today we have numerous PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. So it is reasonable to expect comprehensive public universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges to hire faculty members educated in the teaching of writing.

But, alas, what I call the "Maimon Hierarchical Fallacy" still prevails. (Maimon, *Leading Academic Change* 57). In 1981, I wrote about "senior colleagues, who were nurtured to expect that professional advancement meant no more 8:30 a.m. classes and no more teaching composition. Some of these instructors view a request for consistent philosophical, pedagogic, and curricular thinking about teaching composition as though we had asked them to develop a theoretical perspective on teaching hopscotch" (Maimon, "Writing in all the arts and sciences" 10). Today, we still confront false hierarchical assumptions that assign prestige in counterproductive ways. For example, if I teach graduate courses in literature, and you teach freshman composition, I must be smarter than you.

Today, even some scholars educated in composition and rhetoric believe that teaching freshman composition is beneath them. The dependence on underpaid, overworked adjunct faculty to teach this fundamental course is one of the biggest threats not only to writing across the curriculum but to 21st-century higher education as a whole. In *Leading Academic Change*, I argue that first-year courses, including freshman composition, should be taught by full-time faculty members and that these faculty members should teach brilliantly as well as do research to address the many things we do not know about helping students to navigate the intellectual world of college (64). As president of Governors State University, where only full-time faculty members teach freshmen, I have been privileged to work with out-

standing professors excited by the growth they see in first-year students. Their research is already helping to improve our program and beginning to make its mark nationally.

Improving the preparation of faculty members to work seriously and productively in freshman composition requires transformational change in English PhD programs. The MLA seems more intent on persuading English PhD candidates that their degrees can be useful outside the academy rather than influencing graduate faculty in English to design degree programs to prepare future faculty members to teach and do research at comprehensive publics, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. Such preparation would necessitate transformations of the PhD curriculum and an emphasis on praxis—the integration of theory and practice, research and teaching, scholarship and application. At Research I universities the goal would be to offer apprenticeships in teaching composition as an integrated part of these transformed, enlightened PhD programs. Replicating an experiment in the 1980s at the University of Pennsylvania, senior university faculty members could lead teams of graduate students in teaching and studying freshman composition. For a full description, see chapter 5 of *Leading Academic Change* (Maimon).

Such changes in English PhD programs would lead to strengthened foundation courses in composition, even more necessary to cross-disciplinary programs today than they were in 1981. I wrote then, “If we want colleagues in other departments to reinforce the process of writing in their courses, we must design a composition syllabus that introduces first-year students to these processes” (Maimon, “Writing in All the Arts and Sciences” 10). This emphasis on process moves the discussion from definitions of “writing” to definitions of “curriculum.” In 1981, I stated, “Clearly, I am suggesting that a program in writing across the curriculum works best when faculty members in all departments organize their courses to teach the scholarly processes in their fields” (10). Today, with information available with the click of a key, it is unacceptable to structure a curriculum around exposing students to subject matter in discrete bags of facts. The technological revolution has also been an epistemological revolution. The higher education curriculum must teach students to evaluate facts, connect the dots to create knowledge, and then apply this newly constructed knowledge to radically differentiated contexts.

The epistemological revolution has led to increased commitment to active learning across the curriculum. The passivity of the lecture hall has given way through the years to greater student engagement in learning. I would argue that writing across the curriculum was the first “high-impact practice,” George Kuh’s term for those activities that involve students in

the learning process. In my 1986 article, I quote Kenneth Bruffee, the first philosopher and practitioner of collaborative learning in American education: “The phrase ‘passive student,’ is an oxymoron since an individual cannot at the same time be both uninvolved and learning” (qtd. in Maimon, “Collaborative Writing” 9).

This commitment to active learning applies to faculty members as well as students. Establishing writing across the curriculum depended on creating something new in the academy—the faculty writing workshop. The first workshops that I know of were conducted in the early 1970s as rhetoric seminars for faculty members, led by dean Harriet Sheridan at Carleton College. These seminars were the direct inspiration for the Beaver College writing workshops. As a junior faculty member who wanted to change curriculum but who had no institutional power, I was aware that change had to be based on a new format for faculty conversation—not a committee meeting, not a graduate seminar, and not a party—but something that combined the best features of each. Barbara Walvoord, Toby Fulwiler, Art Young (at other institutions), and I were not fully aware at the time of the power of this new way for faculty members to collaborate. But we soon learned something that became an adage for me as I moved through the years from untenured faculty member to university president: curriculum change depends on scholarly exchange among faculty members.

Today faculty workshops—in various subjects—provide positive vehicles for faculty interaction, creativity, and transformation. They are at the basis of the infusion model, integrating goals rather than proliferating courses. (For more details, see chapter 4 of *Leading Academic Change* (Maimon)). At Governors State University we have infused critical thinking, problem solving, and citizenship across the curriculum. Because our campus is an internationally known sculpture park (the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park), we have also infused into the curriculum what we call “living in the midst of art.” Students in all majors—accounting through sociology—have regular opportunities to appreciate the art around them. Throughout the nation universities are increasingly using the infusion model for connection and integration—an important WAC legacy.

As I reread the two articles I wrote in the 1980s, I recall the artless innovation that inspired so many of us at that time. I hope that this retrospective issue of *WPA* will remind readers of the significance of what we do at colleges and universities. It’s not an overstatement to say that democracy depends on us getting it right. When we launched WAC in the 1970s, we were inspired by the startling inclusivity of open admissions at the City University of New York (CUNY), led by Mina Shaughnessy.

Shaughnessy was inspired to call for WAC because of her experience with new populations of students at CUNY. In 2019, these students—first generation, students of color, adults, and veterans—make up the new majority of students in the United States. Writing and critical thinking across the curriculum are at the heart of what is needed to transform American higher education, not only for this new majority, but for all students.

Kenneth Bruffee was a key member of the Shaughnessy group at CUNY in the 1970s. I conclude with my 1986 tribute to Bruffee, whom we lost in January 2019:

Let us not forget that this journal and the National Council of Writing Program Administrators have their origins in Bruffee's commitment to cooperation. As the first chairman of the MLA Teaching of Writing Division, Bruffee called a meeting of writing program administrators at the MLA meeting in New York in December 1976. Spontaneous exchanges on that occasion led to the formation of WPA. Bruffee gave us an opportunity to collaborate, to learn to make judgments together, and, most important, to form a community ("Collaborative Writing" 14).

I remember that meeting well as a turning point in my career. I hope that WPAs today will be inspired by this retrospective issue to cooperate with each other and with senior administrators on their campuses. Most of us share your values and truly have not journeyed to the dark side. Together, collaboratively, we can continue to play major roles in transforming US higher education into something worthy of our nation's students.

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