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Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can’t exist without the other.
—William Zinsser, On Writing Well

In the George Bernard Shaw play Pygmalion, which became the basis of the award-winning musical, My Fair Lady, Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle arrives uninvited on phonetics professor Henry Higgins’s doorstep with one goal in mind—to receive speech lessons so that she will be qualified for a better job. In Victorian England, speech was the principal means of immediate communication, and the ability to verbally articulate ideas clearly and coherently allowed for upward mobility. In the twenty-first century, speech is still an important skill, but now the ability to write well is often the first step toward career success. When potential employers review applicants’ résumés and cover letters, those documents are evaluated for candidates’ written communication skills and writing experiences.

In 2015, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) commissioned a report, “Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success,” which underscores the importance hiring managers place on written communication skills. The report notes that “four in five employers also say they would be more likely to consider an individual as a job candidate if he or she had completed multiple courses that require significant writing assignments.”

The good news is that students are making gains in acquiring these needed skills. Recent AAC&U research findings reveal that there have been improvements in students’ written communication. In 2016, the VALUE project introduced a nationwide effort to examine direct evidence of student learning across higher educational institutions in the United States. Those results were presented in On Solid Ground, a report based on two years of data collection which stated that, in relation to other studied learning outcomes, “the strongest student performance was in written communication. The results support the effect that institutional efforts focused on improving student writing over the last few decades seem to have had on writing proficiency.”

Peer Review last explored writing and the new academy in a 2003 issue, in which then-editor David Tritelli maintained, “Writing is a key competency to be addressed and practiced recurrently across the educational experience and at successively more challenging levels. Accordingly, writing can no longer be the responsibility of English faculty alone. Responsibility for writing must be truly pervasive.” In the fourteen years that have passed between these issues, improved digital information transmission has led to faster written communication and miscommunication. Therefore, the need for cogent writing in all subject areas has become increasingly important, in- and outside the classroom.

The articles in this issue of Peer Review focus on new frontiers of writing, both in composition classes and across the disciplines. Three articles explore the topic through research lenses. The first, a collaboration between the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Survey of Student Engagement, reveals findings on how writing contributes to student learning. The next article offers an overview of the National Census of Writing, a database of responses to over two hundred questions related to the administration, teaching, and support of academic writers from nine hundred US colleges and universities. A third piece describes the Meaningful Writing Project, a study of more than seven hundred seniors at three universities, in which students describe the roles that writing plays in their lives. Also featured in the issue are articles about writing in a vertical curriculum, teaching for transfer in the community college composition classroom, and using a school’s writing-across-the-curriculum program to inform its quantitative reasoning initiative. The issue closes with a meditation on the power of writing. These various perspectives show multiple ways that writing deepens student learning.

Unlike in the era represented in My Fair Lady, when only the privileged few expected to learn effective communication skills, all of today’s students deserve the chance to receive these outcomes. This is especially true for written communication skills. As the National Writing Project reminds us on their website, “Writing is essential to communication, learning, and citizenship. It is the currency of the new workplace and global economy. Writing is a bridge to the future.”

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY
How Writing Contributes to Learning: New Findings from a National Study and Their Local Application

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Writing ability is among the most valued outcomes of a college education. Always included in conceptions of a liberal education, writing is also one of the most highly desired skills across business and industry (see Hart 2015; Burning Glass Technologies 2015). Since the 1970s, writing specialists have intensified their theorizing, research, and advocacy of institution-level initiatives aimed at improving students’ writing abilities. These efforts have produced, among other things, writing-intensive (WI) courses and writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) programs. In 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) underscored the importance of effective writing pedagogy by including writing-intensive courses in its list of high-impact educational practices (Kuh).

Despite the impressive gains these efforts have realized at many institutions, the national results have fallen short of expectations. In an AAC&U-sponsored survey, four hundred employers ranked writing among the skills they most desired in new college graduates, but only one in four said recent graduates were well prepared in writing (Hart 2015). While there is widespread agreement that a single writing course taken in the first year cannot adequately prepare students for the writing they will need to do after graduation, almost half (47 percent) of four-year colleges and universities in the United States do not have a WAC/WID program and/or a writing requirement beyond the first year (Gladstein and Fralix 2017). This article and the ones that follow highlight new developments in efforts to improve the writing ability of all students.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF WRITING TO LEARNING
Writing specialists have long argued that writing enhances learning, believing that faculty across the disciplines who are persuaded on this point will be more likely to provide the additional instruction and practice that students need. Also, understanding how writing contributes to learning would enable faculty already incorporating writing to increase the positive results of their efforts.

Unfortunately, research on writing’s relationship to learning has been mixed, reducing the persuasiveness of writing specialists’ claims. While two large-scale studies suggest that writing has a positive impact on students’ learning (Astin 1995; Light 2001), small-scale studies, often conducted in a single course at a single institution, have produced mixed results. Further, when the small-scale research is examined collectively, the variety of institutional missions, student populations, and definitions of “learning,” as well as the different kinds and
quality of studies conducted, paint a less consistent and coherent picture of the relationship between writing and learning.

Over the last eight years, through a collaboration between the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), we have gathered and analyzed data from tens of thousands of bachelor’s degree students to identify characteristics of writing assignments that increase their learning. Results show that well-designed assignments can, indeed, increase learning, including learning about writing. In addition, the quality of assignments is more powerful in advancing learning than the amount of writing assigned, a finding that can reduce the reluctance of faculty who believe that including writing in their courses and curricula requires unreasonable amounts of class and grading time (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine 2015). Below, we summarize our study, and then three institutions describe how they are implementing our findings.

**OUR RESEARCH STRATEGY**

Our research strategy was to ask undergraduates about the nature of writing assignments they received and then to see whether their experiences correlated with aspects of their learning—as well as their perceptions of the progress they made in college toward achieving particular educational goals—that the existing NSSE survey already captured.

To generate the additional questions about writing, we invited members of the CWPA to nominate best practices in designing writing assignments. Eighty CWPA members named 150 practices and then helped pare the list to twenty-seven practices, which we developed into questionnaire items with guidance from NSSE analysts and further validated for clarity with focus groups of students. The questions asked students to indicate whether they encountered each practice for “all,” “most,” “some,” “few,” or “no” writing assignments in their courses during the current academic year.

To gather data from a variety of institutions and students, we recruited a total of eighty institutions (all bachelor’s degree-granting) from among NSSE institutions planning to participate in 2010 and 2011. For these schools, we appended the twenty-seven writing questions to the core NSSE questionnaire. More than 70,000 students responded to the modified survey. While the participating institutions were not randomly selected, they closely mirrored the profile of four-year US institutions, lending credibility to implications for US higher education in general.

**FINDING BROAD STRATEGIES EASILY APPLIED IN ANY DISCIPLINE**

Examining the responses to the twenty-seven questions, we noticed that fifteen questions could be grouped into three clusters, each pointing to a general strategy faculty in any field could apply in the contexts of their own disciplines, courses, and students. Analysis confirmed three underlying constructs representing effective pedagogical practices—each measured by an interrelated subset of the writing questions (see figure 1):

- **Interactive Writing Processes**, in which students communicate orally or in writing with others about an assignment at some point between receiving it and submitting the final draft.
- **Meaning-Making Writing Tasks**, which require students to engage in some form of integrative, critical, or original thinking.
- **Clear Writing Expectations**, which

**Interactive Writing Processes**

For how many writing assignments have you:

- Talked with your instructor to develop your ideas before you started drafting your assignment
- Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before you started drafting your assignment
- Received feedback from your instructor about a draft before turning in your final assignment
- Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment
- Visited a campus-based writing or tutoring center to get help with your writing assignment before turning it in

In how many of your writing assignments has your instructor:

- Asked you to give feedback to a classmate about a draft or outline the classmate had written

**Meaning-Making Writing Tasks**

In how many of your writing assignments did you:

- Summarize something you read, such as an article, book, or online publication
- Analyze or evaluate something you read, researched, or observed
- Describe your methods or findings related to data you collected in lab or fieldwork, a survey project, etc.
- Argue a position using evidence and reasoning
- Explain in writing the meaning of numerical or statistical data
- Write in the style and format of a specific field (engineering, history, psychology, etc.)

**Clear Writing Expectations**

In how many of your writing assignments has your instructor:

- Provided clear instructions describing what he or she wanted you to do
- Explained in advance what he or she wanted you to learn
- Explained in advance the criteria he or she would use to grade your assignment
involve instructors communicating accurately what they want their students to do in an assignment and the criteria they will use to evaluate the students’ submissions.

An essential feature of these constructs is that each concerns instructor behavior. The instructors determined whether their assignments included meaning-making tasks, and they provided explanations that students found to be clear or unclear. While some students may have decided on their own to engage in interactive writing processes, the instructors decided whether to require peer review, personal conferences, visits to the writing center, or other interactive processes.

**USING THE NEW CONSTRUCTS TO CREATE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS THAT PROMOTE LEARNING**

Having established the three new constructs, we sought to determine whether and how they were associated with student learning. The 2010 and 2011 versions of the NSSE instrument included three well-established constructs—clusters of interrelated questions from the core NSSE—that assessed students’ participation in deep-learning activities:

- **Higher-Order Learning** concerns how much students say their courses emphasize analyzing experiences and theories, synthesizing concepts and experiences into more complex relationships, and judging the value of information.

- **Integrative Learning** combines ideas from various sources, such as including diverse perspectives in course work, using ideas from different courses in assignments or class discussions, and discussing course concepts with their instructors or others outside of class.

- **Reflective Learning** focuses on the students’ self-examination of their views on a topic, understanding the perspectives of others, and learning that changes the way the students understand an issue.

Statistical analysis demonstrated that students who experienced more assignments featuring the three writing constructs (Interactive Writing Process, Meaning-Making Writing Tasks, and Clear Writing Expectations) reported they were also more often engaged in higher-order, integrative, and reflective learning. Further, these relationships persisted after controlling for institutional type (Carnegie classification); ten student characteristics (age, sex, ethnicity, major, enrollment status, transfer status, living on campus, international students, parent education, and self-reported grades); and eight other reasons why students could be engaged in deep-learning activities (amount of assigned reading, diversity experiences, group work, academic challenge, service-learning, internships, participation in a learning community, and doing research with faculty).

While these results are indirect measures of learning—as opposed to direct measures of outcomes—they demonstrate that writing assigned and carried out across the curriculum using the three constructs is associated with engagement in deep learning.

Engagement has been shown to correlate with a variety of academic success outcomes (Kuh 2008), so these findings answer our original question: yes, well-designed writing assignments contribute to student learning.

Moreover, the three constructs can be used as heuristics by faculty in any discipline. For instance, the seven questions related to Meaning-Making Writing Tasks serve as a measure of the broader notion of meaning making. Faculty in any field can probably think of other cognitively challenging tasks to incorporate into their writing assignments.

**ASSIGNMENT QUALITY VERSUS ASSIGNMENT QUANTITY**

Our research also found that, with all other variables taken into account, the three constructs developed in this study had much higher correlations with engagement in deep learning than did the amount of writing. Faculty who already include substantial writing in their courses can increase student learning by applying the three constructs. Institutions with little or no writing beyond the first year can reap additional learning by adding modest numbers of writing assignments in advanced courses—as long as they pay attention to the constructs. By incorporating well-designed writing assignments in courses for their majors, departments can teach students the conventions and expectations of the fields they will enter after graduation.

**WRITING INCREASES STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS**

Statistical analysis also discovered a positive relationship between the three writing constructs—Interactive Writing Processes, Meaning-Making Writing Tasks, and Clear Writing Expectations—and three well-established constructs from the core NSSE that measure students’ perceptions of how much they had learned and developed while in college:

- **Practical Competence** includes acquiring job- or work-related knowledge and skills as well as the ability to work effectively with others; use computing and information technology; analyze quantitative problems; and solve complex real-world problems.

- **Personal and Social Development** includes learning independently, understanding oneself, understanding other people, developing a personal code of values and ethics, and contributing to the community.
General Education Learning includes communicating clearly and effectively and thinking critically and analytically. The more students experienced writing assignments that featured the three writing constructs, the more they credited their educational experience at the institution for helping them become brighter, more socially adept, more tolerant, and more astute individuals than when they started college.

CREATION OF THE NSSE AND FSSE “EXPERIENCES WITH WRITING” MODULES

In 2013, NSSE created an Experiences with Writing module, an optional set of questions based on the fifteen writing questions used in this study. Institutions can use this optional module to:

- assess the extent that their students encounter writing assignments featuring our research’s constructs;
- benchmark their results with all schools (in aggregate) that administered the module within two years;
- measure progress by comparing results across years;
- target their writing initiatives to areas of greatest need by disaggregating results by academic unit, student characteristics, or other variables.

NSSE also created an Experiences with Writing module for its Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). It asks faculty about their use of the same behaviors asked of students on the NSSE module. By comparing student and faculty responses, institutional leaders can create a robust picture of their school’s writing climate and culture.

EXAMPLES OF HOW THIS RESEARCH HAS BEEN USED

By disseminating and promoting the use of our research results throughout their curricula, colleges and universities can maximize the additional learning that students in any field gain through well-designed writing assignments. The following examples illustrate ways that schools with different missions, students, and resources for faculty and curricular development have begun doing so.

Harvey Mudd College

Harvey Mudd College (HMC)—a small, private liberal arts institution in California with a focus on science, mathematics, and engineering—revised a half-semester writing course for first-year students called Writ 1. Designed by faculty from many departments, the resulting curriculum supports the research findings.

Because Writ 1 instructors come from all departments, the course provides an excellent opportunity for disseminating the use of the three constructs throughout the school’s curriculum. Faculty new to the course participate in a five-day preparatory workshop; returning faculty take a two-day refresher. Course instructors meet weekly to clarify and rehearse their expectations and strategize ways to make those expectations clear to students and consistent across sections. Nearly half the faculty who taught Writ 1 indicated that the experience substantially (“very much” or “quite a bit”) influenced the way they taught their disciplinary courses. Fewer than one in ten felt it had “very little effect” on their teaching in other courses.

HMC has also used the research to inform instruction and assessment in other ways. For example, there was a disparity between HMC students’ and faculty members’ perceptions of the clarity of assignments: while nine in ten instructors believed their expectations were clear, only seven in ten first-year students thought so (with a slightly larger gap for seniors). These results sparked discussion among HMC faculty about the dimensions of transparency and how they could “make the invisible visible” to students, acknowledging that although they don’t want to guide students with step-by-step instructions, they could help students learn more if they explained the pedagogical methods behind their assignments.

Auburn University

In 2010, Auburn University, a midsize public university in Alabama, began an institution-wide writing initiative supported by a new Office of University Writing. This office was charged with helping each department develop plans for embedding writing assignments and instruction throughout their regular courses, a strategy that was believed to be much more effective than designating one or two courses as writing intensive.

Drawn from the twenty-seven best practices developed early in the research project, a University Writing Committee established five requirements for department plans. The committee reviewed department plans, suggested improvements, and asked departments that had not satisfied all five criteria to revise and...
resubmit. It also elevated some plans as models on the Office of University Writing’s website (http://wp.auburn.edu/writing/index/writing-plans/).

By 2011, all undergraduate majors had approved writing plans. Every three years the committee reviews implementation reports and suggests refinements to departments. Based on these reviews, it also recommends ways the Office of University Writing can better support the writing initiative. The office uses the research project’s three constructs in its programs, curricular assistance offered to departments, and online resources.

University of the Cumberlands

University of the Cumberlands (UC), a Christian liberal arts institution in Kentucky, provides an illustration of the ways some schools have woven the Experiences with Writing results into projects centered on other institutional objectives. As an accreditation requirement, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges asks institutions to develop a targeted Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to improve student learning. UC originally used locally developed rubrics to assess progress in its QEP of Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum (CTAC) with emphasis on reading and writing in general education courses. At the suggestion of consultants from the Teagle Foundation-funded Center of Inquiry, UC adopted NSSE with the Experiences with Writing module in 2013 to assess the writing focus of CTAC.

The NSSE Experiences with Writing module has become a part of the University’s ongoing discussion of pedagogy. The data were central to the development of the current QEP, piloted in 2015, which focuses on enhancing student metacognition and performance through reading and writing. As part of a recent general education revision, faculty in disciplines serving this curriculum developed writing-intensive, cross-disciplinary, upper-level “integrated studies” courses. Under the current QEP, the University seeks to focus on general education as the liberal arts major shared by all undergraduates in preparation for lifelong learning, with faculty in integrated studies strengthening these courses as capstone general education experiences.

A longitudinal comparison of UC’s 2013 and 2016 NSSE data for seniors shows a slight increase in Interactive Writing Processes from a mean of 2.8 to 2.9. Meaning Making was stable at a mean of 3.3, slightly above the NSSE-wide mean of 3.2. The most notable increase was the mean for Clear Writing Expectations which rose from 4.0 to 4.2, statistically better than the NSSE comparison mean of 4.0. Also noteworthy, first-year students who completed NSSE in 2016 found their courses to be more challenging than did their counterparts in 2013. These results support the benefit of curricular development with underpinnings of collaborative faculty development. UC’s ongoing pedagogical enhancements and writing initiatives have had a measurable impact upon student learning.

OTHER APPLICATIONS

Some institutions report their results for internal use and in accreditation and other documents directed to extramural readers. For example, faculty at Miami University (Ohio) and North Carolina State University highlighted the NSSE/FSSE research results in a successful joint proposal to the National Science Foundation for a three-year, multi-institutional project to improve student learning and writing in computer science and software engineering programs nationwide.

CONCLUSION

The research project described in this article and the examples of its local application underscore the value of teaching faculty to focus on the quality, not just the quantity, of writing assignments they give students. It also provides faculty across the disciplines with practical, adaptable guidance for enhancing what students learn from any writing assignment, including those described in—or derived from—the other articles in this issue of Peer Review.

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REFERENCES


n the October 3, 2016, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Joseph R. Teller, an English professor at the College of the Sequoias, asks, “Are we teaching composition all wrong?” My answer to his question is yes, if we are teaching composition in the manner and with the misconceptions that Teller embraces. His main complaints are that “compositionists have been enamored of a pedagogical orthodoxy” that is incorrect; we should, instead, focus more on product, use the rhetorical modes, and should not teach reading in the first-year course.

Professors have been complaining about student writing for as long as students have been writing in their courses. Sharon Crowley’s excellent 1998 history, *Composition in the University*, reminds us that in 1892, more than half of the Harvard students who took the writing exam received a failing score. This crisis resulted in the creation of “English A” and began the widespread requirement of first-year writing in US higher education institutions (69). Despite the gnashing of teeth and the sweeping generalizations from Teller and his ilk, much has changed in the teaching of composition since the nineteenth century, to the ennoblement of the discipline and its students. In this article, I tell the story of how, in 2014, Governors State University (GSU), formerly an upper-division campus, established a structured four-year undergraduate program beginning with a two-course composition sequence in the first year. While the criticisms of contemporary composition are frustrating, they also remind us that we have not succeeded in telling composition’s story. These concerns seem to emanate from the 1980s when product versus process was a lively debate and educators were pushing hard to steer textbooks away from rhetorically disembodied discussions of the “modes.” Composition education has come a long, long way since then.

**GSU, FULL-TIME FACULTY AND CLASS SIZE**

I arrived at GSU in August 2011 during a perfect storm of curricular change. I remember the first convocation I attended when we discussed the cohort model for GE—with three groups of thirty students in each themed cohort. I started doing the math, and when it was time for questions, mine was the first hand raised. I reminded the president and provost that the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recommends no more than twenty students and, ideally, fifteen in writing classes. President Elaine Maimon responded that our first-year writing courses would be limited to fifteen students. We have, in fact, kept that promise despite the crushing financial woes that we face in Illinois, having been without a state budget for eighteen months.

Small class size is recommended for a variety of reasons, from workload considerations to student learning needs. At GSU it moves hand in hand with our commitment to having only full-time faculty teaching GE courses. To put into place the high-impact practices recommended by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)’s LEAP initiative—including writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, community-based learning, and undergraduate research, among others—universities need full-time instructors who are integrated into the culture of the institution. Faculty need development and support to enact these high-touch strategies of teaching, and a local community of faculty, staff, and administration is integral to their implementation. Adjunct faculty don’t have the same access...
to this cultural enrichment because of the itinerant nature of their work. In a practical way, institutions cannot control the workload of adjunct faculty, since they may teach five or six courses at several institutions and commute many hours to their classrooms. If institutions are serious about limiting class size, then they must know how many classes, and what types of classes, their instructors are teaching. Full-time instructors with balanced workloads and no more than fifteen students in their writing classes are also able to put into practice the best recommendations of the field.

Threshold Concepts and the “Literacy Autobiography”

Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle recently edited an essential volume for the study of composition, Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies. It is an accessible and engaging resource for non-specialists as well as for compositionists. They explain that threshold concepts are the critical ideas we need to “participate more fully in particular disciplines” (ix). These concepts are “troublesome,” in that they tend to contradict prior knowledge and ask writers to redefine themselves as well as to “unlearn” previous knowledge (x–xi). Threshold concepts are not pieces of knowledge, but rather are “ways of seeing . . . that change a learner’s stance.” They change “how” people know instead of “what” they know (xi). The volume includes thirty-six concepts, each written by an expert in the field, and includes concepts such as writing as a struggle, writing as a shaper and enactor of identity, and writing as a knowledge-making activity.

Our first-year composition program is built on these concepts, and the example of one shared assignment we use, the “literacy autobiography,” illustrates how the threshold concepts play out in our classrooms. First-year students bring with them a raft of knowledge related to writing, some of it rigid and unhelpful. They begin in a restricted place, with guiding assumptions and conclusions based on their own experiences. Threshold concepts invite them to expand those boundaries and their knowledge. Using the literacy autobiography, a common pedagogical tool, invites students to reflect on their reading and writing experiences before they came to college and to consider how those experiences shape their current writing practices. This assignment helps students to see through the lens of the following threshold concepts: that writers’ histories with writing vary, that writing is informed by prior experience, and that writing creates identity.

Students, and many other writers, assume that all writers share common histories, and that we all struggle and succeed in the same ways. Some may assume that we all learned our craft by first writing a sentence and then moved to combining sentences into paragraphs, even though our lived experience and composition research defy this assumption. For instance, Teller ends his Chronicle piece with this sentence: “But if they [students] show up, do the work, and turn off their phones, they just might leave my class able to write a sentence.” For most of us it is both much messier and more spontaneous than this. Students and teachers must unlearn this unhelpful prior knowledge about the neat linearity of the writing process if they are to succeed.

Many of our students—those in our summer bridge programs, our peer mentors, and our writing fellows, as well as many staff and faculty members—complete Gallup’s StrengthQuest assessment, which identifies individuals’ combination of strengths and empowers them to work from a natural place of engagement. To teach our students, we need to know who they are. We know that our GSU students are 55 percent people of color and 54 percent Pell eligible. Many are first-generation college students from the South Suburbs of Chicago. They have been told in action and in words the dozens of ways in which they will fail and the specific nature of their weaknesses. At GSU, our entire GE program is predicated on a strengths-based model of education. Therefore, GSU’s challenge has been to get to know our students’ strengths and to enable them to see how their rich literacy traditions can inform their college writing. Indeed, students also bring with them enriching literacy experiences that can be transformed into practice in our classrooms and in their academic writing. In terms of threshold concepts, we know that literacy experiences shape and express identity in positive as well as in more troubling ways.

The literacy autobiography also offers insight into how a specific threshold concept—that writing is
shaped by genre and context—works with first-year students. Most of my students come to college with the guiding principle that they should “never write in the first person.” They have heard this “rule” throughout high school and will, no doubt, hear it in college as well. It is an appropriate guideline in some contexts. The problem, however, is that writing is always situated. Every semester that I’ve assigned the creation of a literacy autobiography, students have raised their hands and asked, “Are we allowed to write in the first person?” At first, I was surprised—it is, after all, a literacy “autobiography,” a genre defined by its use of first person. It’s clear that these students have been successful in high school in part because they’ve learned rules such as “no first person,” but rules don’t cross contexts very well. What writers need instead of rules is rhetorical knowledge, which invites them to think about their writing in context. The genre of the autobiography invites the first person because it is a story about the self. The “I” is expected and appropriate.

The literacy autobiography also allows educators to extend boundaries as to where writing “belongs.” Students and teachers hold the notion that writing belongs in and to the class where it was assigned. At GSU, we want our students and instructors to see writing extend beyond the boundaries of first-year composition, into their other classes, and into their lives. We have established a literacy autobiography contest for first-year students in the spring semester. Their autobiographies can be revised multiple times, in consultation with their first-year writing teachers or with any other teacher or tutor. Students submit the revised essay along with a reflective piece about their writing process to a contest committee of readers, selected by the provost, and are awarded prizes at a formal luncheon. Our goal is for students to continue working with their writing outside of the context of the classroom and past the boundaries of the semester. These stories matter because they shape writers’ understanding of themselves, which in turn shapes the kinds of writing experiences they are capable of. Additionally, this contest underlines another threshold concept—that revision helps writers develop.

Threshold concepts about writing—that it is rhetorical, situated, shaped by genre, directed toward an audience, and exigent—inform the importance of a vertical curriculum. Disciplines demand certain kinds of writing and the writing completed within the discipline shapes the knowledge of the discipline. Writing, from this perspective, is read and judged by audiences based on the disciplinary communities in which it is produced. Therefore, students must become acquainted with successful discourse practices within disciplines. For instance, the English discipline uses the Modern Language Association (MLA) style guide to govern our writing conventions, while the social sciences and others use the American Psychological Association (APA) guide. On the face of it, these guides may seem only to dictate where citations are placed and how bibliographies are produced. However, once writers dig into these guides, we realize that they shape the foundations of the writing. As an example, the MLA privileges text and, consequently, invites extensive quotation of both literary texts and critical texts. Quotations serve many roles, including support for arguments, strategies to build the writer’s credibility, and celebrations of language itself. The APA, however, tends toward much less quotation, and in some cases none at all, using research conclusions and citations as sufficient evidence. Further, the APA privileges dates in its...
citations for the obvious reason that research in the social sciences changes quickly and tends to be time sensitive. Good writing needs the context of discipline-specific instruction to help develop these key features.

In addition, the vertical curriculum seeks to create more and deeper student engagement through writing-intensive courses, one of LEAP’s high-impact practices. The writing across the curriculum movement views writing to learn as one of its key objectives and assumes that writing enhances learning and creates knowledge. Recent research across several institutions by Paul Anderson and his colleagues underlines the importance of using writing to improve learning. Based on their research, which is discussed in their article in this issue, students need to do more than “write more.” They must write in a context in which they will be read and taken seriously; they must be asked to participate in meaning-making tasks; and they must understand teachers’ expectations. Students profit from having their writing read and responded to before it’s graded, whether it’s by the teacher, a writing tutor, or a well-prepared peer. Further, writing needs to be connected to learning outcomes in ways that are explicit to students.

GSU’s vertical curriculum makes use of writing fellows in order to support instructors as they invite students to use writing as a way of making knowledge as well as to create disciplinary texts. These students, who are English majors or from other disciplines, and are both graduate students and undergraduates, are paired with a particular professor and a specific classroom. They sit in on the course and offer support to both professors and students to better understand the writing process in courses across the disciplines. They serve as translators between professors and students, as well-prepared readers, and as experienced writers who can share their own writing practices with their peers. As one of our fellows, Samantha Schmidt, recently said in a meeting, “Our job is recognizing and leveraging students’ strengths.” Indeed, her words are the foundation of what we do at GSU.

Teaching writing is challenging work. It requires our best instructors in disciplines across the curriculum to embrace a praxis where teaching, on-the-ground experiences, evolving understandings of our students’ strengths and needs, and an awareness of critical composition research merge to urge us past our personal frustrations in order to meet our students where they are and to help them enlarge their boundaries.

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How Writing Program Best Practices Have Transformed Carleton College

Carol Rutz, Director of the Writing Program, and Senior Lecturer in English, Carleton College
Nathan D. Grawe, Professor of Economics and Ada M. Harrison Distinguished Teaching Professor of the Social Sciences, Carleton College

Carleton College, a small private coed liberal arts college of 2,000 students in Northfield, Minnesota, has been closely associated with the beginning of what is now called writing across the curriculum (WAC). Sources differ on naming the first WAC program, but all agree that then-Chair of English Harriet Sheridan decided in 1974 to abandon the freshman writing course for what she called “Teaching Writing Extra-Territorially” (Sheridan 1975). Fortunately, that term did not stick, but the notion of dispersing the responsibility for teaching writing throughout the college did catch on at Carleton and elsewhere.

Writing at Carleton
Writing had been a staple of the curriculum since the college’s founding. According to catalogs from previous years, students were required to take writing courses for three semesters from 1867 to 1904, a requirement reduced to two semesters from 1904 to 1961. In 1961, the academic calendar was changed from two semesters to three ten-week terms, with writing required for two terms. Over the next dozen years, the requirement was gradually reduced to one term and then to a half-term course of five weeks. That half-term course was unpopular among students and the faculty assigned to teach it. Part of Sheridan’s inspiration rested on the practical problem of staffing a course that was universally reviled. Her recognition that writing was expected—and expected at a high level—in all departments led to the “extra-territorial” approach supported by two important innovations: a summer rhetoric institute to train faculty willing to teach writing more intentionally in their courses and the concomitant training of a handful of advanced students to be rhetoric assistants to faculty who were taking on the extra responsibilities of teaching and assigning more writing. The initial group was limited to fifteen volunteer faculty and five student assistants. (For more on that story, see Rutz, Hardy, and Condon 2002.)

Sheridan’s innovation led to a key pedagogical change for faculty: teaching writing across the curriculum differs from assigning writing across the curriculum. Toward that end, faculty development should itself feature a curriculum that draws on course design, course goals, assignment design, response strategies, and assessments.

Faculty development curricula should include instruction on how to
- articulate course learning goals;
- scaffold assignments in the course and stage assignments to build up to larger assignments and assign drafts as part of the assignment;
- encourage students to pay attention to audience in writing and oral reports;
- develop and evaluate student work with a rubric;
- encourage students to write multiple drafts and revise in response to feedback;
- provide clear, helpful, and timely comments on student work;
- provide students with exemplars;
- incorporate student peer review into the process;

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• encourage help-seeking habits for all students (e.g., seeking help from writing centers, libraries, professors, faculty, staff, and peers).

FACTOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS
At Carleton, these pedagogical principles infuse faculty development programs in a range of contexts. Carleton’s calendar features three ten-week terms, with a six-week break between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day. December is typically packed with workshop opportunities for faculty and staff. Topics for December 2016, for example, included advising, global engagement, learning beyond the ten-week term, responding to student writing, and a comprehensive workshop for new faculty. Most years, a workshop on quantitative reasoning is offered, often in conjunction with WAC. Other recent topics included communication across campus, visual learning, art and technology, grant-writing strategies, information literacy, and several IT-related sessions. Most workshops are led by faculty and staff, although some have featured outside facilitators. Participants receive modest stipends, contact with peers (who have been closed in their own departments during fall term), opportunities for group work on assignments and other activities, and plenty of good food.

A typical WAC workshop has included some preworkshop readings distributed electronically that were tied to the subject matter. In December 2016, readings covered research on responding to student writing from scholars interested in tone, efficiency, rubrics, technological bells and whistles, and testimony from students about their response to instructor feedback. Groups discussed some classroom scenarios, and for overnight homework, everyone drafted an assignment—paying attention to goals, scaffolding, and so forth, as well as the following WAC-specific pedagogical teaching goals:

• Analyze assignments for effectiveness.
• Teach students to write clear prose.
• Teach students to write with clear organization.

When simple venting gave way to more serious curricular discussion, someone asked how we could figure out just what our students were and weren’t doing well.

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development curriculum, Carleton has emphasized the assessment of student writing. Between 1999 and 2006, Carleton was awarded a series of faculty development grants from the Archibald Bush Foundation, which supported typical faculty development combined with learning to conduct writing assessment. A significant outcome of those grants is a college-wide writing portfolio modeled on the junior portfolio at Washington State University that requires students at the end of the sophomore year to submit work addressing a range of rhetorical tasks from at least three disciplines or interdisciplinary programs. To connect this assessment to faculty development, student writing portfolios are read by Carleton faculty and some staff, and for them, the benefits have been profound. Without such an assessment program, few who teach writing-intensive classes would also see the writing students do for other courses, especially outside of their own departments and programs. When thirty-five faculty members sit down to share the reading of five hundred portfolios, everyone will read material from outside her field, written by students she does not know.

A greater awareness of the disciplinary expectations across campuses and more empathy for student experiences produce thoughtful assessment of individuals’ approaches to writing pedagogy. Those specific experiences feather nicely into the curricular features of faculty development (noted above) aimed specifically at WAC.

THE CARLETON QUANTITATIVE INQUIRY, REASONING, AND KNOWLEDGE INITIATIVE
As much as this assessment-based professional development program has nurtured writing at Carleton, it has also been an effective vehicle for other
curricular programs. This phenomenon is best exemplified in the Quantitative Inquiry, Reasoning, and Knowledge (QuIRK) initiative. QuIRK began in 2004 as an informal group of faculty concerned about students’ use and misuse of quantitative evidence. While it is hardly unusual for faculty to gather and gripe about their annoyance with foibles in student work, an odd turn in the conversation sent this group off in a very unorthodox direction. When simple venting gave way to more serious curricular discussion, someone asked how we could figure out just what our students were and weren’t doing well.

Long-time WAC participant and geologist Mary Savina responded, “Well, we have boxes of student writing samples stored in the attic. We could just look.” And in that instant Carleton’s writing portfolio became a critical foundation to our quantitative reasoning initiative. While a writing portfolio may be an unusual place to begin the search for students’ quantitative reasoning, it has also struck us as odd that so many discussions of students’ quantitative reasoning avoid all use of quantitative evidence to support claims.

With support from a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant from 2004 to 2008, QuIRK refined a rubric for assessing quantitative reasoning in student writing (Grawe, Lutsky, and Tassava 2010). At the same time, we created an assessment-grounded curriculum for faculty development. To say this program was “modeled” on our WAC program would be a gross understatement. In fact, we partnered with the writing program to use their well-established workshops to promote assignment development and address the problems we were seeing in student writing. This partnership was truly symbiotic. By leveraging the writing program’s existing expertise, QuIRK hit the ground with a fully developed program designed by a faculty development expert. At the same time, focus on the use of quantitative evidence in writing drew new faculty members to writing program events.

Access to the Writing Portfolio dramatically altered the focus of QuIRK’s work. From the start, we recognized the importance of what we called “central quantitative reasoning”: the use of quantitative evidence to address the central question of an argument. However, through reading student work we became aware of the equally important “peripheral quantitative reasoning”: the use of quantitative evidence to provide context or enrich description. An example of the latter would be an introduction to a philosophy paper arguing for a particular definition of poverty in which the author uses income distribution statistics to hook the reader. While the central argument in this case is qualitative (a philosophical defense of a particular definition), the student has used quantitative evidence as a rhetorical device. Grawe reports that nearly half of all instances of quantitative reasoning in student writing are peripheral in nature (2011). And of these, the majority of instances are found in papers written in arts, literature, and humanities courses. Almost no examples of peripheral quantitative reasoning were found in the natural sciences, where most work focuses on the central use of quantitative evidence.

**QuIRK Across the Curriculum**

If almost half of student quantitative reasoning is peripheral, and if a majority of that work takes place outside the natural and social sciences, then quantitative reasoning needs to be taken up across the curriculum. That is a daunting idea with implications for serious faculty development to help faculty take on new roles. Thankfully, writing programs at Carleton and elsewhere had been confronting these same challenges for three decades and had developed best practices for providing just this kind of faculty support. Even better, QuIRK had partnered with our writing program and was already taking advantage of that work. With a portion of the FIPSE grant and additional support from the W. M. Keck Foundation from 2008 to 2011, QuIRK provided faculty workshops, student research support, and small stipends to aid faculty in nonquantitative fields to design or revise assignments that provided students the chance to grow in their quantitative reasoning. Like the writing program, QuIRK linked assessment (through student writing) with workshops designed with explicit curricular goals for our audience of teachers. Following workshops, we hoped that participants would be better prepared to create assignments and courses that:

- Institute a quantitative habit of mind for students.
- Help students implement quantitative methods correctly.
- Help students interpret and evaluate quantitative information thoughtfully.
- Help students communicate effectively with quantitative data.
- Give students experience with real-world, ill-structured problems with no single “correct” solution structure.
- Help students visually represent numbers to support their arguments.

The resulting course and assignment revisions confirmed our understanding (developed in part through WAC work) that higher-order thinking skills like quantitative reasoning are integrated in diverse ways across the disciplines. For example, a French professor invited her students to examine a cultural topic...
are quite simple—the count of bears seen by Lewis and Clark or the mean years of education attained by various demographic groups. QuIRK steering committee members quickly learned that, just as disciplines employ different writing genres, the definition of quantitative evidence understandably varies across fields. Too often those of us in the social or natural sciences (that is, those who are likely to lead quantitative reasoning initiatives) are tempted to overvalue the “more advanced” methods of our own fields and, in the process, lose sight of the wonderfully sophisticated ways in which colleagues use basic quantitative constructs to make their point. Indeed, given the nature of the data they are working with, it is often impossible for humanists to make credible arguments based on more complex techniques. If instead we choose to honor the multiple ways in which quantitative evidence can be used in arguments, we open an exciting and new type of campus in which students wrestle with quantitative evidence throughout the curriculum. Just as it has done in writing, this cross-cutting approach promises to reach a broader audience and develop stronger habits of mind as students learn that there is literally no place in the curriculum where people are proud to say they don’t write or reason with numbers.

**CONCLUSION**

QuIRK has refocused and enriched WAC for both faculty and students at Carleton. Quantitative reasoning is now an official feature of the curriculum, resulting in a robust list of options for students in nearly every discipline. Consequently, students are reminded through writing assignments of the rhetorical power of numbers to lend authority and precision to their prose, even if their intellectual interests are not primarily quantitative. Thanks to QuIRK’s faculty development, faculty have an increased appreciation of the benefits of quantitative writing, especially for setting the context for an argument in the humanities or arts.

In 1974, Harriet Sheridan encouraged faculty to help students write well in all courses. Her approach to bringing faculty together to promote effective writing pedagogy changed Carleton forever and engendered best practices for WAC. While she probably did not anticipate how this goal would be strengthened by the unity of faculty development and assessment, much less the advent of QuIRK as an enriching influence, we suspect she would be delighted by the results.

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Teaching for Transfer: A Passport for Writing in New Contexts

Howard Tinberg, Professor of English, Bristol Community College

English 101, the universally required writing course at colleges and universities, ought to play a significant role in students' success in college and beyond. After all, the course serves as a gateway to the curriculum, a curriculum that puts a special premium on writing, especially writing in response to reading. The stakes are even higher at community colleges, where students so often struggle to complete their studies. While some of my colleagues in composition and rhetoric may blanch at the thought, I would assert that English 101 has a special burden to prepare students for all the writing challenges that await them in college and in their working lives. Those same colleagues may question how a single course, taken over fifteen weeks, can possibly prepare students for the array of writing challenges that await them deeper in the curriculum, let alone out in the workplace. But what if we imagined a set of outcomes less bound to the number of pages written or genres attempted but instead aimed at promoting a habit of mind or, more to the point, asking students to theorize about habits of mind that will help them articulate and apply concepts critical to becoming successful writers? Such a habit or such theorizing might serve as a “passport” for students as they move their writing into new contexts.

TEACHING FOR TRANSFER

Recent work by transfer scholars within composition studies—most notably Kathleen Blake Yancey, Lianne Robertson, and Kara Taczak’s 2014 work—has suggested that transfer of knowledge from English 101 to other courses and contexts may be possible if teaching is geared explicitly for such transfer. In other words, rather than hoping that somehow our students will be able to take what skills we teach and apply them to writing after English 101, Teaching for Transfer (TFT) adopts a writing curriculum that boldly charges students to develop a portable theory of writing applicable across broad and varied contexts, including the workplace.

The notion that student writers at the community college—especially students in their first college course, as is often the case with English 101—might be taught to develop such a theory seems to fly in the face of those who insist on a conventional, skills-based approach, which still dominates at community colleges (Grubb and Gabriner 2012). And yet the “skill and drill” method of writing instruction has not translated into improved course completion or an increase in student retention beyond the required writing course. Nor has it promoted the habits of mind—such as meta-cognition, which many say is crucial to knowledge transfer—that our students will likely need to become thoughtful and creative problem-solvers in class and beyond.

INTRODUCING THRESHOLD AND TROUBLESOME CONCEPTS

Initially I moved toward a TFT curriculum in my English 101 course by promoting in students a critical and portable vocabulary about writing through teacher commentary and peer
review, post writes (writers’ commentary on their drafts in progress), and reflective cover letters as part of portfolio assessment. That vocabulary was based primarily in the formal aspects of written expression: meaningful transitions, the grounding of argumentation in evidence, appropriate style and tone, and so forth. I did not explicitly call attention to key writing-based concepts such as “rhetorical understanding” or “genre knowledge.” While I did have students write in various genres—such as a proposal to solve a community problem or an interview/profile—I did not ask students to reflect on how knowledge of a genre can lead to successful writing. I simply had them write in a particular form. Moreover, as I reflected on the course’s current and rather vacuous list of course outcomes (“learning to view writing as a process,” for example, or “learning to write with sources”), I suspected that I was doing a disservice to my students by not giving them the theoretical and practical understanding that they would need to succeed as writers.

I revised my course after I was introduced to the so-called “troublesome knowledge” and “threshold concepts” (Meyer and Land 2014; Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). I became aware of those concepts when I became involved in the Naming What We Know project, led by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. This project was initially online and later it became a published exchange with colleagues within composition studies about concepts that define the ways of thinking in a discipline. The assumption was that each discipline has its own threshold concepts, the understanding and application of which marked students’ entry into the ways of the discipline. Such entry is rarely easy; indeed, the concepts that need to be understood are often difficult and troublesome. However, these concepts often lead to transformed student understanding (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick 2014).

Indeed, faculty members who have been teaching composition for several decades may find it troubling or difficult to recall such essential concepts, which over time have become nearly invisible as practice has overlaid and obscured such concepts. When reading colleagues’ contributions, I was led to reflect on concepts that I considered key to my discipline. I was especially taken with the concept of metacognition and was encouraged to incorporate explicit teaching of that habit of mind. If students are to take what they’ve learned in English 101 to other writing situations, they will at the very least need to be aware of their own writing habits and ways of thinking.

DEVELOPING A THEORY OF WRITING
I turned to the TFT curriculum in order to bring that level of awareness to my students. Through a series of mixed-genre readings, weekly reflective blog posts, and major writing assignments, my students are well into the process (as I write this essay) of generating a theory of writing that I hope will serve them well beyond the course. I adjusted the curriculum reflecting my own ongoing pedagogical priorities and the realities of the community college classroom. For example, I have retained peer review and the practice of using class time to review and share drafts in progress. I also continue to have students include post write commentary on each of their drafts, answering the following questions:

- Did this assignment remind you of any writing that you’ve done previously? Please describe that work.
- What was new about this assignment? Please be precise.
- What kinds of knowledge/writing skills did you draw on to produce this draft? Please begin to use some of the key terms that have begun to form the basis of your theory of writing. For example, did you draw upon your understanding of audience awareness or genre? How so?

- When drafting, what choices did you make? Please explain.
- What questions do you have for readers about the piece?

These questions are designed in part to prompt students to engage the question of transfer in concrete terms: What assignments have they done in the past? What previous experiences and knowledge sets have they brought with them to the present writing situation?

READING ACROSS GENRES AND MODALITIES
To give students a foundation in key writing concepts, I have continued using a textbook for the course to provide students with accessible and tested material on core concepts such as rhetorical situation, audience, voice, genre, peer review, and critical thinking. The required reading beyond the textbook—all linked on our course webpage—consists of works that cross genres and modes, including TED Talks, a YouTube video, an article in a popular magazine, an obituary, and a celebrity profile.

Given the range of learners in a typical community college classroom, the inclusion of visual material seems the right approach. In addition, the clear distinctions among these genres brings out the important point that the forms, conventions, and purposes of writing can differ in dramatic ways. In weekly blog posts, major assignments, and class discussions, I ask students to analyze these works using key words that we have generated, collected, and reflected upon throughout the semester.
KEY TERMS
The TFT curriculum in writing consists of two critical elements: (1) a set of organizing and foundational key terms and (2) a sequence of writing assignments, both informal and formal, that assist students in understanding and deploying those terms—and, hopefully, prompting an additional set of terms critical to theory-making in the composition classroom. The course is organized around critical writing terms, such as genre, composing, audience, rhetorical situation, peer review, reflection, exigence, knowledge, and context. Students define these terms, attempt to see relationships among them, and apply them to their own work and the work of others. Throughout the course, students are asked to develop a theory of writing that incorporates these terms and any others that have been generated in class discussions.

EXPLORATORY WEEKLY BLOG POSTS
Each week students are prompted to reflect in their blogs in ways that prepare them for the major assignments of the course and the overall course objective to promote a theory of writing. The posts typically ask students to reflect on key concepts, grounding their reflection in the assigned works for the week. For example, in week one, students are asked to reflect on the question, “What is writing?”:
- What are the definitions, ideas, thoughts, expressions that you associate with writing?
- What defines successful writing for you?
- What type of writer do you see yourself as, and why?
- Create a list of five to eight key terms that define writing for you.

Throughout the course, students have been analyzing various genres—both written and visual. Now they put their knowledge into action.

- What do we learn about writing from this text?
- Is this text “successful” according to the criteria you defined earlier? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What else might you say about this text to help you classify the text as successful or not successful?
- Do you want to revise your list of key terms based on this reading? If so, explain what you would revise (or not) and why (not).

Subsequent blog post assignments require students to reflect on other key terms and apply such terms in an analysis of given works. Blog posts also provide a space for students to explore and propose topics for major assignments, as well as reflect on their own theory of writing.

As to the major assignments, students must use sources in their writing from the very start, supported by class discussion, informal blog posting, peer review, and teacher commentary. For the first major assignment, students are asked to write a source-based article that employs the concepts of genre, audience, and rhetorical situation in an analysis of three given sources. How does a commencement speaker, for example, express his understanding of the commencement address genre? How does he undermine the conventions of that genre? Why does an author, in debunking western stereotypes of Africa, choose to deliver her message in the genre of the PechaKucha—a slide show consisting of twenty slides each of which is shown no longer than twenty seconds? After engaging in such analysis, students are then asked to reflect on the relationships among the terms—genre, audience, and rhetorical situation—as a critical, early step toward developing works in progress or on the process that produced a work.

As the major assignments, students from the very start are asked to define and deploy key terms, such as genre, audience, and rhetorical situation, in an analysis of source material. For most of my teaching career, I had delayed the research-based essay until the last part of the 101 course, not fully acknowledging that writing with sources requires continual practice and revision.

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social and often a product of happenstance. And rather than limit students’ choices as to school-sanctioned sources, students are asked to provide a range of sources, both primary and secondary: interviews, personal observations, peer-reviewed and web-based sources, and popular sources (such as TED Talks and BuzzFeed).

Staying with their research topic, in their next assignment students are asked to construct a target audience and communicate what they’ve learned about their research by writing a composition in three genres, one of which needs to be an infographic. Students choose from a list of possible writing formats—such as public service announcements, musical lyrics, and short videos. Students reflect on their purposes and the rhetorical choices that they’ve made in their compositions. Throughout the course, students have been analyzing various genres—both written and visual. Now they put their knowledge into action.

Finally, as a culminating project in the course, students produce a reflection-in-presentation; that is, in a genre of their choosing, students look back at their writing during the semester and address the following questions:

- What is your theory of writing at this point in the semester?
- What was your theory of writing coming into English 101?
- How has your theory of writing evolved with each piece of composing?
- What has contributed to your theory of writing the most?
- What is the relationship between your theory of writing and how you create(d) knowledge? In other words, what uses, generally, does a theory of writing have in your own learning?
- How might your theory of writing be applied to other writing situations both inside and outside the classroom?

Similar in purpose to a cover letter for a portfolio, this piece requires that students review the work that they’ve done in the semester, taking stock of the changes that they’ve made to the writing. In that sense, this assignment, like the cover letter, further promotes metacognition—a key component of transfer knowledge. But what separates this from the standard reflective cover letter is its focus on a theory of writing, as it has evolved throughout the course. In order to take what they’ve learned in the course and apply it in other writing situations, students must not only adopt a metacognitive habit of mind, they must also have a portable writing theory—their passport to the writing curriculum. Each writing situation will no doubt pose its own challenges, but when in possession of such a passport, community college writers will be better prepared to meet those challenges, no matter the genre.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

Given the importance of workplace training in the community college mission, it is worth noting that such a theory could come to good use as students move into the workplace, where written communication and record keeping is commonly expected. Genre knowledge may play a large role for novice nurses, for example, as they come to understand the expectations and constraints of a nursing log or care plan, no matter the clinical location. And an understanding of purpose and audience will no doubt assist budding grant writers, who must fashion a request for funding support in ways that maximize their chances for success. Given that community college students (and, indeed, millennials as a group) are one of the most mobile demographics in higher education, providing them the means to transfer from one learning context to another can be only for the good.

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Supporting Data-Driven Conversations about Institutional Cultures of Writing

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Brandon Fralix, Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Writing and Analysis Program, Bloomfield College

Colleges and universities have long sought to identify ways to improve students’ writing abilities, as communication skills are central to a liberal education. As institutions assess how students evolve as communicators, questions arise from different stakeholders on campus about the role of writing in the curriculum and the most appropriate approaches for supporting student writers. Faculty committees or individual departments ask these questions:

- Are students graduating with the ability to communicate effectively based on a set of outcomes?
- Who decides on the outcomes, and what are the best methods for assessing them?
- Where and how are institutions helping students to meet these outcomes?
- Is it through general education requirements, writing throughout the entire curriculum, or the support of a writing center?

The answers to these and other related questions are the foundation for understanding an institution’s culture of writing. Defining an institution’s culture of writing can be a daunting task, and often this culture can be informed by what transpires at peer institutions or in national conversations. The National Census of Writing (NCW), a database of responses from nine hundred US colleges and universities, serves as a resource for institutions and individual researchers to find data from over two hundred questions related to the administration, teaching, and support of academic writers. The NCW (writingcensus.swarthmore.edu) provides data to help institutions illuminate what is or what could be the culture of writing on a given campus by naming the different sites of writing and highlighting where resources have been allocated to support and develop an institution’s culture of writing. This naming and identification process may raise additional questions on a given campus and in the field as people grapple not only with identifying the different sites of writing, but also with the rationale for the institutional structure surrounding these sites. The NCW can be one space for institutions to look for answers to begin contextualizing these conversations. In this piece, we will introduce the genesis and methodology of the NCW project and discuss how the naming of practices aids in understanding an institution’s culture of writing, which can lead to improved student outcomes.

GENESIS OF A NATIONAL DATABASE ON WRITING PROGRAMS

The NCW project began with the simple task of notating the existing sites of writing at different US colleges and universities. The project met at the crossroads of three discussions: (1) In the book Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges, Gladstein and Regaignon (2012) hypothesized that the approach to writing at Small Liberal Arts Colleges (SLACs) was different from other institutional types, but there were limited comparable data available. (2) We had been involved in discussions about the diversity of membership of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and we questioned what data were available to document the diversity of writing programs and their administrators. (3) Each week we observed people on listservs requesting data they needed for proposals or reports. These three discussions prompted us to adapt a survey used in the SLAC book (Gladstein and
We wanted to create an open-access database that people could utilize in their own work as administrators and researchers. The survey covers eight areas:

- sites of writing,
- first-year writing/English composition,
- identifying and supporting diversely prepared students,
- writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing beyond the first year,
- the undergraduate and graduate major and minor,
- writing centers,
- administrative structures, and
- the demographics of the respondents.

Most empirical writing scholarship has been based on surveys focused on a limited number of institutions (Peterson 1987; Charlton and Rose 2009) or focused on a particular site of writing instruction on campus (e.g., first-year writing, writing centers, or writing across the curriculum programs) (Thasis and Porter 2010; Writing Centers Research Project 2014). By creating one survey that focused on the different administrative, teaching, and support structures around writing, our goal was to put the data for each area in conversation with the others.

After formulating a list of schools through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, we attempted to identify potential respondents to directly send the census invitation in order to avoid the self-selection biases inherent in requesting respondents from professional listservs. To locate these individuals, we searched institutional websites to identify email addresses of campus writing professionals, sometimes finding multiple people administering different aspects of writing on a single campus or sometimes finding no one because that information was unavailable on the website.

Through the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Swarthmore College, we hired an IT firm to design and build a searchable database using the processed data. The database includes an ability to filter the results by Carnegie classification, size, geographic region, and mission (e.g., minority-serving institutions, SLACs, and the Catholic Consortium). These filters allow users to constrain the results to better align with users’ institutional contexts. Some schools provided authorization for a public program profile that allows users to see how a specific institution answered the survey.

We sent the survey to 1,621 four-year institutions and 924 two-year institutions. As responses were returned, we cleaned and processed the data, often sending follow-up emails seeking clarification. Ultimately, we ended up with responses from 680 four-year institutions (a 42 percent response rate) and 220 two-year institutions (a 24 percent response rate). Through our conversations with respondents during data collection and processing, we learned of the difficulties some respondents had when naming the writing practices on their campuses. We found that some of these difficulties relate to how the different sites of writing and the people administering these sites were positioned within the institution and with each other. The naming or categorizing of the sites of writing spoke to the respondents’ relationships with their campus’s culture of writing.

**Naming Practices**

Campuses create taskforce after taskforce and committee after committee to improve student writing; these committees often emerge after at least one stakeholder voices the problem that students at the institution cannot write. The attempts to find a solution, however, are often based on the different conceptions of writing that various stakeholders bring to the process. This leads to repeated and frustrating initiatives that often do not justify the time and resources put into them.

A common step with such initiatives is to identify best practices at other institutions and replicate them. This impulse to examine best practices as potential models belongs in the review process; however, through our work with the NCW, we have found that stakeholders at an institution or within a department also need to be introspective about their practices to identify their culture of writing. To do this, they need to name all the sites of writing—explicit, embedded, and diffused—and the relationships among them. The NCW does not illuminate best practices; rather, it helps institutions and individuals name and contextualize their writing practices, which leads to a better understanding of the institution’s
culture of writing and ultimately to a more efficient and sustainable process for changing that culture.

Multiple times during the data collection and processing stages, we encountered confusion from respondents about the sites of writing on a campus. Unless individuals had direct responsibility for a particular site, they sometimes were unaware of the existence of other sites of writing, or they lacked a basic understanding of the functioning of that site. For example, people may not have known if there was a writing requirement, if there were basic writing courses, or if students had to take writing courses beyond the first year. Obviously, at most institutions it is impossible for an individual to know the ins and outs of each institutional unit; however, writing extends beyond and across multiple units. Depending on the institution, it is a shared responsibility among members of a department, among departments and writing centers, or among all faculty. A working knowledge of how different sites of writing interlock and support each other is the basis for improving an institution’s culture of writing, supporting student writers, and resolving curricular challenges.

Our work on the NCW left us with the question of why different stakeholders lacked knowledge about the various sites of writing at an institution. We found that sometimes there was a complete lack of awareness that different sites exist, but other times this lack of acknowledgement could be traced to how the different stakeholders named or defined a site and how that naming aligned with the naming used in the census. This confusion was most apparent when we asked respondents, “Does your institution have an official writing program or department?” The NCW was originally named the Writing Program Administration (WPA) Census, but when collecting and processing survey results, we learned that respondents positioned themselves in relation to those terms and sometimes opted out of the project because, as they put it, “We don’t have a writing program, so we can’t answer your survey.” From our research on the cultures of writing at SLACs, we had deliberately designed questions to address the fact that some institutions have a less-defined institutional structure for their sites of writing, but we found that some people still responded negatively to the terms “program” and “administration.”

A similar instance of naming conventions revealing a tension within campus cultures of writing occurred when we asked respondents, “Does your institution have a writing across the curriculum (WAC) program or requirements beyond the first year?” Here two people at the same institution may have provided opposite responses, leaving us as researchers perplexed as to how to process the responses. In further conversations with respondents, we learned that with this question, respondents again contested the formality embedded in the term “program.” Some respondents wanted to name and own the fact that faculty do incorporate writing into their courses beyond the first year, while other respondents wanted to be clear that even if faculty embedded writing in their courses, it did not mean the institution had a formal or explicit (and thus funded) program or requirement.

We believe that some of the confusion surrounding respondents’ answers stems from debates within the larger field of writing studies. Questions about naming, best practices, and local contexts are not settled within the discipline, and respondents aware of different trends in the field may have submitted contradictory answers based on their relationships to and knowledge of shifting disciplinary discussions.

**EMERGING CONVERSATIONS**

The NCW bridges local and national conversations by sharing responses to two hundred commonly asked questions about writing programs and centers. Despite the extent of the NCW, the survey itself is not all-encompassing; instead, answering the NCW questions may suggest additional avenues for exploring writing instruction and support on a campus. For example, does responsibility for stewardship of the culture of writing fall to the writing program? If there is also a writing center that is institutionally housed outside the program, how does it work within the current culture? What happens if there is a writing center but no designated program? These questions cannot be answered in a multiple-choice survey, but the NCW raises these questions, rather than answers them, as it attempts to help institutions and the field name their practices.

Sharon Mitchler, a professor of English and humanities at Centralia College, explained her institution’s difficulty with definitions in a recent NCW blog post:

> We struggled to answer the question as presented in the National Census
questionnaire. Of course we are a writing program. We have curriculum review, we have outcomes, we have course outlines, we have professional training, and we have students in writing classes. We talk about how to best implement pedagogical changes. We document changes in students’ progress through our courses. We work with other composition professionals. We gambol and stretch and learn and struggle to empower our students so that they may move on to their next goals as prepared as possible to use writing proficiently and strategically.

However, we do all these things through multiple lenses and structures. We are not using an [institution-wide] writing program to coordinate our actions. So is our fractured structure a way to move most expeditiously to our goals? Would our structure be enhanced by having an explicit writing program that crossed all disciplines and campus hierarchies? What might we lose by changing to a monolithic program? How would it be administered? And would having a single writing program silence those who need writing instruction to occur in particular ways with students who need a finer grained skill set? Who would we be marginalizing? What ways would a single program both provide institutional power and limit the flexibility of the current organization? And lastly, how might this be financed and staffed (re: how the heck do we pay for a director or a partial director when we are all hands on deck to cover the courses we need to teach)?

The NCW does not attempt to answer these questions posed by Mitchler, nor does it want to suggest that all institutions should have a formal writing program or that there is only one way to structure a program. Instead, as the researchers behind the NCW, we argue that one way to define the culture of writing and its stewardship is to look at what currently gets defined as the writing program and if this program includes all sites of writing. If not, why are some sites under the umbrella of “program” while others are separate entities or not entities at all?

As Gladstein and Regaignon state, “the first step toward change is often that of identifying and claiming all the sites of writing on campus. Not only does this give both [writing program administrators] and institutions a full picture of the current relations shaping the local culture of writing, but it also helps bring to light the history of that school's approach and how the current program fits into national conversations” (2012). By all sites, the authors were referring to the explicit, embedded, and diffused sites of writing. Explicit sites are those places the institution has labeled as administering, teaching, or supporting the goals of writing on a given campus (e.g., writing requirements, writing center, director of writing). On the other hand, embedded sites are places where the goals of writing are addressed as an embedded part of a larger unit (e.g., first-year seminar, learning center, chair of a department).

Finally, there are diffused sites where writing takes place across the curriculum, but there is no formal entity in place to organize, direct, and assess what occurs. When documenting spaces where students develop as writers, it may be tempting to focus on the explicit sites of writing and to sidestep the embedded and diffused sites of writing. Bringing these sites of writing to light can be difficult and time consuming and could reveal issues that need to be painfully or expensively resolved. It may seem easier and more efficient to instead focus on the explicit sites of writing and align them with best practices; however, ignoring embedded and diffused sites of writing creates situations where students’ explicit instruction in writing (if any) may be contradicted or countermanded. To get beyond this, it is important to identify and document all sites of writing on campus. Naming all campus writing practices can lead to conversations that reveal the true culture of writing on a campus and will reveal how and where resources may be better allocated to improve student learning.

While collecting and processing data, we heard from respondents that the NCW encouraged different stakeholders on campus to come together to discuss the posed questions. These questions provide language and direction to understand how the various entities develop and support student writers. To ensure that its students can write (a goal of liberal education), a school should recognize its culture of writing, and to do this they need to name and understand their sites of writing. The National Census of Writing helps in this naming process because it identifies the explicit, uncovers the embedded, and shares the results in a national database.

REFERENCES


What makes a writing assignment meaningful for undergraduates? In the Meaningful Writing Project—a study of over seven hundred seniors at three universities: St. John’s University, a private, urban Catholic university; Northeastern University, a private, urban university known for experiential learning; and the University of Oklahoma, a public R1 flagship institution—students described the powerful roles that writing plays in their personal, academic, and professional lives. Our students’ stories run counter to a dominant narrative in US higher education that says students are “academically adrift” (Arum and Roksa 2011), not engaged in reading and writing in the ways that earlier generations seemed to have been. Instead, like others who deem writing to be a high-impact educational practice (Boquet and Lerner 2016; Anderson et al. 2015) and an opportunity for students to draw on and explore all dimensions of their lives (Guerra 2015), we found that students are writing across their undergraduate years, in their majors, in general education courses, in contexts without formal writing requirements, and outside of class, and they recognize that writing is meaningful.

First, we asked seniors from the class of 2012, “What was your most meaningful writing project and why was it meaningful to you?” Study participants also named the faculty who assigned their most meaningful writing projects, and we then surveyed and interviewed those faculty, asking them why they believed students found their assigned project meaningful and how writing “works” in their teaching. We want to note that student and faculty interviews were conducted by undergraduate researchers.

Our findings are grounded in students’ experiences and in their reflections on those experiences, and the findings reveal what we can learn if students’ voices become central to investigations of learning and teaching (see figure 1 for a visual representation of our major findings). In this article and in our book based on this research, The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education (2016), we show that meaningful writing occurs when students are invited to

- tap into the power of personal connection;
- immerse themselves in what they are thinking, writing, and researching;
- experience what they are writing as applicable and relevant to the real world; and
- imagine their future selves.

Our findings are grounded in students’ experiences and in their reflections on those experiences, and the findings reveal what we can learn if students’ voices become central to investigations of learning and teaching.

We also found that faculty who gave writing assignments that students found meaningful often deliberately built these qualities into their teaching and curriculum.

In this article, we offer examples of students’ meaningful writing, emphasizing students’ voices as they describe how and why a writing project was meaningful for them. These examples
are meant to assist faculty in all disciplines who want to create the conditions for their students to have meaningful writing experiences.

RECOGNIZING AND VALUING THE WAYS STUDENTS FIND MEANING

A prevalent theme in our data was that writing projects are meaningful when they offer students opportunities to make personal connections to the topic, the processes, or the genre of writing. Faculty often deliberately cultivated these connections through their assignment design. As one instructor told his interviewer: “In my writing assignment the student is not forced to answer any specific question I pose to them, but rather they are encouraged to seek connections between their own interests and the subject, and subsequently to explore said connection.”

I thought I would see the role in breast cancer. It would be most interesting for me.” In this example and in the next, the writing project connected to students’ passions; their families or community members; their past, present, and future identities; or a combination of these influences.

Neha, a senior anthropology and international affairs dual major, identified herself in our survey as Asian, female, and 18–21 years old. She described her meaningful writing project as a “mini-ethnography I had to do for my Peoples and Cultures class. This was freshman year. And I was looking at hockey fan-culture.” In her interview, Neha tells the story of how she came to the project:

My friend in my dorm, she was really into hockey, and she dragged me to this hockey game early in that semester. . . . I started to like the game, and I really wanted to analyze it though, because I was still a newcomer to it. So it was sort of, kind of like an excuse to watch more hockey. But also, it was just a really cool way to analyze what people did.

While Neha’s personal connection seems at first somewhat for the sake of convenience and, simply, in the interest of spending time with her friend at hockey games, later in the interview she reveals a much deeper layer of personal connection:

It’s partly because it was an anthropology project, so I wasn’t an anthropology major when I took the class, and when I took the class it was just sort of like the pieces of my life fit together. Because I’m Indian and I grew up in an Indian household, but I went to school in a very white town, and it was sort of like a very American thing. I constantly had these clashing cultures. Or maybe not always clashing, but two different cultures, two different . . . values and things and what they expected of me. It was sometimes difficult, sometimes kind of cool. I always sort of felt like really conflicted about it, and I always felt like I had to side with one culture or the other. When I took the class, it sort of made me feel better about my life, and it was just sort of like, “Yes. This validates my life.” In a sort of way it was like I always knew that I had, there were these two different things, but it sort of just made the lines very clear. And so that’s why I switched majors. . . . It was also really cool for me to be able to look at the world through that anthropological lens, that I sort of already had because of living in two different cultures, kind of. It was really a fun experiment for me to do that. For Neha, the meaningful writing project allowed her to confront the tension she had lived with as a person of color growing up in a majority white community. These issues of identity seem on the surface not particularly connected to an ethnography of hockey fan culture, but as Neha reveals in these interview responses, the sense-making she was able to gain about fan culture acted as a lens for reflection on her own cultural experiences.

Neha also noted that her instructor did not play a particularly strong role in helping her craft this paper. As she described, “We knew about it from the beginning of the term, it was one of those that you do it on your own and at the end of the semester you produced the paper.”
From The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education (Utah State University Press, 2016)

- 707 surveys from seniors at 3 schools
- 27 one-to-one interviews with seniors
- 160 surveys from faculty who taught the classes in which students wrote their meaningful writing project
- 60 one-to-one interviews with faculty

**MORE THAN 1 IN 3 STUDENTS** described personal connection as a reason why their project was meaningful

- 52% wrote their MWP in their major
- 17% wrote their MWP in an elective course
- 29% wrote their MWP in a general education course
- 52% wrote their MWP in a required course

For the project you’ve described as meaningful, had you previously written anything similar?

- 21% YES
- 79% NO

For the project you’ve described as meaningful, are there ways in which this writing project might contribute to the kinds of writing you hope to do in the future?

- 69% YES
- 31% NO

**NEARLY HALF** the students surveyed wrote their MWP in their senior year

- 28 STUDENTS went out of their way to say they had no meaningful writing as undergrads

http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/

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The meaning that Neha derived from the project was also not necessarily connected to her professor’s evaluation of that work. She told her student interviewer, “I got a B+ which is actually lower than I had hoped, but I still really liked it.”

**THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF A MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

We learned in our research that some faculty can become so preoccupied with their own assignment expectations that they miss the meaningful experiences students might derive. In our second case study, Steve, an “over 30-year-old” returning student working on a bachelor of science degree in natural sciences who identified himself on our survey as white/Caucasian and male, found the content of his online elective course, Literature of the American West, surprisingly engaging. He told us on our survey, “The significance of this assignment to me was that I gained a heightened appreciation for the values and philosophies of natives and pioneers of the United States.” The post-interview reflection written by the undergraduate researcher who interviewed Steve used the word “stories” seven times to describe Steve’s experience, and the interview itself includes Steve retelling the plots and themes of stories he learned in reading literature of the American West: “It’s fantastic literature. I would actually want to spend more time, take another course, [and] another degree program. Sign me up! . . . It was inspiring. It was absolutely the stories.” Steve was so moved by an Amy Tan story in the course anthology he “ran to the library” to find *The Joy Luck Club*: “I read it. The whole book. She’s an incredible writer. She spoke at the museum and I took my textbook with me and I got her autograph. I had her sign that chapter in the book.”

There is, however, a caveat to “meaningfulness” that Steve mentions in both his initial survey responses and in more detail during the interview. As Steve described it, “No matter what, I just apparently wasn’t able to conform to the professor’s style requirements.” Apparently, Steve, who was used to APA documentation, could never perfect MLA documentation and believes his B grade for the assignment was due to that failing. Even the undergraduate researcher, in her post-interview reflection, noted that “it seemed like the most frustrating aspect to him was the professor focused too much on style rather than content.”

While Steve and his instructor never met face-to-face, Steve seems to have had a rich experience with the material and found the writing assignments clear and open enough that he could explore this new literature even more deeply by writing about it. But the professor’s rigid assessment criteria left Steve feeling as if his professor did not understand how meaningful the course had been for him.

**DESIGNING WRITING PROJECTS TO BE MORE EXPANSIVE, INVITING, AND FUTURE-ORIENTED**

While our previous two case studies might be read as students finding meaning in their writing despite the actions of their instructors, in our next case the student and his instructor co-constructed the meaningful experience as an opportunity to practice writing for future application. This future orientation was a strong finding in our data as nearly 70 percent of all students surveyed felt that the projects they identified as their most meaningful would contribute to their future writing. Many faculty were quite aware of their students’ goals, as one told us, “While [the assignment] is very structured, it allows the student to tap into their altruistic passions to change their world.” Faculty
also hoped students would experience what writing might be like in future settings: “The assignment has real-world applications that ensure that students will be able to use it in their careers as well as in the classroom.”

Erik, a senior finance major who identified himself as Asian, male, and 18–21 years old, described his most meaningful writing project as an exercise in “analyzing the impact of business ethics in today’s economy and society.” That project, written in a required business ethics class he took as a sophomore, was meaningful to him because of its “relevance to today’s ethically volatile and corrupted business practices,” and he said he had never written anything like it before. As a senior completing our survey, he looked back on that project for how it still connected to one of his future goals: “I intend to contribute to the Journal of Business Ethics looking into privacy and social implications in the development of technology and business information systems.”

Erik met with his professor more than ten times during the semester—sometimes right after class and sometimes in the early morning. The student interviewer asked him what the professor did or said in their meetings that helped him see this project through. Erik replied, “He saw my vision, he saw what I was capable of. He asked ‘Why? Why are you thinking that?’”

After an “all-nighter” of marathon drafting, Erik was left with twenty pages his professor asked him to revise down to five pages. He told his interviewer, “I’ve never really had to support my ideas within such a rigid structure, so that was unique, having a framework around my writing.” He continued, saying, “The ability to take the piece apart and analyze it and put it back together and see what was there and what was not there. I think that analytical piece and that businesslike characteristic of his critiques were really important. That’s what translated across all my writing pieces until today.” He also told his interviewer how the work made him feel about his professor: I didn’t like him, to be honest, throughout the whole semester. . . . he pushed me more than I wanted to be pushed. But looking back, it helped me to develop as a business student and gaining a writing style that was not only influential, but really had substance in it. . . . I was more of a creative writer to begin with. Having thoughts and producing entertaining pieces or producing pieces that were analytical and thought-provoking was my nature. But just pairing that style and that passion up with something that was so business centric, that was just an amazing journey.

When the undergraduate interviewer asked Erik what he believes makes a writing project meaningful, he said, “What makes papers meaningful to me is the [professor’s] ability to present a growth opportunity for a student.”

THE FUTURE FOR MEANINGFUL WRITING

We have shown in this article that students find writing projects meaningful when they have opportunities to connect on a personal level, to find meaning beyond the specifics of the assignment itself, and to imagine future selves or future writing identities connected to their goals and interests. We are encouraged by the evidence that the assignments faculty created often provided deliberate opportunities for meaningful learning, unlike Melzer’s (2014) findings that writing assignments across the curriculum are largely relatively brief written responses in exam contexts with the instructor as the sole intended audience.

Overall, we believe what we found in our research is not complicated, but it is also not a simple equation or easy recipe. Meaningful writing happens for a reason, with intentions toward learning coming from both students and faculty, built on a platform that makes writing agentive, relevant, and consequential. Meaning does not reside in students alone or assignments alone but is found at a nexus of opportunities. The kinds of assignments or opportunities offered to students recognize writing as a social act and take place in a socially influenced environment much larger than the assignment. That environment was framed expansively (Engle et al. 2012), optimizing all the points of connection between a student and their opportunity to write. Ultimately, we believe meaningful writing projects reveal how learning, teaching, and writing can become simultaneously more connected to our goals as educators and more connected to students’ own goals as learners.

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REFERENCES


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For the past several years, the United States has seen the legitimate concerns of the working poor and the legitimate concerns of the historically marginalized placed into a destructive opposition. Out of the ferocity this generated, a virulent and powerful rhetoric of racism and sexism has spread over these concerns, distorting their roots and damaging potential solutions. So today, in the United States there is a deep concern about what might happen next. At such a moment we might ask, what can something as simple as the act of writing accomplish? How might writing enable individuals to overcome divides in the project of building a greater whole?

Here is one example worth considering. In the late 1970s, a time of significant economic and cultural transformation in the United Kingdom, when immigration intersected with industrial collapse, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) emerged. Initially, the FWWCP was a small set of writing groups located in London, focused on sharing their writing with each other and finding a collaborative way of speaking about what was occurring in their neighborhoods. From these simple origins, however, the FWWCP grew into an international organization that expanded outwards to the Americas and the Middle East. In the process, it also became an organization that supported hundreds of authors and published close to one million books that expressed its collaborative vision of justice.

Yet here is the most important point about the FWWCP. Each published author, each book, emerged from a local writing group in a local community. These groups worked to bring together all the community elements that were suffering under this great economic and cultural transformation—the dispossessed worker, the recent immigrant, the victims of gender and racial oppression, and many others. In these small, intimate moments of sharing words, of using language to build a new way of understanding across conflict, a recognition of a common humanity emerged—a sense of humanity that bridged divides and created a path forward. From these groups emerged writers, then books, and then local moments of collective activism around literacy education, labor rights, and cultural justice. Given a voice by the power of writing, these diverse individuals formed a collective that fought for a more just and equitable future for everyone.

Today, that struggle continues.

I suggest that one way in which we might use our positions as teachers and as researchers is to join with our local communities to create writing groups which actively seek to draw together those populations that have been asked to see their neighbor as the Other. We should work with communities to establish the conditions in which writing across conflicts can create a new common sense, an inclusive vision that draws out what is common in the name of an expansive collective justice. We then need to ensure that this new vision circulates in the classrooms and in the streets through which we walk every day. This, I believe, is the task at hand and the power of writing.

Finally, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that the world would have continued to be unjust whichever candidate was elected last November. There were clearly stark differences, but our work would not be over in either case. Racism, sexism, and hatred are not new. They exist within the very language in which we speak and the institutions in which that language circulates. Today, our work has become harder, but we do not have to act alone. Indeed, if we expand our vision, our sense of the power of writing, we might find there are entire communities waiting to welcome us into the important work ahead.

Stephen Parks, Associate Professor, Writing and Rhetoric, Syracuse University
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