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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN THE
NINETIES: WE DON'T KNOW HOW
PROGRESSIVE WE REALLY ARE

Michael Steinberg

*Those of us who are engaged in writing across the curriculum
are just beginning to see how radical the issues really are,
and it's a sobering vision.*

— Sam Watson
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

I

In asserting that writing is a vehicle for growth and learning as well as for communication, by stating that language development involves collaboration, community, and exchanges of ideas, and in championing student-centered learning, writing across the curriculum presents content-area teachers and their students with a progressive alternative to the current traditional model of language learning.

Because of its "radical" writing-to-learn philosophy, much of the movement's nationwide support has come from a small but growing segment of innovative teachers and curriculum coordinators who are strongly attracted by its reformist ideas. Here in Michigan several schools, junior colleges, and colleges have in recent years begun their own writing across the curriculum programs. For example, I'm familiar with existing programs in the Alma, Grand Rapids, Holland, Spring Lake,

Portland, Walled Lake, Birmingham, Berkley, and Utica Schools, at Delta, Macomb, Monroe, and Mid-Michigan Community Colleges, and at Michigan Technological University, Madonna College, and Central Michigan University. And I'm sure there are many others that I'm not yet aware of.

As a result of these efforts, writing across the curriculum is starting to stir up some grass roots enthusiasm. My own recent experience bears this out: In the past year and a half, I've gotten a surprising number of invitations from middle school, high school, and junior college curriculum coordinators and department chairpersons to lead writing across the curriculum workshops. In addition to offering participants a blueprint and design, these workshops usually promote a spontaneous enthusiasm and healthy exchange of ideas.

Over a two-three day period, for example, workshop participants and leaders usually spend time composing a series of "writing to learn" activities—informal learning log entries, journal writes, and expressive freewrites—which we then shape and develop into more formal, content-specific writing projects. Over the course of the workshop, many teachers discover—some for the first time—that in addition to using writing to reason and think critically, it's also okay to use writing to discover and express their own ideas. In short, they experience firsthand the power of content-area writing as a means of learning.

Following the workshops, the most avid teachers will form their own after-school writing groups, many of which cut across disciplines and grade levels. Others will begin developing writing to learn activities

for their classes. Whatever the level of involvement, a good number of teachers do return to their classrooms with a renewed enthusiasm for writing and teaching. And in the follow-up sessions, teachers speak, often eloquently, of the dramatic changes in their own and their students' attitudes toward writing.

My experience is not unique. Other workshop leaders testify that the best training workshops generate spirited cross-disciplinary exchanges. And this kind of enthusiasm is consistent with what the large body of contemporary research on language learning tells us: that learning is experiential; collaborative learning promotes more active inquiry; and engaged learners make more connections for themselves.

Given the enhanced learning that teachers and students experience, you'd think that writing across the curriculum would be an idea whose time has come. But that's clearly not the case. The majority of K through college teachers—nationally and in Michigan—still subscribe to the traditional model of language learning. Despite writing across the curriculum's emphasis on inquiry-based learning, many teachers continue to lecture on grammar and mechanics and to rely on workbook exercises and drill; despite the movement's emphasis on growth and development, state agencies and school district administrators persist in measuring students' learning by scores on standardized writing and reading tests.

Nationally, writing across the curriculum has to contend with prescriptive "back-to-basics" and cultural literacy approaches to learning, both of which have been enthusiastically endorsed by the

media and the educational establishment. Unlike these movements, writing across the curriculum does not have a visible product to display as proof that learning has occurred. And without something tangible to show—like a predetermined list of required “classics”—it’s virtually impossible to assess objectively what writing across the curriculum does.

Where, then, does that leave the movement? A grass roots effort founded on change and reform, writing across the curriculum will continue to enlist those creative teachers who are drawn to its unique views. And as the movement grows, its supporters will encounter resistance from educational traditionalists. For example, Stephen Tchudi describes an experience he had while conducting a writing across the curriculum workshop in Colorado. Tchudi tells of a physics teacher at a session who said: “To include good writing in my course, I’d have to change from deductive to inductive teaching,” from “covering the curriculum to letting students do more figuring out for themselves... You’re not asking me to add more writing to my course. You’re asking me to change my whole style of teaching” (22).

In challenging the old deductive approach, Tchudi—and other writing across the curriculum advocates—are critiquing the traditional model of teaching and learning. In effect, then, the movement’s leaders are calling for radical reforms in current institutional pedagogy. Specifically, what they’re advocating is a shift from a teacher-centered, writing to learn approach. As Sam Watson of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte said at a recent NCTE meeting, “Those of us who are engaged

in writing across the curriculum are just beginning to see how radical the issues really are, and it's a sobering vision."

II

If Watson's assessment is accurate (and I think it is), then the movement's leaders have an important decision to make—one that will have a bearing on how the movement shapes its future plans. Given its anti-traditional approach to learning, and given the ongoing conservative climate in education, it seems to me that if writing across the curriculum is to have a hand in shaping present and future learning, it must address this issue: What is the most desirable relationship between writing across the curriculum and current institutional structures?

In an article discussing institutional reform, William A. Reid cites Alasdair C. MacIntyre, who says,

Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise, if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. (12)

MacIntyre's analysis describes the conundrum that writing across the curriculum practitioners must solve. In response, I'd like to cite two recent contrasting scenarios: one is a story of a failed effort, the other of initial success.

First, there's Sam Watson's unsuccessful attempt to develop a writing across the curriculum program at the University of North

Carolina at Charlotte, a state-supported school with an enrollment of over 13,000 students. After years of heading up summer writing projects and developing grass roots faculty training workshops at UNCC, Watson was invited by his school's administrators to coordinate a university-wide writing across the curriculum staff-development program. The program's charge was to create a pilot series of writing intensive courses across the disciplines.

Watson accepted the invitation because he felt that the school's administration was sincere about offering its support. Initially, he had no reason to believe otherwise. The University had already approved his request for released-time and for the funding needed to develop the program. But, just as the training sessions were about to start, the administration reneged on its promise: they denied Watson his released time as well as the money he had requested. When he pressed them for reasons, he was told that too many content-area faculty members opposed having to be trained as writing teachers. The faculty's counter-proposal was to agree to assign more term papers and essay tests.

Instead of building a University-wide writing across the curriculum program, in the end UNCC settled for a series of traditional content/writing courses, the likes of which have existed without reform for the better part of the last century. In response, Watson resigned his position.

In retrospect, it appears that Watson's program did not succeed because UNCC's administration tried to institutionalize what was fundamentally a voluntary, grass roots movement—one that functioned

loosely and autonomously outside the University. As Watson himself later pointed out:

Beyond a certain point, faculty interests and initiatives will die if they receive no institutional response. On the other hand, nothing would kill writing across the curriculum more surely than to have it merely mandated, imposed by administrators on unwilling faculty and by them on unfortunate students.

In the final analysis, the school's administrators, it seems, wanted to get on the writing across the curriculum bandwagon; but when push-came-to-shove, they could not persuade themselves or their faculty to support an alternative, "writing to learn" approach. And that's not an unusual scenario; in my own dealings with large, state-supported institutions, I've found that faculty and internal bureaucracies are very stand-offish when asked to embrace and implement any alternative approach to learning.

On the other hand, at Delta College (a small two-year school in Michigan), a writing across the curriculum program was initiated by faculty within the institution; and it grew slowly through grass roots support. The program began as a credit course taught by Stephen Tchudi and attended by curious volunteers from several of the college's disciplines. In time, Tchudi's workshop class generated an enthusiastic support community. As a result, a few key administrators offered assistance in the form of small grants for pilot programs and limited released time for a few faculty members to do further research. The other teachers in the movement carried the ball from there. After three years of hard work, meetings, and more training programs, the program now has a coordinator (Larry Levy, who is on partial released time). And as of this

Fall, Delta has begun a two-year pilot program of writing intensive courses—to be assessed and evaluated at the end of the two years. Stay tuned.

Although Delta's program is not (and may never become) a college-wide requirement, it has made an impact on the school's curriculum; and it has been instrumental in transforming several teachers' attitudes about using writing to learn in content courses. Both these scenarios suggest to me that writing across the curriculum has its best chance of succeeding inside current institutional structures when and if faculty members initiate the program themselves and administration then endorses and funds it—rather than the other way round.

III

Having participated in several writing to learn start-up programs—institutional and otherwise—I'm convinced that much of writing across the curriculum's appeal has to do with the fact that it is **not** a majority movement. In fact, it may be writing across the curriculum's particular destiny to provide cross-disciplinary exchanges and support communities for disenfranchised and innovative teachers.

I also feel very strongly that the movement's uniqueness and strength lies in its humanness—its emphasis on sharing, collegiality, and on making connections with colleagues across disciplines. Whether or not it becomes a mainstream movement, I believe that writing across the curriculum will continue to appeal to an increasing segment of teachers who understand and need what the movement has to offer—fraternity, support, encouragement, community.

In my opinion, then, the wisest choice for writing across the curriculum's leaders is to resist the temptation to go out and convert everyone—to subvert the educational establishment. Instead of trying to bring resistant teachers and administrators around to its point of view, the movement should devote most of its time and channel its energies into developing liaisons with those who have expressed an interest in its ideas, those who will contribute to the movement's growth, and those who seek its counsel and guidance.

That's not to say that writing across the curriculum ought to withdraw completely from the political arena. Its advocates should continue to promote their position. They should lobby, infiltrate and challenge the educational establishment, and continue to make public their ideals and programs. But, for the movement to have a real chance of influencing future language learning, its leaders need to accept writing across the curriculum (at least for the present) as a minority, alternative approach—and to use that to its advantage.

I feel that writing across the curriculum programs will be more productive if they *don't* compete with current institutional policy. Instead, some immediate projects the movement's supporters can initiate are: school/college in-service collaboration; teacher-training workshops for interested colleagues; pre-college summer reading and writing programs; Young Readers' and Young Writers' workshops; tutorial programs for school and college students; and an annual national conference to expose its ideas to a larger audience of educators.

IV

It's taken almost two decades for writing across the curriculum to gain even a small foothold inside the educational system. And it will take additional time and exposure to its principles before any mass reform in language learning occurs. If and when that time comes, we want to be around to enjoy it. In the meantime, like the Libertarian political party, we need to make sure we're always on the ballot. To ensure that, we need to keep on participating in ongoing pedagogical debates, and we need to keep our ideas always accessible to those who want to consider an alternative view.

In the next few decades, then, I believe that we should keep re-defining our programs, expanding our networks, and mapping our strategies. As the society becomes more pluralistic, it becomes even more urgent that alternative approaches to language learning—like this one—remain as options for interested teachers and students. In short, if writing across the curriculum is to be a catalyst for current and future reform, we need to concentrate our energies on the continual and ongoing development of voluntary communities of language teachers and learners—individuals and groups committed to using language for personal growth and discovery, for inquiry, and for sharing information and knowledge.

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