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# The Five Myths About Writing Across the Curriculum

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In the last 15 years many school districts across the country hopped on the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) bandwagon. For many teachers the ride was bumpy but fruitful as they discovered ways of helping students learn subject area content through expressive writing strategies, such as journals and reading logs (Ross, 1998, 189-90). Students wrote reports in varied formats to real and simulated audiences. Written essay exams and portfolios of their writing assessed their progress.

However, the trip for other teachers was full of potholes. They eventually discarded the writing-to-learn roadway and resorted to rutted paths like worksheets and end-of-the-chapter questions. Students wrote traditional reports to only one audience, the teacher, and multiple choice tests evaluated their work. They copied rather than wrote, took notes rather than made notes.

Part of the reason that these teachers abandoned WAC was a lack of information, misunderstandings, and unsuccessful attempts to implement writing in their classrooms. As a result, a false mythology emerged and, sadly, is still prevalent in many schools. This article attempts to dispel these myths and offer some corrective suggestions.

## **Myth 1. Teachers have to be good writers to adopt WAC**

This myth is manifested by teachers not assigning written work because they lack strong writing skills or have low regard about their own writing abilities. They are deadly afraid to model an assignment or write in the classroom because of a number of factors. First, they believe that exposing their thoughts on paper or on the overhead projector will reveal subject area inadequacies. They fear they cannot meet their own writing expectations and thus may encounter student ridicule. They also dread the lack of control that might occur if they allow students to discuss their writing.

While content area teachers may lack the skills of a professional writer, they still can use writing as a learning tool in the classroom. Just as a teacher does not have to be a filmmaker to use films in the classroom or does not have to be a computer programmer to use computers, teachers do not have to be writers to take advantage of the power of language to generate and communicate ideas. However, teachers need to understand ways to implement writing into their curriculum so they feel comfortable.

While it is not necessary for content area teachers to perceive themselves as writers, their effectiveness will increase if they occa-

sionally write with the students, even if this writing is not polished. Teachers should write at least some of the assignments with the students to know the demands of the assignment and to develop appropriate assessment criteria (Mayer, 1983, 8). Teachers can model thinking through writing without being masters much as athletic coaches or music directors model without being professional artists. The important point is that students see teachers participating in the tasks they require of the students.

### **Myth 2. WAC will turn content area teachers into English teachers**

When subject area teachers hear the word "writing," they often fear that they will have to do all the dirty work of the English teacher. They are not enamored with the prospect of reading 130 essays each week, correcting grammar and spelling errors, and taking home armloads of papers to grade over a weekend. These fears are somewhat justified since these teachers are trained as experts in other content areas and have little or no interest in re-specializing.

James Upton (1994) comments that the selling point of WAC is that content area teachers are not involved in the direct teaching of writing, but in the use of writing (p. 250). The purpose of WAC is not to create a school filled with English teachers. Rather, the goal is to provide subject area specialists with another teaching tool that will help their students learn the class material. WAC strategies are primarily designed to help students generate and discover new ideas, clarify fuzzy thought, and recall and retrieve forgotten notions. They provide ways for students to think about their subject matter and are only secondarily intended to improve students' written communication.


### **Myth 3. Content teachers have to read and grade all the written work**

Probably the most widely held misconception about WAC is that everything a student writes has to be read by the teacher. Some type of grade, comment, star, or point must be assigned to every paper, or the teacher has neglected her duties. Many teachers feel that students will not complete their work without the threat of a grade. However, there are a number of strategies to ease the paper load without jeopardizing student motivation to complete the assignment.

First, teachers might simply evaluate journals, learning logs, and other first-draft pieces of writing for "doneness." Toby Fulwiler (1987) suggests that teachers count pages as a way to determine a grade. If students complete a minimal number of lines they are given full credit for their efforts (p. 28). Teachers read and offer suggestions only for writing that will be revised by the student. They grade only papers that are considered final drafts.

Second, teachers might create response groups in which students read their first drafts to their peers and make comments for improvements according to a rubric you have devised. While students are working in these groups, teachers are given time to conference and discuss the work of individual students.

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Third, teachers can form editing groups that help individuals correct their mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage. Most of the time teachers spend reading papers is actually devoted to correcting these mistakes. For some reason teachers feel that if they don't correct every written mistake, they have betrayed their oath as a good teacher. Parents will vilify their competence if a paper lacks circled words in red ink. In truth, the only person who learns is the one who actually makes the correction. Let the students spend the time.

Fourth, teachers can create alternative ways of assessing papers that will eliminate the enormous frustration and time that it takes to assign grades or points to a paper.

#### **Myth 4. Teachers who use WAC must disregard proper spelling and grammar**

Some expressive writing strategies like journals, logs, and first drafts do not emphasize correct mechanics or form because their purpose is to help students discover and formulate their ideas. Students must generate ideas – lots of them – before they can clarify and correct them. In other words, students need to become fluent before they become precise. These expressive strategies encourage students to compose whole and complete pieces of writing before they have acquired all the technical skills necessary for composing a mechanically perfect sentence or paragraph.

Other WAC strategies strongly emphasize correct grammar and form because their purpose is to help students communicate what they already know. Gordon Clanton (1997), for example, grades the three one-page papers he requires from his sociology students according to rigorous content and organizational criteria (p. 22). Final draft writing tasks demand that the student create a final product that is polished and free of mechanical error. Teachers might incorporate editing groups in the writing process in order to help students correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and usage mistakes.

#### **Myth 5. WAC takes time away from teaching content area subjects.**

One of the most serious concerns of content teachers is their fear that WAC will take time away from teaching their own subject area. Many teachers feel that their instructional day is already cramped with curricular mandates, tests, and incidental interruptions that leave little room for enrichment activities. The thought of planning blocks of time for writing in their class schedule is ludicrous if not simply implausible.

WAC is not another topic that content area teachers must cover in their courses. Rather, it is a method to teach content. By using WAC strategies, a content area teacher spends just as much time teaching their content but elects writing as a way to think about that content. In other words, writing, like simulations, labs, lectures, small groups, films, or field trips, is one of many instructional tools that teachers have at their disposal to make learning more effective for the student. For example, if a biology teacher decides to spend two weeks studying genetics, she may elect to lecture about genes, diagram genes, read about genes, or write about genes in various ways. WAC is merely an array of writing experiences available for teacher use.

Another misconception that is related to this myth is that teachers who buy into WAC have to use it every day or give up other methods of instruction that have worked for them. Many feel that WAC is an all-or-nothing proposition. While some WAC strategies are more successful if used two or three times a week, most may be used once or twice during a semester with great effectiveness.

#### **An Accurate Mythology**

Over the years we have accumulated much evidence that WAC helps students learn. For example, Quinn and Wilson (1997) found that most math teachers felt that writing was beneficial to students' understanding of math concepts (p. 18). In other studies, both students

and teachers reported that writing increases student engagement and encourages active student learning (Harris and Schaible, 1997, 35).

While most educational bandwagon rides only last a short time, writing-across-the-curriculum has stayed on course through the years because it defies the prescriptions of many program and curriculum "fads." The movement has ultimately endured because it empowers teachers to be decision-makers in their classrooms without mandating specific methodologies to the exclusion of best teaching practice.

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