Re-Imagining the Nature of FYC: Trends in Writing-about-Writing Pedagogies

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“[Composition courses] shouldn’t have some gratuitous or incidental content that serve[s] as a kind alibi ‘occasion’ for writing.” – Michael Murphy

“As far as I’m concerned, there’s no looking back; it seems that our discipline has crossed a threshold at which composition as an introduction to writing studies now offers the most compelling pathway” – Andrew Moss

As the introductory chapter of this volume illustrates, the advent of the field of Composition Studies in the 1960s was marked by the emergence of specialized theory- and research-based knowledge about writers, writing, discourse, and textual production. But while that knowledge quickly began to shape first-year composition (FYC) processes and pedagogies, only recently has that knowledge about writing become an explicit focus of study or the subject of students’ own writing in FYC. In this chapter, we describe rationales and goals for making the knowledge of the field the studied content of FYC, and explore this “writing-about-writing” (WAW) pedagogy as an area of cutting-edge pedagogical research in Composition Studies. We begin our review with an overview of rationales for and theory underlying writing-about-writing pedagogy and its goals, and then describe a range of representative curricula. We conclude by overviewing early research regarding suggesting the efficacy of the approach, and suggest directions for further research on writing-about-writing curricula and their impact on Composition Studies.

The Subject and Ethos of Composition Studies
Hang around the discipline of Composition Studies long enough, and eventually (whether in two weeks or two years) you’ll find yourself asking, “Why does it always seem to come back to teaching? Why do we seem unable to unhook the study of writing from the study of writing pedagogy?” We want to begin our chapter, which is on a kind of writing pedagogy that is the study of writing, by posing this question of why Composition Studies seems to be so inevitably, in Joseph Harris’s terms, “a teaching subject.” Doing so lets us offer an argument about the nature of this field you’re beginning to investigate, and it lets us explain how we see “writing-about-writing” pedagogy as an embodiment of the field’s ethos.

Composition Studies is at this point a field nearly 50 years old. Like other academic fields, it has a loosely defined (and continually redefined) set of central questions creating an area of research- and theory-based study. These questions include, *How does writing work? How did a text get to be the way it is? How do writers get writing done? How is writing a rhetorical activity, and how are texts rhetorical discourse? How is writing technological? How is writing learned, and what are better and worse ways of teaching it?* Like other academic fields, Composition Studies (which also goes by Writing Studies, Rhetoric & Composition, Rhet/Comp, and Comp/Rhet) is characterized by paradigmatic waves of thought shifting one to the next, each a strong reaction to (and usually against) the preceding paradigm. Always, these paradigms of thought about writing are expressed foremost in the pedagogies that accompany them. *Current-traditional* rhetoric, with its modernist emphasis on forms of, and form in, writing, was accompanied by writing instruction that focused on formal correctness and theme-based writing. The *process* paradigm, beginning in the early 1970s, focused on
writing as an activity of recursive invention of ideas through pre-writing, drafting, and revising, saw writing instruction turn to emphasize “process over product” and strong expression of writers’ own points of view. With the advent of the social turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers and theorists brought greater emphasis to the contexts in which writing takes place, re-understanding writing not as simply emerging from a writer’s thoughts, but as a response to particular writing situations and audience needs and expectations. Writing instruction in the social turn has been characterized by a focus on textuality, the social nature of language, and the analysis of how texts are culturally constructed and thus constrain writers and readers. Today we see this emphasis evolving in a number of directions, particularly toward a focus on technologies of writing which are making us rethink our understanding of the nature of writing and how it works, and another focus on the politics of writing and literacy, which explores the nature of writing and texts as social and cultural empowerment. The question that drives much of this book is, “What writing pedagogies and supporting pedagogical structures reflect current turns in our theorizing and research?” Our chapter discusses what has come to be known as “writing-about-writing” (WAW) as a response to a longstanding dichotomy between teaching form and content.

But before we directly take up the form and content concerns and the writing-about-writing pedagogy, we want to pause briefly to consider the ethos of the field that, we would argue, has remained unchanged through every paradigm shift so far. The ethos of the field, as we understand it, helps explain why composition scholars continue to dedicate themselves to resolving theoretical and ideological disputes as classroom questions with real material consequences for students. The formation of Composition
Studies was predicated on, and continues to be most defined by, the attitude that the professionals within it take toward writing instruction, writing students, and the role of writing instruction in higher education. We believe this attitude can be summarized (though far from exhaustively) in the following points:

1) a concern for the success of students, as individuals bettering themselves through higher education, including writing instruction (the very formation of the field grew out of an interest in students who were not succeeding; see, for example, the work of Sondra Perl and Mina Shaugnessy);

2) a belief in the abilities of students, a centering sense that students are *already* writers with things to say (Bartholomae; Elbow; Murray);

3) a critique of educational structures, systems, and myths that impeded students as writers, thinkers, and participants in civic life (Berlin); and

4) a conviction that if teachers think more carefully about their work, taking these other starting points into account, that we can improve writing instruction *and* the institutions in which we teach (note the extensive amount of scholarly energy devoted to issues of writing instruction and writing program administration—The Council of Writing Program Administrators and their journal and Outcomes Statement, for example).

Simply put, we understand the ethos of the field as largely resisting *deficit* models of writing instruction, which assume students know little, have poor writing abilities, and need “saving” from “bad writing,” and instead favoring models of writing instruction that give *voice* to students, seeing them as able, engaged, and full of potential as knowers and learners. These convictions seem to partially arise from our developing understanding, as
theorists and researchers, of the nature of writing itself: that writing is not a set of universal, basic, fundamental *skills* that should be easily learned once and for all by the end of high school or the first year of college; but rather that writing is a *rhetorical activity* that is contingent upon the writer’s situation, is imperfectible, and is learned over time and multiple situations (see, for example, the developmental perspectives on writing offered by Beaufort, Carroll, Haswell, McCarthy, Sommers, and Sternglass, among many others).

Composition Studies’ continuing concern with the nature of writing and the success of student writers has led to an argument by some that composition courses can serve as a place where students learn not only “how to” write but how writing works. This writing-about-writing approach stems from decades of debate over what writing is and particularly how or whether the content of writing can be separated from its forms and procedures.

**The Problem of Content and Form in Composition Courses**

Since 1979, Richard Fulkerson has written semi-regular overviews of the state of FYC pedagogy for *College Composition and Communication*. While there are certainly other useful analyses of composition pedagogy, we find Fulkerson’s particularly helpful due to the frame he provides: an outline of what he sees as the necessary components of a theory of teaching writing and a discussion of the various theories currently at play. In a field that so highly values pedagogy, Fulkerson’s attention to a theory of teaching writing seems understandable. He is not alone in arguing that all writing teachers have theories of teaching writing, whether they are aware of them or not. If teachers do not consciously understand and enact their theories, however, students can become confused and resistant
to future writing instruction. These consequences of such teacher mindlessness are important enough that Fulkerson is willing to return to this discussion three times in thirty years.

Fulkerson argues that a full theory of writing must include:

- an axiology (“a commitment about what constitutes good writing” (“Composition Theory” 410),
- a procedure (“a conception of how writers go about creating texts, and perhaps a conception of how they should go about it”) (411),
- a pedagogy (“some perspective about classroom procedures and curricular designs suitable for enabling students to achieve the sort of writing one values”) (411), and
- an epistemology (our assumptions about “what counts for knowledge”) (411).

Fulkerson originally outlines four axiologies (“Four Philosophies” 344-5):

- formalist (writing that values form, including both correctness and style);
- expressionist (expressivist) (writing that values self-discovery or expression);
- mimetic (writing that demonstrates or conveys knowledge); and
- rhetorical (writing that persuades an audience). In his final (2005) overview, Fulkerson details what he understands as a variety of emerging rhetorical approaches: procedural rhetoric, composition as argumentation, genre-based composition, and composition as introduction to an academic discourse (“Composition at the Turn” 671).

In his 2005 article, Fulkerson adds a fifth axiology, critical/cultural studies (CCS), which focuses on helping students analyze and explore issues of culture and power (659).
Three of these axiologies—formalist, expressivist, and rhetorical—do not address the content of student writing but instead focus on what has elsewhere been described as procedural knowledge or craft: how a writer goes about writing correctly or persuasively or creatively. These approaches seem to view the composition course as a content-less skills course. The two approaches that do address content (mimetic and CCS) hint at our field’s inability to resolve the difficult question regarding the relationship of form and style to content. The mimetic approach, which highly values clear reasoning and accurate content, has, according to Fulkerson, “never been common in writing courses. It more usually exists when teachers evaluate essay tests or research papers in their disciplines. Papers with inaccurate information or unacceptable conclusions are then judged seriously inferior” (“Composition Theory” 335). When literature was a common content for composition classes, that focus would certainly have lent itself to a mimetic axiology, but literature was removed from many composition courses with the ascent of the process movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Through the 1970s, 1980s, and well into the 1990s content of composition was commonly understood as “whatever is most interesting to students,” the assumption being that writing courses are about forming arguments or crafting text independent of the content of those arguments or that text.

Fulkerson categorized the CCS axiology that became popular in the 1990’s as a mimetic approach (“Composition at the Turn” 662) and argued that it reflected “content envy on the part of writing teachers,” (663). While this approach seemed as though it might offer a resolution to the form/content dichotomy, Fulkerson argued that it did not. Rather, he felt that such courses nearly always focused on their content (declarative knowledge about culture and power) to the exclusion of focusing on writing or writing
instruction (procedural knowledge about writing). CCS courses require that “students read about systemic cultural injustices inflicted by dominant societal groups and dominant discourses on those with less power, and upon the empowering possibilities of rhetoric if students are educated to ‘read’ carefully and ‘resist’ the social texts that keep some groups subordinated” (659). According to Fulkerson, this approach is appropriate for a writing-intensive history, anthropology, or sociology class, but it is not focused enough on writing to be considered (by him) to be a writing class.

Fulkerson’s analysis, then, seems to suggest that composition has been largely understood as a “skills” course, and that the writing done in composition courses is (except in the case of CCS courses) separated from content because it is understood as non-disciplinary. Fulkerson’s sense of the field suggests an underlying acceptance of the belief that composition courses are, by their very nature, content-less and cannot reflect a mimetic axiology, because the only disciplinary knowledge about which students could write exists in disciplines outside of Composition Studies. According to this view, to demonstrate content knowledge, students would have to write about some other discipline’s content (for example, sociology), but in such cases composition teachers are most often unable to respond to inaccurate or off-the-mark information or conclusions because those instructors lacks expertise regarding the content (in this example, sociology). This separation of content knowledge from writing instruction forces the composition teacher to instead value writing process (for example, number of drafts), adherence to specified forms, grammatical correctness, specified style, or ability to persuade a general audience. While all of these are important aspects of writing, they represent an incomplete set of concerns for a teacher to value. Rhetoric understood more
fully as a unification of content, arrangement, style, and delivery appropriate to various audiences and discourse communities appears to be unattainable in a composition class where any content and form are allowable but the teacher’s expertise regarding all the possible content and forms is realistically limited.

What Fulkerson’s analysis suggests to us is that compositionists have not recognized our own disciplinary knowledge as a possible content for FYC courses. Our understanding of FYC as a “skills” course has continued to instantiate a separation of form, content, style, and process despite the fact that much of our recent research suggests such separation is not effectively possible (Russell). Is it possible for students to write about a content (declarative knowledge) for which the composition teacher is a qualified reader and which also won’t detract from but instead stress the writing-related (procedural) knowledge that should be the focus of a writing course?

Recently, we have been among those developing research, theory, and curricula that treat FYC as a content course in the specialized knowledge of Composition Studies. This approach diverges from those that Fulkerson outlined by positing the content of Composition Studies as a possible content for the composition course. Rather than write about any topic, for example, students in such Writing-about-writing courses consider writing itself as a topic to consider. In particular, Writing-about-writing approaches ask students to consider their own relationships to writing, their lives as writers, and how some relevant Composition Studies research can help them change both their conceptions of writing and their writing practices. When we wrote about this approach in College Composition and Communication in June 2007, we gave a number of rationales for it, including the desire to change students’ “understandings about writing, and thus change
the way they write” (Downs and Wardle 553). We reasoned that learning about writing would change students’ conceptions of, approaches to, and processes of writing by putting content, form, and process in harmony rather than constant tension. Our initial pursuit of this pedagogy was sparked by the needs of our own students and our concern that the common forms of FYC we had been trying to enact did not appear to be resulting in transferable knowledge about writing (556-7). Over time we both came to believe that some of the knowledge of our field might be helpful for students to read and consider directly. In other words, we began to feel that composition courses could serve as introductory “content” courses (554) in much the same way that introductory courses in other disciplines do.

Since that article, our own understanding of the potential of a Writing-about-writing approach has grown as we have attended and helped facilitate a number of Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) SIGs (Special Interest Groups), participated on a listserv for those using the approach, worked with others to facilitate a CCCC workshop on the approach, chartered the Writing-about-writing Network (WAWN) with founder Betsy Sargent, and created a related Ning with David Slomp. Our approaches have been enriched through dialogue between the many compositionists around the country who use Writing-about-writing—some who have been quietly doing so for decades.

In the remainder of our chapter we will discuss the goals and rationale for the approach, describing how it attempts to overcome the form/content and procedural/declarative knowledge dichotomies, and what we know so far about whether the outcomes for the courses match expectations. Much of the discussion and work
around this approach has yet to see publication, so our discussion here draws largely on the working groups mentioned above, as well as a small survey we conducted of those using Writing-about-writing.

**Goals for WAW Approaches**

Those using Writing-about-writing speak of intertwining goals for students and the field of Composition Studies. We begin here with the three central goals survey respondents and colleagues state for students, perhaps best summarized as a desire to create a *transferable* and *empowering* focus on *understanding writing as a subject of study*.

**Understanding Writing as a Subject of Study**

Faculty using the WAW pedagogy generally understand it in some way as a means to address the age-old FYC problem of trying to teach students “to write” without a content and common knowledge base and without working on many genres in transactional contexts (see Joseph Petraglia’s edited collection, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* for more extensive discussion of this issue). In her response to our survey questions, Kathleen Yancey, current editor of *College Composition and Communication*, noted that composition courses often “treat content as though it doesn’t matter, but logically it must.” While most of the approaches that Fulkerson outlines seem to accept the notion of composition as content-less skills course, Writing-about-writing pedagogies actively resist that conception. Michael Murphy, Director of College Writing at SUNY-Oswego, responded to our survey questions by arguing that composition courses “shouldn’t have some gratuitous or incidental content that serves as a kind of alibi ‘occasion’ for writing.”
In a WAW class, the subjects of students’ writing are issues and questions related to writing, discourse, and literacy, in genres appropriate to their local learning objectives. They build common experiences and knowledge about writing that prompt them to actively learn more; their teachers, with expertise on writing as a subject, serve as better readers than they can on subjects they know less about. Students share what they learn with others, in forms appropriate to their ends—blogs, letters, conference and poster presentations, even articles for publications.

Debra Dew, Director of the Writing and Rhetoric Program at University of Colorado-Colorado Springs and co-editor of the *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*, noted in her survey responses that the WAW approach “sets up writing tasks and contexts with content-intensive experiences.” By providing a relevant subject of study that helps students reflect on the very “skill” they are meant to learn, students can understand the study of writing as a form of intellectual work. As such, FYC can, as Heidi Estrem, Director of the Writing Program at Boise State University, said in her survey response, “complicate something (writing) which many [students] see as only a skill.” Yancey describes the WAW content as a way of teaching not just procedural but also declarative knowledge, helping students gain “an understanding of composing that explains their current practices in the context of a theory of composing. The goals of the course thus include key concepts and their relationships in addition to successful practices and texts.” Given the complexity of this issue, we think it is worthwhile to provide an extended example here of one way this works.

We both ask our first-year students to complete an auto-ethnography of their own writing processes. This assignment requires that they talk-aloud and record themselves in
a natural setting while writing a paper for a class. They then transcribe their own protocol
and code it, using as a starting point a code the class invents together after reading studies
by scholars such as Sondra Perl, Nancy Sommers, and Carol Berkenkotter. Coding
categories might include “lexical revision,” “conceptual revision,” “writing without
planning,” “re-reading,” and so on. The students might discuss the form their papers
should take, debating whether the task is entirely writing-to-learn and thus can take the
form of an informal reflection, or whether it is also a learning-to-write activity preparing
them to write about research in a more formal way. The students draft their papers in the
genres agreed appropriate by the class, read and respond to one another’s drafts in a
structured workshop, and then revise for teacher feedback, which leads to grading in the
end-of-semester portfolio.

In our view, the assignment represents a unification of three of the axiologies—
expressivist, mimetic, and rhetorical. One purpose of the assignment is clearly to promote
greater self-awareness and self-knowledge, an expressivist goal. But another purpose is
mimetic—to use the terms and concepts in the course reading to help analyze and explain
data. A third goal is rhetorical—to learn to write about research in ways that might be
helpful in future writing situations. The style and genre are discussed at length, and
students sometimes write quite innovative and alternative types of texts. The topic of the
assignment is writing process, the readings are about writing process, and course
pedagogy models a potential writing and revision process. The content is integral to the
writing and learning, rather than gratuitous, to recall Fulkerson’s taxonomic concerns.

Some critics of Writing-about-writing worry that the WAW approach teaches
declarative content about writing to the exclusion of procedural knowledge, or “craft.”
However, all of the WAW pedagogies we have seen, including our own, incorporate both. The focus on writing as content works seamlessly with discussions of craft, style, and revision, as we hope the above example illustrates. Doug Hesse, Director of the Writing Program at University of Denver and former Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, has argued that this approach does not allow for “writers [to] gain the floor by creating interest, through the arts of discourse” (41). We wonder, however, whether it is ever possible to teach the “arts of discourse” (understood as style and craft) independent of content. How do writers know what sorts what stylistic options are usefully available to them unless they know to whom they are writing, about what, and under what circumstances? Discussing writing as craft and procedure as well as content adds another layer of rigor and complexity to the discussion, while allowing students to make empowered and informed choices about their uses of discourse.

Hesse also suggests that placing writing at the center of a writing course creates a course in which student writing is “disciplined,” only allowing rhetors to “develop given topics along approved trajectories” (41) rather than allowed to be limitlessly creative. The emerging WAW pedagogies we have seen and implemented ourselves seem to suggest two things: first, that WAW classes are not at all limiting in either their topics or their trajectories; any meaningful genre, form, writing-related content, and medium can make an appearance in a WAW class—as they are relevant to the learning outcomes related to writing; since all writing classes inevitably have desired learning outcomes, the WAW approach is no different in this regard. However, because students in WAW courses are learning about the nature and possibilities of writing, they inevitably explore many content- and craft-related possibilities, perhaps more than they would in a traditional
composition class. Second, however, it seems to us that it is important not to conflate understanding that disciplinary conventions exist and how/why they work with forcibly “disciplining” or limiting student writing. As post-process and genre theorists have noted (CITED CLARK AND HER PROCESS CHAPTER AND THOSE PEOPLE HERE), knowledge about how texts work is empowering rather than limiting. Knowledge about how stylistic conventions and disciplinary genres work does not mean that writers are limited to using those; rather, such understanding allows writers to recognize what the expected options are and how to use them if they choose—or how to resist them usefully if they choose.

**Transfer**

Many WAW teachers express dissatisfaction with students’ transfer of learning from traditional composition courses to other writing contexts, and anticipate that WAW courses will significantly improve such generalization. Laurie McMillan, for example, argues that “students are more likely to transfer what they’ve learned if they’re not only practicing writing in first-year comp but also constantly reading and reflecting on writing/composition research.” Some respondents, such as Scott Warnock, Director of the Freshman Writing Program at Drexel University, distinguish between different probabilities of transfer: “While we may not be able to teach students transferable writing skills, we can provide them with transferable writing knowledge that they can take with them to help them work through any writing/communication assignment.” As different writing situations offer different answers, the transferable knowledge is not the answers but the questions—not “how to write” but how to ask about how to write.
Transfer research has suggested that meta-awareness is one means for encouraging transfer (e.g., Beaufort, Perkins and Salomon), and rhetorical understanding and metacognition are explicitly stated aspects of every WAW approach we have seen. Work on reflection, including Yancey’s *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, as well as genre and activity theories seem to have been influential in encouraging this focus on metacognition. Estrem points out that “Genre theory . . . gives us a framework for talking about writing—and, importantly, for doing *lots* and *lots* of reflection and meta-talk/writing.” The fieldwriting that students do in Shannon Carter’s approach is one way of reaching this end: Carter, Co-Director of the Converging Literacies Center at Texas A&M University-Commerce, wants students to develop a metacognitive awareness—which she calls *rhetorical dexterity*—“necessary to negotiate a variety of different writing tasks in a variety of different rhetorical contexts.” Moss also hopes to help students acquire this rhetorical dexterity specifically within the university: “Writing-about-writing seems to offer students more direct, more explicit understandings of how writing and academic inquiry are interrelated. It provides them with a framework for understanding how writing works within the activity systems of a university. And it offers students sustained exposure to the texture and feel of academic writing—the language and rhythms of different kinds of academic prose.”

Having students learn concepts rather than general rules is also a road to transfer, and the rhetorical focus of WAW lends itself to such conceptual learning. McMillan says that in her class, “students end up seeing this as a particular genre of writing with particular conventions . . . associated with it rather than getting the sense that one set of Rules exists for all occasions.”
Critics of the WAW approach rightly wonder whether research will bear out the hopes regarding transfer (Kutney). Research to test transfer from WAW classes has begun, but is still in early stages, since such research is longitudinal and will take a number of years to conduct. The forthcoming work of David Slomp, et al on transfer from WAW classes mirrors and complicates Wardle’s earlier transfer findings: cultivating meta-awareness about writing is necessary but not sufficient for transfer. Other “contextual…and interpersonal factors” must be in place beyond and alongside composition courses in order to encourage transfer (18). Dan Frazier’s recent discussion of transfer and WAW pedagogies suggests that transfer may hinge on “bridge” moments during and between courses.

We feel optimistic that the WAW courses are carefully designed for transfer in a way that traditional composition courses are not. However, if transfer researchers are correct in their belief that transfer depends not just on the initial learning environment but also on appropriate subsequent learning environments, then we may be frustrated in our pursuit of transfer until we can study WAW curricula within a carefully integrated vertical curricular experience.

*Student Empowerment*

WAW proponents as a group seem greatly concerned with student empowerment. They want students to have what Barbara Bird, Director of the Writing Center at Taylor University, describes as “greater control over and investment in their learning/knowledge construction” and they want students to be what Heidi Estrem calls “the primary knowledge-makers and contributors.” Most of those who responded to our survey see their WAW approaches as ways of helping students draw from their own literacy and
writing experiences and research to generate real writerly authority. Andrew Moss, Coordinator of the Composition Program at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, notes that this pedagogy demands the same student engagement as that sought by critical theorists such as Ira Shor, whose *Empowering Education* Moss finds useful in understanding what values, attitudes, and experiences students and faculty bring to classes.

In this regard, the WAW and CCS approaches have common ends, though they might be viewed as in opposition due to their differing sense of the source of student empowerment. In the WAW approach, the content and methodology of the course itself is seen as the source of empowerment; in other words, students are empowered to better understand themselves as writers and users of language because the course treats them as authoritative speakers and asks them to own and take control of their own literate experiences, expertise, and questions. The CCS approach tends to work toward empowerment by having the teacher instruct students to write through and write about issues of empowerment.

**Hopes for the Field**

Composition Studies has a long and embattled history (THAT I HOPE KELLY AND PAUL WILL COVER IN THE INTRO CHAPTER). After a long tradition of rhetoric as the foundation for Western education, that approach faded in favor of one or two composition courses primarily imagined as remedial skills courses. This course led to research about composing and the re-emergence of rhetoric as a field of study. However, the FYC course and many of those who chose to study in the emerging field of Composition Studies were often housed in English departments that did not allow these
emerging scholars autonomy over their own courses. For a variety of political, practical, and disciplinary reasons, composition courses have proven difficult to change. They are often taught by adjuncts and graduate students with little if any training in the field of Composition Studies, a situation that re-inscribes the understanding of those courses as “remedial” “skills” classes that almost anyone can teach.

Most teachers and administrators advocating a WAW approach share a common goal for the field of Composition Studies: that by bridging form and content in FYC, the field itself might find sounder footing in the academy. Yancey notes that such an outcome is best seen as “a benefit, not the purpose” of WAW approaches. But survey responses like Dew’s make a powerful case (as she also does in her 2003 *WPA* article detailing her WAW curricula) for this possibility: “We frame the course as an entry-level disciplinary experience—not as the FIRST course in the major as in a sequence that leads to a rhetoric/writing major, but rather as a discipline-specific experience in rhetoric/writing theory [content] and practice [skills]. All fields work in both content and skills domains, and hopefully, they all will assess their efficacy in like manner.”

Explaining why framing FYC as a disciplinary experience seemed to her to be a logical next step for the field, Dew told us, “I reviewed FYC texts to better discern WHAT content we could have them work with—I saw *myself* and *ourselves* in these books—language, rhetoric, writing—our content and our skills appeared everywhere. However, we were not naming the work as ours. I decided to reframe the content that was already within our WPA outcomes, to make it visible and integral.” In other words, we have the disciplinary knowledge, but we have not publicly claimed it *as such*, and in that choice have lost a key source of credibility in the academy and with our students. Framing what
we know as disciplinary knowledge helps us gain authority to structure writing courses in ways that make sense given results of our research about writing and writers.

Warnock points out that there are benefits for teachers, too, in moving to a WAW approach because such an approach “provides us with a disciplinary foothold, helping to professionalize our faculty and the composition program.” Such professionalization might help in our fight to improve working conditions for our teachers—an argument Dew has made repeatedly and eloquently. The results of early WAW assessment at the University of Central Florida (UCF) did aid in professionalizing the composition faculty, persuading the president to provide funding to convert all part-time and visiting composition lines to full-time positions so that faculty could participate in ongoing training and professional development.

Framing composition as a class about writing and as only one of many writing opportunities necessary for students to grow as writers also helps to change inaccurate conceptions of writing and make a case for writing across the curriculum programs. Such was the case at UCF, where the success of the WAW course was framed as only a necessary entry point to a vertical curriculum. This argument resulted in new funding to begin a writing across the curriculum program (see “New Writing Department Goal”).

**Curriculum Descriptions: Ways of Writing-about-Writing**

While writing-about-writing adherents share many common goals, pedagogical possibilities for reaching those goals are nearly endless. While these curricula all are defined by making the knowledge of the field the studied and written content of the course, approaches around the country and even within programs are increasingly
diverse. New teachers are often interested in knowing what WAW looks like. Here we want to emphasize that WAW can take many shapes. To be practically useful to new teachers, however, we will offer some examples of common ground shared by many WAW approaches, some ways in which WAW approaches differ, and then three sample “models” that demonstrate these variables in action.

**Common Ground**

WAW curricula generally imagine first-year students as smart, capable, and experienced, not *tabula rasa* or in deficit. As the goal of empowering students suggests, WAW demands a belief in students’ ability to highly achieve. Bird, for example, has designed a demanding WAW curriculum specifically for basic writers, and has argued eloquently that such writers can and do rise to the challenge. The curricula in our survey responses set a high bar; everyone seems to be working in the spirit of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading*, a curriculum and textbook that became popular in the late 1980s (and remains so today), recognized for its rigor and emphasis on placing authority in the hands of students. WAW curricula similarly assign difficult reading and expect that students can handle complex texts when given appropriate scaffolding and support.

Readings from Composition Studies is a second and related defining feature of WAW curricula. Readings, foremost, convey the content studied in the course. Beyond that, readings model the genre-related and intellectual moves of the academic discourses on which many WAW approaches focus. The readings also provide a platform for teaching strategies for reading intellectually challenging, complex, scholarly texts. In
each instance of WAW in specific courses, at least those of which we are aware, these texts are at the center of the pedagogical approach.

Perhaps due to the WAW goal of transfer, these curricula place a high value and emphasis on metacognition and reflection, based on the premise that helping students become mindful of their assumptions and practices of writing and reading will yield greater control and better strategies. The WAW curriculum with which we are familiar all stress reflection and use a variety of writing assignments, from literacy narratives to journaling to portfolio reflections, to prompt it.

Finally, we note that many (but not all) WAW writing assignments are analytical and/or research-based. WAW courses emphasize interaction with texts that are themselves focused on writing and literacy, as well as interaction with a variety of actual scenes of writing. After reflective writing, the most common writing assignments are ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, interview reports, and other research reports in which students have observed some site of writing or literacy and analyzed or theorized it.

The shared overall goal among WAW variants seems to be to change students’ awareness of the nature of writing and literacy in order to shape the way they think about writing, with the expectation that how they write may change in turn. Toward this end, students in these courses engage a variety of sophisticated texts focusing (in writing) on writing and literacy, reflecting on their experiences and finding relationships and patterns between those and their reading. They often study some aspect(s) of writing and literacy in greater depth, relating the material and ideas presented in the course to actual scenes of writing and literacy.
Dimensions of Variation

While there is common ground across WAW pedagogies, there is also substantial variation. These variations include:

- The particular angle or perspective a course takes—what subjects it prioritizes and how student research is focused (if the course includes research);
- The end of student learning emphasized—a primary focus on personal growth versus a primary focus on contribution to the field;
- Types and number of readings;
- Types and number of writing assignments;

The most obvious distinction among WAW curricula is that they may focus on writing and literacy from distinctly different angles. We see remarkable blends of subject matter, making it difficult to generalize without misstating what happens in courses. We can, though, distinguish three categories of approaches developing. The first focuses on literacy and discourse, how writing and language demonstrate community membership. The second focuses on Writing Studies itself—the existence of the discipline *qua* discipline, with its knowledge and expertise on writing, emphasizing rhetorical theory and its resultant strategies for writing. The third focuses on the nature of writing and writers’ practices. While these approaches ultimately focus on much the same ground, they do so through significantly different lenses. Other approaches, like the one at UCF, try to cover all of this ground by teaching “units” with particular declarative knowledge that must be covered.
Another predictable source of differentiation among curricula is readings. These, of course, vary by curricular focus, as well as by the length of the course and how instructors decide to interweave readings with writing projects. Broadly speaking, we saw all of these kinds of readings in the survey: empirical research and theory on writing, writers’ accounts on writing, empirical research and theory on literacy, literacy narratives and biographies, and even traditional textbooks integrated with scholarly and professional readings. Many WAW classroom also assign student writing as classroom texts. In our own classes, for example, students read former students’ work, as well as selections from the national undergraduate rhetoric and composition-focused journal Young Scholars in Writing and local UCF student journal, Stylus.

While there is similar variation in writing assignments, some assignment-types are quite common. For example, many courses assign a literacy narrative. Within the common category of reflective writing, a variety of assignments are given, the most popular being some form of reading journal. Most courses have students analyze readings in some way, most often through summaries, analyses, and responses. Writing with sources is almost universal, whether in short or long texts. Many courses use varieties of writing to support a research project: research proposals, bibliographies, literature reviews, summaries, presentations. Courses which included primary research tend most often toward interviews (with professionals and others, on the writing they encountered) and ethnographies, though some did not specify methods. And, as noted earlier, there appears to be great diversity in what students actually write about. If it has to do with writing, literacy, language, rhetoric, reading, communication, argument, persuasion, or
the cultural functions or implications of any of these, a WAW curriculum has students researching and writing about it.

To offer a concrete sense of ways these variations can combine, we offer overviews of three possible curricula to consider as potential models for future WAW-focused FYC classes, one representing each of the three major approaches that we find represented in our survey—literacy/discourse, language/rhetoric, and writing/writers’ practices.

**Example 1: Literacy/Discourse**  
*Shannon Carter, Texas A&M-Commerce*

Carter’s English 100-101-102 sequence is a mostly program-wide writing-about-writing curriculum based on ethnographic inquiry into in-school and out-of-school literacy practices—“the shape and function of literacy as place-based, people-oriented, and socially-mediated activity rather than an autonomous, neutral, standardized, portable skill-set.” Stated objectives in the syllabus include building researched academic arguments, awareness of the influence of context and audience on writing, rhetorical flexibility to negotiate various academic tasks leading to researched argument, an awareness of how research can be influenced by researchers’ subject positions, and the creation of effective written reports of research findings. Students read work by Brandt, Moss, Mirabelli, Barton and Hamilton, and Resnick, among others, and the 102 course then “invite[s] them to contribute to this ongoing scholarly conversation through their own ethnographic inquiry, including extensive field observations, interviews, and secondary research.” Students write three 3-5 page assignments that build to an ethnographic project of ten to fifteen pages that may include text, aural, visual, and video
components. The first assignment has students test Brandt’s notions of literacy sponsorship against their own experiences; the second has students explore literacy in place; the third has them explore relationships between out-of-school and in-school literacy practices. Students usually draw their large ethnography project from one of these shorter assignments. The course stresses the content of the field as the content of a field, focuses directly on changing students’ conceptions of writing, and emphasizes primary, contributive research to the field. There is mild emphasis on transfer; the curriculum gives little attention to disciplinarity or writing for other disciplines. Ultimately, the course seeks to “work against the literacy myth” that require many writers to adopt notions and processes of reading and writing “that run counter to what research tells us about how literacy functions in the world and approaches ‘expert writers’ take when engaging in meaningful writing tasks.”

**Example 2: Language/Rhetoric**  
**Debra Dew, University of Colorado—Colorado Springs**

Dew’s *Rhetoric and Writing I: Academic Reading and Analytical Writing* is required campus wide and is the only authorized curriculum, which Dew sees as accomplishing disciplinary work: “The course . . . sets the disciplinary parameters for what rhetoric/writing is on campus and beyond.” Students read rhetorical theory that gives them working concepts of rhetorical situation, appeals, stasis, and writing process; and then readings on language, including rhetorical performances (e.g., King, Standing Bear, Anzaldúa, Lincoln, Roosevelt), literacy autobiographies (e.g., Rodriguez, Baldwin, Tan), and essays that “define ethical and unethical language strategies and practices and complicate rhetoric conceptually” (e.g., Hirshberg, Huxley, Gerberg on propaganda and
advertising). Along with journal responses to readings, students compose four analytical documented essays with various aims: connecting the claims of a course reading to another text (film, advertisement, or video); positioning an argument within the ongoing discussion of a language issue; rhetorical criticism of a reading. Dew’s curriculum is concerned that students recognize the study of rhetoric and writing as a discipline, which inherently carries some emphasis on changing students’ conceptions of writing and showing disciplinary differences in writing (though these are not main emphases). No explicit attention is devoted to transfer, conducting primary research, or writing to contribute to the field. Rather, the course positions students primarily as writing-to-learn.

Example 3: Writing/Writers’ Practices
Laurie McMillan, Marywood University

Laurie McMillan, Writing Coordinator at Marywood University, teaches a version of Writing-about-writing that fulfills her institution’s sole FYC requirement. It is specifically focused on promoting transfer of knowledge gained in the class through metacognition, reflection, and explicit discussion of writing processes and practices. Students read selections from Wendy Bishop’s *On Writing: A Process Reader*, and work through three units in the course: Why Write?, How Writing Works, and Joining the Conversation (researched argument). They first focus on purposes and kinds of writing, with attention to style; their writing includes an e-mail to the professor and an interview narrative. They then explore more writing research and foundational concepts of writing, developing a comparative rhetorical analysis and a midterm reflection. The third unit, occupying the second half of the course, guides students through an extended research process, from proposing a research question to presenting findings. The course does not
heavily emphasize the disciplinary nature of academic writing, and its attention to changing student conceptions of writing as a specific project is limited. Rather, it stresses the content of the course as the content of a scholarly field, something that students themselves can contribute to through primary research. Transfer remains the central goal: McMillan hopes that “by practicing writing in a very self-conscious way, student writers will improve in their ability to write effectively as they face new writing situations.”

Conclusion

Anne Beaufort, in her recent book championing a writing-focused approach in composition, argues, “Freshman writing, if taught with an eye toward transfer of learning and with an explicit acknowledgement of the context of freshman writing itself as a social practice, can set students on a course of life-long learning so that they know how to learn to become better and better writers in a variety of social contexts” (7). Teachers pursuing WAW pedagogies are working to bridge the content/form/process gap that has plagued FYC since its inception. In most cases, they are asking students to read and write about writing concepts themselves as a way to help them learn “how to learn” to continue to grow as writers. Proponents of WAW pedagogies enact curricula that suggest it is possible for students to write about a content for which the teacher is a qualified reader and which stresses rather than detracts from the writing-related knowledge that should be the focus of a writing course. It would be unrealistic to assume that WAW approaches mark the end of fragmentation and change regarding first-year composition courses. What WAW does seem to mark, however, is a recognition of our disciplinary history and
an assumption that our disciplinary knowledge can and should be shared with students in meaningful ways.

We are only beginning to see how well long-term assessments suggest that WAW approaches overcome some other longstanding problems with composition courses. Are WAW courses more effective in their desired ends than traditional courses? And do they better encourage transfer of writing-related knowledge to other situations? Recent end of semester portfolio assessment results at the University of Central Florida comparing WAW to traditional composition sections suggest that the WAW curriculum can result in positively quantifiable differences in learning outcomes. For example, students in WAW sections had significantly higher scores than students in traditional section in the transfer-encouraging behavior of self-reflection (2.89 mean out of 4.0 for WAW students vs 0.52 for traditional students), demonstrated greater levels of global revision (2.07 mean for WAW students vs 1.52 for traditional students), and had higher scores on ability to rhetorically analyze difficult texts (2.71 vs 1.12) and demonstrate college-level thinking (2.61 vs 2.37) (for more on these assessment results, see Wardle and Nickerson). Whether these gains will result in better transfer remains a difficult and intriguing question, as the early transfer studies discussed previously indicate. Most reasonably, the research that informs writing-about-writing approaches suggests that one course will never be sufficient to teach students to write and about writing. At best, WAW approaches serve as a more solid foundation to vertical writing experiences within and outside the university than traditional composition courses. Integrating writing-about-writing composition classes with rigorous writing across the curriculum experiences and
supportive writing centers seems to us to be the most likely to result in college graduates who can demonstrate Shannon Carter’s desired “rhetorical dexterity.”

Additional Works Cited in this Revision
Wardle, Elizabeth and David Nickerson. “Examining the Impact of an Outcomes-Based Writing-about-Writing Pedagogy on Quality of Student Portfolios.” Under review, September 2010.