

How to Apply Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Philosophy in Your Classroom*

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Faced with a wave of eager college students deemed insufficiently literate, the American educational elite of the late 19th century devised a remedy: freshman comp. Within a couple of decades, the teaching of grammar, composition, and rhetoric—once integral to a classical education—was consigned to a single course and a single faculty, the English department. A hundred years and a few paradigms later, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs are flourishing on college campuses as faculty in most disciplines regain the idea that written expression and correctness figure prominently in the success of their students. WAC programs are designed to support all faculty who want practical, sound ideas for adding or keeping writing in their courses. They typically offer seminars and forums, newsletters, and one-on-one consulting that deal with making assignments, grading papers, training T.A.s, or even designing new courses. While freshman comp remains a fixture on open-admissions campuses, WAC programs provide much needed balance to a curricular tradition that has been, in some ways, stacked against the best interests of the 21st century student.

Although The University of Montana does not have a formal WAC program, most of the necessary elements for one are in place. Any UM faculty member can participate in the WAC movement by taking a few simple steps:

Consider your writing assignments. There is an art to making good writing assignments but there is also a reward. Faculty who are not accustomed to making writing assignments might tend to fall back on prototypes—e.g. the open topic research paper, essay, literature review, or abstract—and expect students to know these genres as well as they do. When the underdeveloped or poorly organized papers come in, it is easy to decry the ignorance of the students. But it is better to ask how the assignment could be improved to elicit the result desired. For concise tips on improving writing assignments, go to <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/> and click on “How can I avoid getting lousy student papers?” and “What makes a good writing assignment?” Clarity of purpose, audience awareness, and adequate detail in the assignment model these virtues for the students.

Share the workload. As in other famously complex tasks, it takes a village to shepherd a student toward better written expression. The WAC ideal relies on villagers, working occasionally with specialists, to teach the varied expectations of the academic community. UM has several programs that stand ready to offer faculty help that is tailored to an individual course. Among these are:

The Mansfield Library liaison librarians www.lib.umt.edu/about/policies/cii.htm
The Writing Center www.umt.edu/writingcenter
UM Online <http://umonline.umt.edu/FacultyInfo>
The Center for Teaching Excellence www.umt.edu/cte

When faculty work with any of these programs they reduce their workload, improve the effectiveness of their instruction, and demonstrate to their departments that they are actively working on becoming informed, engaged teachers.

Stop grading all writing assignments. Faculty frequently draft books, articles, reports, proposals, lectures, syllabi, notes, letters, lists, and email messages that do not result in formal publication. This may make them overlook the degree to which they create their disciplinary expertise through unfinished writing. Students, too, can learn to make sense of data through informal, non-graded writing that gives them the habit of writing to discover what they do and do not understand. While it may be disconcerting at first to ask students to write without the threat of a grade, doing so teaches that writing is a valuable way to organize experience and not just an end in itself. A superb list of ungraded write-to-learn activities for any classroom is available at the Colorado School of Mines website, www.mines.edu/Academic/lais/wc/wac/effective/writelearn.html.

Give students constructive, consistent feedback. The best way to encourage students to meet faculty expectations in their formal writing is to ground the expectations in established, disciplinary conventions and spell out those expectations on paper, in advance. With the expectations in full view of all, commenting on and grading papers becomes a matter of reminding students of the stated expectations and responding to the various ways each student tries to meet them. Anchoring the feedback to explicit criteria makes those comments the basis for improvements on the next writing task, something summary judgments such as “not clear” or “good idea” preclude. For suggestions on how to comment on student papers go to www.umt.edu/writingcenter/resourcesforfaculty.htm#howto and click on “How to evaluate student writing”.

For an overview of WAC philosophy and practice, browse the WAC Clearinghouse website at <http://wac.colostate.edu/index.cfm>. Because writing proficiency is enacted and assessed in specific contexts for diverse purposes, improving the writing proficiency of UM students begins anew in every course. Any UM faculty member can make a positive difference in this cross-curricular endeavor.

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