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WAC in FYW: Building Bridges and Teachers as Architects

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Abstract

Students entering the first-year writing classroom directly out of high school often tell me that they had to 'write differently for each teacher and class.' Imagine their confusion and apprehension when they are told that one of the objectives of FYW is to prepare them for *academic writing across all disciplines*! How can teachers incorporate cross-curricular skills into their lessons? More importantly, amongst the already-complex demands on the purposes and goals of FYW courses, how do students learn these techniques that teachers deem 'easily-transferrable'?

I argue, first, that the FYW classroom is an ideal location to present students with the individual tools for writing in *any* discipline. We discuss elements of writing like organization, idea development, thesis statements, citation, and the writing process within our courses as part of the standard curriculum. Therefore, I argue that the multi-faceted roles of FYW teachers include the characteristic of architect, and assert that transforming our lessons into WAC lessons involves the incorporation of examples, standards, and formats from outside disciplines. Mentioning how thesis statements tie together English and Religion papers or how dividing a paper into sections enhances the organization of Biology lab reports and Business reports establishes connections for students. With some simple additions to teachers' lessons, students will find that the writing techniques they learn are just as crucial and useful in both core and major classes. Building these bridges reinforces the lifelong importance of writing and helps students continue to develop their writing skills across and through the college curriculum.

Keywords: first-year writing; WAC; academic writing; connections; curriculum; instructors

Introduction

Building a structurally-sound bridge that connects two places first requires the development of an intricate blueprint. Such a detailed plan calls for a knowledgeable architect—one who can see across the divide and envision the final product that will link one piece of land to another. On the map of many universities, these separated areas of land are First-Year Writing (FYW) courses and Writing across the Curriculum (WAC). Not surprisingly, then, when students first arrive at the university, they often

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encounter a gap between the expectations of academic writing at the high school and university levels; this divide leaves them feeling confused, overwhelmed, and frustrated. As an FYW instructor, I often hear my students say that they feel like they have to ‘write differently for every class.’ After examining assignment sheets from across the curriculum, I can’t say that I blame them—the requirements range from two-paragraph, generic topics to three-page, bullet-pointed guidelines that practically dictate the paper’s template. Further, many assignment sheets from non-English disciplines emphasize content mastery and call for evidence of comprehension. Proficiency in writing, in those assignments, is implicitly assumed.

In order to navigate the overwhelming continuum of writing requirements across the disciplines, students need an architect with a blueprint—someone who designs a plan to introduce them to the necessary tools for writing in these courses, and will help them build bridges. At a university, I believe that architect could be the FYW instructor, working with a blueprint design rooted in the FYW curriculum. Admittedly, students may doubt that a core writing course will prepare them for academic writing across *all* disciplines, and instructors may be sceptical that universally-helpful lessons can be incorporated into an already-dense curriculum. However, because of its structure as a preparatory course and its emphasis on community and collaboration, I argue that the FYW classroom is the ideal site for introducing writing across the curriculum.

It might sound like I am arguing that FYW instructors should go out of their way to adjust their curricula, make room for writing instruction in disciplines outside their own, and sacrifice teaching the writing strategies *they* know in order to teach those the *university* wants students to know. Instead, I suggest that FYW instructors adjust their vision of their roles as instructors, looking for the explicit connections that they can help students make between first-year writing and courses across the disciplines. As an FYW instructor myself, I believe that embracing our roles as architects will help make our courses—and college-level writing—more meaningful.

I. College from the students’ eyes

First-year writing presents many pedagogical challenges for instructors. We face the constant challenge of proving the course’s necessity to students who took Honors courses and got all A’s in high school, believe they already know how to write, or just do not want to try because the course is not (as they see it) directly related to their majors. Despite their objections, the fact remains that FYW serves a universal purpose—preparing students for academic writing in any discipline.

In discussing the purpose of first-year writing, Keith Hjortshoj (2001) writes that ‘freshmen writing courses usually serve the purposes of general education: to help you write, read, and think more effectively in all of your other courses.’ Further, Michael Pemberton (2001) discusses an approach that he believes governs the objectives and curriculum development of first-year writing courses; he calls this the ‘pedagogy of the generic.’ Though FYW is considered a core course and usually receives an introductory-level course designation, I believe that phrases like ‘general education’ and ‘pedagogy of the generic’ diminish its importance and complexity. Despite its low-level designation, FYW teaches students key skills about writing that they are expected to draw and build upon for their remaining years of school and in the workforce. These

'generic' course catalogue identifications, then, mimic the core course mindset that many students maintain about FYW courses and make the contents seem simple, basic, and easy to teach.

I counter Hjortshoj and Pemberton by asserting that FYW is, in fact, pedagogically complex. FYW instructors are held responsible for teaching students the foundations of writing—and do so in a way that situates first-year writing as *central* to general education. Therefore, I propose an amendment to Pemberton's phrase and believe instead that what we teach is governed by the *pedagogy of the universal*. Students often do not recognise that the writing skills they learn and practice in first-year writing become implicit expectations in other courses across the curriculum. The fact that instructors across the disciplines *assume* that students have already learned the components of academic writing elevates the importance of FYW; as I heard one FYW instructor tell her class, 'this is the last time that someone will actually *teach* you about writing.' With more universities in the U.S. implementing formalized WAC programs and the ever-increasing importance of writing proficiency, I argue that students *must* leave first-year writing courses with practical knowledge that allows them to independently transfer these skills—and instructors can help them build these bridges.

II. Solutions and bridge-building

A. The FYW classroom as the blueprint

To embrace the mindset of architect, instructors must begin by adjusting their perspectives on the importance and function of the first-year writing classroom in order to impact students' perspectives. Treating the classroom as an ideal location to prepare students for writing across the curriculum lays the groundwork for those students to make connections between what they learn in FYW and the writing they will do throughout college. After all, a WAC framework assumes that students have practiced—and are somewhat proficient with—academic writing, whether in their secondary education courses or their first semesters of higher education. Most specifically, that thorough preparation takes place in the FYW classroom.

To initiate the shift in attitude and perspective, FYW instructors must examine their blueprints: the curricula and assignments of their courses. I believe that instructors should view first-year writing classrooms as sites of cross-curricular acknowledgment, inviting the language of non-English disciplines into our class discussions. By preparing students to expect that they will write case studies in the social sciences, formally-organised reports in business, and analytical responses in the humanities, the first-year writing classroom recognises writing as a *universal discourse community* and demonstrates to students that they will have to write in every college course.

The good news for instructors is that the standard FYW curriculum contains a clear framework for teaching universally-useful elements of and lessons about writing. To enhance the course's objectives and make them more immediately meaningful and applicable, therefore emphasising the 'universally-useful' aspect, instructors can make a conscious effort to connect the elements of academic writing to courses across the curriculum. Below, I outline some components of successful academic writing, and share an example for each of how an instructor can enhance the lesson by acknowledging other disciplines within the conversation.

***When discussing *invention and idea development*:**

‘Some courses will present you with very specific directions for the questions or readings you will respond to. Others will give you basic guidelines, leaving you with the responsibility to design your own research question. You must be prepared to report on the specifics of wood distillation for your chemistry courses, as well as argue which book out of the Old Testament tells the best story for your religion courses.’

***In a lesson on the necessity of a *thesis statement or central argument*:**

‘Papers in any course must contain an identifiable central focus that lets your readers know what you are thinking. Political science papers need a specific argument that summarizes your position or belief, and literature papers must contain your interpretation of a character, theme, etc.’

***For the principle of *organization*:**

‘Some documents—like lab reports or business analyses—follow a specific template that contains specially-designated sections. In freeform essays (both formal and informal), you must find a way to make your ideas flow and develop to strengthen your point.’

***In helping students understand *writing as a process*:**

‘Take what you gain out of the writing process required in this course—the improvements between a first and final draft, a trip to the Writing Center, or even starting with brainstorming or an outline—and make that a part of writing for any class. It will make a difference on your unit plans for your Education class and your Philosophy reading summaries, just like it makes a difference in our first-year writing course.’

***For introducing the process and importance of conducting *academic research*:**

‘When you are looking up interpretations of Emily Dickinson’s poetry or searching for creative ways to teach elementary-school students their multiplication tables, you must be adept at searching for credible information.’

***To introduce styles of *citation* and the necessity of *documentation*:**

‘Though there are different citation styles for each discipline, you must know how and why to cite your sources. In empirical reports, listing sources is more important than discussing them. However, in philosophy or literature, you must elaborate on the quotes you include to show how they contribute to your argument.’ Simple conversation pieces like the ones I have modelled above fit seamlessly into the lessons that first-year writing instructors already teach. Mentioning the writing that students will do in other courses shows that FYW instructors are hyper-aware of their responsibilities to the university. Further, these conversations introduce students to the idea and expectations of writing across the curriculum.

B. The FYW teacher as the architect

I anticipate that some may object to my assertions, claiming that I am oversimplifying the problem and solution. Others may say that the FYW curriculum is already too complex and instructors should not be asked to depart so much from standard program requirements. I acknowledge that knowledge transfer is a complicated issue and that its complexities extend beyond the walls of FYW classrooms. My perspective

focuses on a way that FYW instructors can *contribute* to aiding knowledge transfer. As opposed to outwardly changing the curriculum, I propose a shift in approach and perspective, which creates an opportunity to elevate the value of FYW above ‘general education’ and a governing ‘pedagogy of the generic.’ By embracing our roles as architects and entering the FYW classroom armed with the tools to help students learn to build bridges, we will situate ourselves as crucial classroom resources for academic success.

To gather the framework for these bridges, FYW instructors should draw from the core components of effective writing, as set forth by both the first-year writing program *and* the university. Sharing these learning outcomes and assessment criteria with students will demonstrate that writing is continuously and universally valued and assessed beyond FYW classrooms. Further, conversations that incorporate the writing in all disciplines prove that writing is a crucial part of every course, and allows FYW instructors to stress that professors will expect students to incorporate the elements of academic writing they learn in FYW.

One of the enriching benefits of a WAC program is that it encourages cross-disciplinary conversation amongst faculty members. Similarly, FYW instructors can replicate these meetings within their classrooms by inviting students to participate in these discipline-inclusive discussions. Below, I offer some curriculum strategies to help instructors plan:

1. Select a textbook that contains a chapter or section on WAC, like Lisa Ede’s *The Academic Writer* or Andrea Lunsford’s *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, with material to enhance your own lessons.
2. Talk as a group about what constitutes ‘good writing’ on the first day of class. Not only will this help you start with where your students are, it will create an ideal segue point to show how the course will be relevant for all other courses.
3. Ask your students what other courses they are taking, as well as what types of writing assignments the courses require. Holding these discussions early in the semester will give you the opportunity to incorporate those courses and assignments into lessons and conversations throughout the rest of the semester. At the end of the term, ask students to reflect on how the skills they learned during first-year writing were useful in other courses as a way to prompt them to put it all together.
4. Examine and discuss the language (and the many verbs) of assignment sheets to help students navigate general, short, specific, picky, open-ended, and everything in between.
5. Incorporate a variety of different writing assignments into the course to help students practice different styles of writing: freewriting, Discussion Board responses, academic research, summary and response, multimedia presentations, proposals, and analytical essays, just to name a few.

Finally, make previously-mastered skills implicit expectations for all assignments that follow to help students accumulate and build upon the skills and lessons each unit contains. If unit one focused on writing specific thesis statements, include a bullet point like ‘specific, well-defined thesis statement’ in the evaluation criteria for papers two through four. Discuss the writing expectations of professors across the university,

and guide students to see how FYW will help them fulfil and incorporate those expectations. Having an open conversation *across* the curriculum *within* the first-year writing classroom will help students learn to *decipher* what their courses require of them and how to *transfer* the skills they are acquiring. Further, these discussions will situate us as architects who help students build bridges between our courses and the wider college curriculum.

III. Reassurance and reinforcement

This may sound like a lot of pressure and responsibility; and truthfully, the misconception that FYW will *fully* prepare students for academic writing, which I have heard from some professors across the university, gives FYW instructors an overwhelming responsibility. Persuading students to see the relevance of FYW is relentless and sometimes defeating, especially since we cannot guarantee that they will continue to transfer the skills we teach them. That leads to the frustration I experience when I hear professors say that ‘my students are *terrible* writers. Shouldn’t they have learned how to write paragraphs and thesis statements in first-year writing?’ In an ideal university world, a WAC program means that, as Louise Z. Smith (2001) asserts, ‘writing is everybody’s business.’ If so, professors across all disciplines would reinforce and make time for writing, and professors who complain that students cannot write would work to improve it within their classrooms instead of placing blame on the FYW program.

Overall, my point is that with just a few simple adjustments to classroom conversations, FYW instructors can enhance the value of their courses without sacrificing their own objectives and the enjoyment of teaching. I am not suggesting that we incorporate the details of every discipline and assignment, nor should we feel the weight of the entire university on our shoulders. I do believe that we can *expand* the conversation and *invite* the vocabulary of all disciplines, in an effort to set the stage for knowledge transfer. This approach aids in the development of effective teaching qualities like the ones I list below. I also offer suggestions to help FYW instructors become more versatile:

**openmindedness* – ask for information about other courses and assignments and consider how students might write them.

**creativity* – design assignments that allow students to explore a topic based on their areas of interest. Since most students will deem the writing they do within their majors most important, have them research the ways they may use writing in the careers they are pursuing (Hilgers et al. 2012). Or, find a story about a major world/country/state/city event, and have students think about what different academic audiences would want to know about it.

**flexibility* – inquire openly about and learn from what students are studying in other classes. This can enhance discussions about writing in the FYW classroom.

**explicit persuasion* – sometimes FYW instructors just have to be willing to repeat themselves; as I learned in an education class, it takes ‘three times for emphasis.’ If we make it our business to prove the value of first-year writing to students, we set forth the expectation that they should make it their business to understand that.

The structure, atmosphere, and curriculum of first-year writing set the stage for beginning the conversations about writing across the curriculum. If FYW instructors embrace their roles as architects and consciously construct writing bridges between their classrooms and those outside, they will elevate the importance of the course. Most importantly, cross-curricular acknowledgment will reinforce writing as a crucial skill to master, and a fully-developed foundation will encourage students to build on their acquired knowledge, enhancing their writing skills across and through the college curriculum.

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In Conversation with...

Zoë Readhead, Principle of Summerhill School, Leiston, Suffolk.

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As the UK battles with an ever-changing education landscape in which growth can be seen in the introduction of academies, trust schools, federations, chains of schools and 'free schools', I talk to Zoë Readhead, Principal of what is often called the first democratic, self-governing 'free' school. Whilst the term 'free school' today implies a model that is 'state-funded... set up in response to what people say they want and need in their community to improve education for local children' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/opening-a-free-school#free-school->