What is Writing Across the Curriculum?

By Kit O’Toole

What exactly does Writing Across the Curriculum, or WAC, mean?

WAC is a pedagogical movement based on the premise that students best learn actively rather than passively, and that writing is one of the best heuristics. WAC scholar Susan McLeod explains that WAC “does not mean a program that is merely additive—more term papers, more courses, more proficiency tests—but one that is closely tied with thinking and learning, one that will bring about changes in teaching as well as in student writing.” By writing to learn, students interact with subject matter and take ownership of it.

Professors benefit tremendously from a WAC program because of the changes that occur. Professors find efficient ways to teach students how writing is done in their specific discipline. Professors find ways to get students to manage time for developing ideas, researching, revising, and editing. Professors learn to evaluate writing in time-saving stages, so they can avoid overwhelming paper loads. WAC is about effectively delegating responsibility to students.

WAC encourages students to enter the conversation of a specific discipline. WAC pioneer Elaine Maimon says, “our goal as teachers is to help our students to find an authentic voice in the community of educated people. We teach students to find that voice by exemplifying how writers and scholars behave [in different disciplines] and by giving them opportunities to practice making connections between writing and learning.” Students learn discipline-specific conventions by writing in localized contexts and by receiving responses from writers within those contexts.

Since 1989, NIU’s WAC program has assisted various departments in these areas:

- promoting writing instruction across campus
- creating a network of faculty interested in improving student writing in all disciplines
- providing workshops and other forms of support for faculty
- integrating writing assignments into the curriculum
- tutoring students to improve their writing skills

The ultimate goal of NIU’s WAC program, as well as the WAC movement nationwide, is to practice writing beyond the freshman composition classroom. By writing in various disciplines, students become better communicators and thinkers.

What are WAC Consultants?

WAC consultants are tutors who help students work on writing assignments for different disciplines. However, WAC consultants can also become resource people for faculty.

Gail Jacky, a WAC consultant based in the Writing Center in Reavis 306A, specializes in business writing. In addition to tutoring students, she gives 10-15 minute classroom presentations on topics such as understanding an assignment, getting started on a project, organizing and developing ideas, revising drafts, finding online help, editing for grammar and punctuation, or quoting and paraphrasing sources. Jacky has also presented techniques for writing case studies to Speech Pathology Clinical classes. Students and faculty can contact her at the Writing Center, 753-6636.

Once students contact her, Jacky works with them in person or advises them online. Clinical classes. Students and faculty can contact her at the Writing Center, 753-6636.

WAC Web Site: <http://www.niu.edu/acad/english/wac/wac.html>
Keith Millis Gets Students to Publish for Each Other
by Steven Roman

Students in Keith Millis’s PSYC 345: Cognitive Psychology practice the writing to learn/learning to write binary in an unexpected way. As the semester progresses, Millis gives students a form letter requesting that they contribute an article for a book on cognitive psychology. The letter details the assignment’s format, length (2 pages), and value to the students’ grades. The articles must focus on a specified topic taken from a list that Millis provides. Students form teams of three, so their combined articles will develop a chosen topic more thoroughly. Captains are elected in each team. Millis keeps in regular email contact with them about drafting and editing the articles. Each team’s job is to produce articles that are informative, accurate, and pertinent to the topic. The writers must account for their personal interests in the topic.

Millis collects the articles together in a class anthology. Then students write multiple-choice exam questions based on the articles they’ve written. Millis compiles these questions into an exam. Everyone reads the anthology and takes the exam, but there’s a twist. Original writers of the articles are also graded on how well their classmates perform on the exam questions they write! The rationale? A well-written article will make learning challenging but not impossible for readers.

Meanwhile, students in another section of PSYC 345 have been doing the same task. After both sections have published their anthologies and taken their exams, the students design a “Museum of the Mind,” demonstrating what they have learned from their writing. Judges from the Psychology Department visit and rank which section’s project is the better one, and that section of students gets extra credit on the final grade.

Millis has created a website of a recent outcome of this writing project at <http://community-2.webtv.net/amynkeith/TheMuseumoftheMind/>. He prefers this project to ordinary essay exams or term papers. The writing does not become excessive to manage, but students learn a great deal about the course material and about good writing at the same time. The friendly competition between course sections expands the learning opportunities. In this kind of competition, no one loses.

WAC Tip: Scarborough and Dowen Advocate Writing to Learn

Professors don’t have to plan term papers or other complex writing assignments so that students will benefit from writing. Instead, Jule Scarborough and Richard Dowen use a common WAC technique called “writing to learn.”

Several times a semester, Scarborough asks TECH 394 students to write about what they’ve learned in the previous 5 or 6 class sessions. The students write 1-2 pages. Dowen begins by asking UBUS 101 students to explain in a paragraph why they want to be business majors. Then students continue to write para-

“Act as a catalyst for students to hone their writing skills.”
—Tom Van Vleet

graphs about other broad topics as the semester goes on. Both professors find this is a way to get students to document and think about their progress. The professors need only respond with brief comments or a √, +, or –.

The same progressive principle can work in a single class. Students can respond briefly in writing to an opening question. In discussion, they can share answers. At the end of the class, students can then respond to the opening question again, explaining how their original answer has changed—based on what they’ve learned from hearing other classmates’ answers and the professor’s lecture.