# A Rhetoric of Reflection

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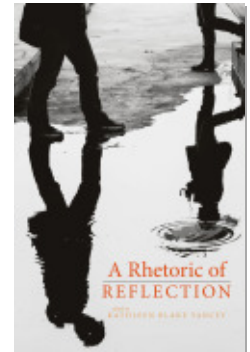Published by Utah State University Press

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# 11

## FROM APPRISED TO REVISED
### Faculty in the Disciplines Change What They Never Knew They Knew

Pamela Flash

Writers have long found that routine reflection upon their practices and products can increase senses of agency, intentionality, and rhetorical agility. Here, working analogically, I ask whether routinized reflective dialogues—conducted by departmental faculty members about writing and writing instruction—can yield increased senses of *pedagogic* agency, intentionality, and agility.

To address this question, I propose that we move to the excitable (and often cranky) realm of the departmental faculty meeting, an atypical venue in writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) circles, and even in writing-in-the-disciplines (or WID) circles. To this setting, faculty members arrive to find that typical meeting fare (tenure decisions, photocopier service contracts, requests for reduced fiscal modeling, enrollment reports . . .) has been jettisoned, that the entire meeting is dedicated to deliberating upon this question: what specific writing abilities should students in your majors be able to demonstrate by the time they graduate?

This scenario depicts exactly what the WAC program at the University of Minnesota has been up to for the past decade under the auspices of its comprehensive writing-enriched curriculum program, or WEC. The reflective process at its heart begins something like this, from a meeting of biological-science faculty that took place in 2008.

PROF A: One thing we haven't talked about yet is objectivity . . .

PROF B: That's one of the things I certainly respond most vitriolically to, when I get something to read and it's all, "I did this . . ." and "I thought that . . ." I mean it's all very touchy feely in the way it's presented and that just . . .

PROF A: Ugh . . . it makes your skin crawl.

PF: Huh. So, how would you describe what you're after? You can ask for "objective" writing, but no one really knows what that means . . . do they?

Prof A: They don't? Really? Why don't they?

Prof B: Remove the writer out of it! . . . They either talk about themselves, or they say, like, "Shaw et al said this, Shaw et al said that," and the emphasis is on Shaw et al rather than the result or the finding . . .

PF: Which is an approach that may have been introduced in a literature or theory course . . .

Prof C: *That's* why they do that? Because people in other departments teach them to?

Prof D: Right, that's, uh . . . more like historical narrative; not what we expect of scientific writing . . .

PF: So, you ask students to focus on presenting the science, not the scientist?

Prof B: I think that's right. We want it to be replicable; see what I mean? So that if someone else came along and did the exact same study that Shaw et al. described, they should get the exact same results. That's the point. Scientific writing is not egotistical . . . it's contributive.

PF: If I were a student in your class, I might find it useful to learn that writing here is expected to emphasize scientific procedure and findings and that this is because the emphasis is on replication. That scientific writing contributes to collective science . . .

Prof A: Right, right. Until right now that seemed so obvious. Uh . . . I've never really spelled that out. Does anyone? (Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior Faculty 2008)

And here's a second scenario, this one from the political science faculty in 2007:

Prof W: Writing in political science is *analytical*. We want *clear analysis*.

PF: Right, that makes sense. And what does clear analysis look like here? When they come up with clear analysis in their writing what are they doing?

Prof W: Uhhh . . .

PF: Because they may have been exposed to different kinds of analysis, right? Break something apart, examine the pieces closely, interpret using a series of theoretical lenses. . . . It could be that when a writing prompt asks students to do something they don't really get, they'll find it safer to just keep on describing . . .

Prof X: Exactly. Exactly! In my class, I must continually emphasize that papers should not be merely descriptive and derivative. . . . So, really? We have to explain to them what "analytical" means?

Prof W: Nah. They know. Can't we expect that they know this already?

PROF Y: It suddenly occurs to . . . me that we may be expecting our undergraduates to be like our graduate students. And that that may be a mistake. We train our graduate students in rigorous analysis, yet we expect it from our undergraduates without training them.

PROF Z: Yeah—we don't teach analytical methodology to undergraduates like they do in, for example, economics. In political science classes, we always start with the big questions like how do you get a democracy? and then expect them to look at specific situations in the light of this big question.

PROF X: But they don't! We would like students to write as intuitive scientists but they come to us as intuitive lawyers. They are used to partisan political arguments, like on TV.

PROF W: Right, they ingest glib arguments that rarely involve analysis. TV doesn't teach them what we want. We don't teach them what we want. So, okay—by "analyze" what do we mean? (Political Science Faculty 2007)

What's going on in these meetings? On the face of it, two groups of departmental faculty members are complaining conversationally about the kinds of writing students are doing in their courses. Nothing new there. But when we look closely, we see a line of productive deliberation threading through the conversation. Initial characterizations of writing—possibly long-held and socially reinforced characterizations— "Objective!" "Clearly analytical!"—are voiced, explained to me (the outsider) and loosened ("What do we mean?"). Participants in this discussion are revealing presumptions about generic discourse norms ("Can't we assume that they know this already?") and beginning to poke at inconvenient truths ("We may be expecting our undergraduates to be like our graduate students"). In these public moments, ideas informing teaching practice can change, and because the collective faculty composes and creates curricular systems, airing these ideas can promote pedagogic and curricular transformation. Creating situations in which these transformative moments can emerge is a central objective of the WEC model.

But do most departmental faculty members want their impressions of writing and writing instruction to undergo transformation? Won't they resist? It is incontrovertible that WAC programs encounter faculty resistance. Faculty audiences routinely resist the appearance of meddling or efforts that seem intent upon replacing familiar practices with imported content. Many WAC programs operate in spite of this resistance, viewing it as an inevitable but ignorable corollary to the kinds of change they are trying to effect. While pragmatic, the impulse to downplay or ignore faculty resistance may unintentionally restrict the reach of WAC initiatives.

By contrast, the WEC model positions faculty members' attitudes about writing and writing instruction as critical pivot points of change. Instead of working around resistance, I tease it out. I'm interested in working directly with resistant reactions, and more important, with the core-level assumptions that give rise to these reactions. Over the course of developing, implementing, and assessing the WEC program, an effort entirely structured around discussions like those excerpted above, I have become convinced that the sustained integration of relevant writing instruction into disciplinary curricula relies on ongoing, locally situated faculty reflection about writing and about writing instruction. Absent this reflection, the long-held WAC goal of integrating meaningful writing instruction into diverse curricula will remain uneven, intermittent, and vulnerable.

In what follows, I draw upon transcript, survey, and assessment data collected over the past decade to illustrate the powerful role reflective discussion plays in changing the way faculty members think about and teach writing within their disciplinary homes. The ideas I bring forward here, and the faculty members who voice them, can inspire us to expand the context in which we study reflection and will provide WAC/WID practitioners a method for productively addressing and transcending faculty resistance to cross- and intradisciplinary writing initiatives.

**Reflection-in-Action.** While structured reflection may be a relatively new focus in the WAC/WID world, it is not new to educational philosophers like Donald Schön and Steven Brookfield, who advocate the use of "reflection-in-action" (Schön 1983) and "critical reflection" (Brookfield 1995) in order to engender increased senses of *pedagogic* efficacy on the part of individual instructors. According to Schön, instructors' increased agency, intentionality, and agility is proportional to their willingness to investigate their own epistemologies and tacitly held values. In *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Blake Yancey characterizes Schön's use of analytical reflection as rhetorical (Yancey 1998), highlighting his assertion that by analyzing our own thinking patterns, by considering the ways these patterns align with or diverge from our intentions, we can adjust and refine the ways we think and work.

The excerpt of political science faculty discussion provides an instantiation of rhetorical reflection when Professor W asks, "So, okay . . . by 'analyze' what do we mean?" Here, a seasoned professor is questioning a concept he'd thought, until that moment, was obvious. In the act of trying to explain it to me, someone without the same set of tacit understandings, he stumbled. Schön would sympathize. "Often we cannot say what it is that we know," he asserts. "When we try to describe it we find

ourselves at a loss or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing" (Schön 1995, 49). Professor W's understanding of what he meant by *analysis* had become loosened, made strange to him. Upon further reflection, he recognized he didn't really know how to describe what he'd meant.

Likewise, in the first excerpt, Professor A reached a similar point in trying to explain why scientific writing should be framed around research, not researchers. In her response, "Until right now that seemed so obvious. Uh . . . I've never really spelled that out. Does anyone?" she looks to her peers for affirmation or contradiction. She was questioning her approach and, at the close of the meeting, told me she was piqued by this moment in the discussion because, as a conscientious instructor, she didn't like the idea that she might be unwittingly disadvantaging her students by withholding what was now revealed as useful information. In the course of a few more discussions, she and her colleagues hammered out some language to describe their expectations of "objectivity." Their current list of writing outcomes includes these two items: "Directly communicates a scientific narrative using an overt logical structure: moves from problem, to procedure, data, conclusions, and back to target problem" and "Describes significant gaps in scientific knowledge by articulating a target question or problem and describing its significance" (University of Minnesota College of Biological Sciences 2013). As Professors A and W found out, these in-depth reflective discussions that uncover uncertainty can be unsettling. What they may not have suspected is that this unsettling is an initial goal of these conversations. When faculty members engage in active, dialogical reflection—when they effectively make the familiar strange—these discussions can catalyze a dismantling of entrenched and unproductive pedagogical thinking. Gratifying realizations can result. "Oh!" exulted a political-science professor at the completion of the analysis discussion excerpted above, "Now, for the first time, I know how to answer a student who asks me, 'What do you want?' without having to spell the whole thing out like a recipe" (Political Science Faculty 2007).

### DEVELOPING THE WEC MODEL

Aware of the role reflection can play in making instructional and curricular change, and equally aware of faculty members' likely resistance to engaging in reflective analysis of their individual or collective values and practices, I set about creating a model that would capitalize on

reflection and divert resistance. To subvert resistance, the model would need to be owned by internal stakeholders. To instigate change, it would need to offer a reflective process aimed at uncovering and working through issues and assumptions that may be blocking it. What sort of mediating moves might keep the process progressing while simultaneously posing no threat to local faculty ownership?

This was my question in 2006 after five years of convening departmental faculty focus groups to assess the University of Minnesota's then eight-year-old writing-intensive course requirement. Discussions with faculty groups from dozens of departments had made it apparent to me that resistance to incorporating writing instruction into departmental curricula was largely based in a narrow set of assumptions about what was meant by *writing* and by *writing instruction*. Effective writing was clear writing; student ability was declining; writing instruction therefore must be remedial, must emphasize clear structures and inevitably take time away from important discussions of content. Sympathy was offered to those recruited to teach the writing-intensive courses, and resistance was aimed at the bureaucratic procedures required to certify them, but little consideration was given to developing alternative methods for ensuring that students graduated as able writers. Faculty members within departments had not identified harmonious or divergent writing values or outcomes they expected students in their majors to be able to demonstrate by the time they graduated and had only the sketchiest of ideas about who was requiring what in which course down the corridor. Until we found a way of getting at and potentially loosening the grip of unproductive assumptions and inconsistent practices, the writing-intensive initiative would have limited success in transforming curricula or writing pedagogy.

Focus on individual instructors and/or individual courses (in workshops and consultation, for example) was thus having limited impact on the goal of integrating writing into departmental curricula or on faculty satisfaction with graduation-level student writing. In developing our WEC model, I changed points of contact. This shift, illustrated by figure 11.1, shows that instead of positioning instructional practices as the primary point of intervention, the WEC model takes primary aim at faculty conceptions of writing and writing instruction. These become the *trigger points for change* rather than the inevitable and ignorable *reactions to change*. Understanding that faculty conceptions of writing and writing instruction shape their instructional practices, and, in turn, the extent to which students conceptualize (and are motivated by) the relevance of writing to their coursework, makes broader change possible. When faculty members see writing as highly relevant to their instructional goals,
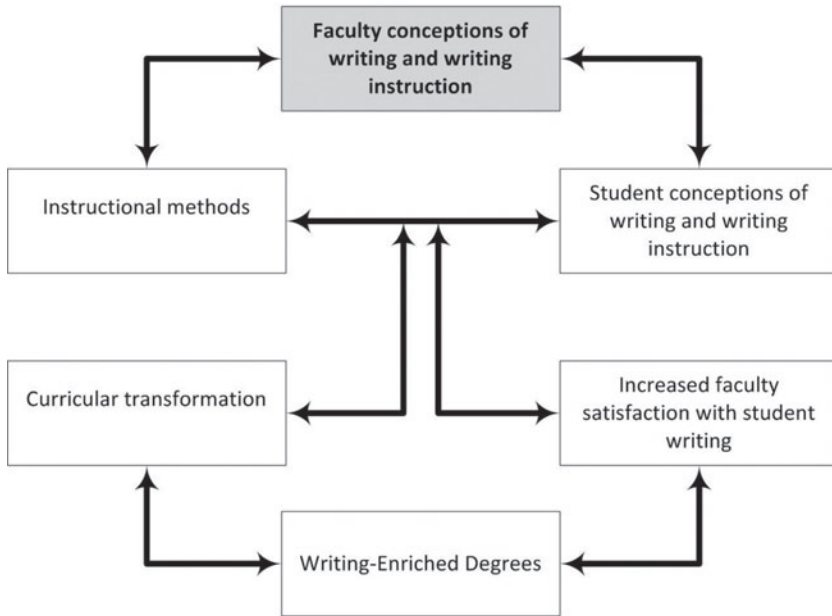
*Figure 11.1. The WEC model positions faculty conceptions of writing and writing instruc-
tion as a preliminary point of contact. Changes in faculty perceptions trigger changes
in instructional methods, curricular sequencing, and student perceptions and ultimately
allow students to graduate with degrees that have been writing enriched.*

they are more likely to see its intentional integration into departmental
curricula and graduation outcomes as advantageous.

### WEC METHODS

Since 2007, faculty members from fifty-five undergraduate departments
have enrolled in the WEC program, and each year, five additional units
(primarily departments, but also, where appropriate, schools or entire
colleges) are added to the roster. Enrolled units engage in a recursive
process of generating, implementing, and assessing multiple itera-
tions of comprehensive documents called *undergraduate writing plans*,
and although they are provided with a boilerplate for organizational
purposes (see fig. 11.2), the content of these five-section plans is fac-
ulty authored and is generated by the sorts of reflective discussions
I've been describing. Although WAC team members prime discussions
by providing faculty discussants with a variety of data collected from
within their departments and follow meetings with thorough summa-
ries, an appointed member for the faculty, the WEC liaison, is ultimately

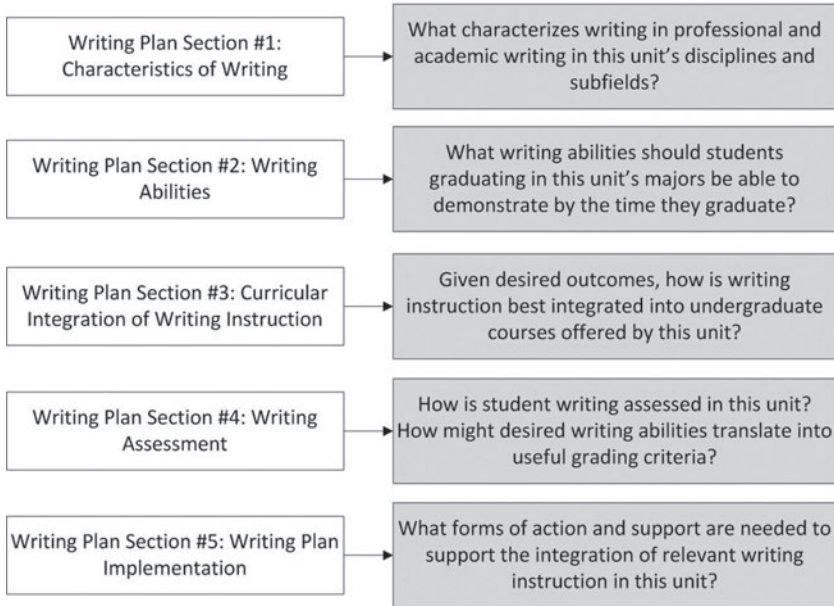| | |
|---|---|
| Writing Plan Section #1: Characteristics of Writing | What characterizes writing in professional and academic writing in this unit's disciplines and subfields? |
| Writing Plan Section #2: Writing Abilities | What writing abilities should students graduating in this unit's majors be able to demonstrate by the time they graduate? |
| Writing Plan Section #3: Curricular Integration of Writing Instruction | Given desired outcomes, how is writing instruction best integrated into undergraduate courses offered by this unit? |
| Writing Plan Section #4: Writing Assessment | How is student writing assessed in this unit? How might desired writing abilities translate into useful grading criteria? |
| Writing Plan Section #5: Writing Plan Implementation | What forms of action and support are needed to support the integration of relevant writing instruction in this unit? |

*Figure 11.2. Writing plans are composed of five sections (left-hand column). Content for each section is generated by faculty in response to critical questions (right-hand column) related to the shape and role of writing in specific departments and disciplines.*

responsible for cofacilitating the meetings and for weaving colleagues' ideas together into comprehensive writing plans.

Throughout the process of creating and assessing editions of writing plans, members of the WAC team collect various forms of writing-related data. When a unit enrolls, we collect and catalog samples of writing assignments and samples of student writing. We administer an online survey that asks unit faculty, students, and professional affiliates to characterize discipline-relevant writing abilities and offer baseline assessments of writing and writing instruction. To prompt curricular perspective, we create visual representations (maps, matrices, flow charts) of key courses comprising the curricula, and to ensure that the various perspectives voiced in meetings are incorporated into the writing plan, we circulate thorough summaries of faculty discussions, which we tape. These departmentally derived data are all offered back to faculty for their interpretation over the course of four faculty meetings within two semesters. Ultimately, armed with meeting summaries, survey data, curricular maps, and writing samples, faculty liaisons draft first-, second-, or third-edition writing plans. Plan drafts circulate intradepartmentally and, once revised, are ultimately granted approval by the Campus

Writing Board, a subcommittee of the university's faculty senate. From there, fiscal requests are approved by the provost's office, and service requests (for workshops, consultations, material development, etc.) are approved by the WAC team.

In a nutshell, the WEC model equips a departmental faculty with an elective, funded, and faculty-driven method for critically reflecting upon assumptions related to the kinds of writing they assign students in their undergraduate curricula and for intentionally implementing and assessing context-specific activities warranted by these reflective processes. The model, designed to capitalize on reflection and divert resistance, has resulted in sustainable changes in the ways writing and writing instruction are conducted at our research university.

## CHANGES YIELDED BY WEC'S REFLECTIVE PROCESSES

Reflective processes involved in the creation, implementation, and assessment of writing plans can result in three areas of change: changes in attitudes about writing and writing instruction, changes in instructional methods and in language used in describing writing to students and colleagues, and changes in the rate at which student writing meets faculty expectations. These results are documented in the evolving editions of plans themselves, in transcripts of meetings held to create those plans, in annual liaison surveys (in which we pose the question, "What effect has the WEC process had on practices and attitudes related to writing instruction in your unit?"), and in the longitudinal ratings of student writing. To evidence these changes in approaches to teaching, I will excerpt responses to our annual liaisons survey and discussions from meeting transcripts. To demonstrate changes in student writing, I will provide data yielded by our panel ratings of student writing.

### Changes in Faculty Attitudes and Assumptions

Changes in attitudes about writing and writing instruction are evident throughout our data. "The big impact has been attitudinal," notes one faculty liaison who goes on to say, "This is the first time in my six years in this unit that our department has ever had a discussion about what we actually do as teachers, in the classroom, across our different programs. Many of my colleagues who have been here for much longer tell me that they have never seen interest in this dimension of their work before" (WEC Liaison Survey 2009). Another liaison recounts changes in attitude by noting that as a result of the reflective discussions, colleagues
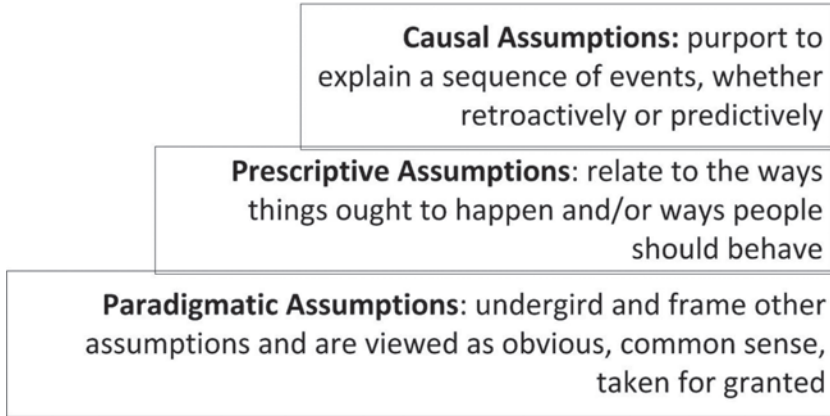
**Causal Assumptions:** purport to explain a sequence of events, whether retroactively or predictively

**Prescriptive Assumptions:** relate to the ways things ought to happen and/or ways people should behave

**Paradigmatic Assumptions:** undergird and frame other assumptions and are viewed as obvious, common sense, taken for granted

*Figure 11.3: An illustration of Stephen Brookfield's typology of assumptions informing instructional practices.*

"are more accepting that they are the 'experts' regarding writing instruction in their discipline" (WEC Liaison Survey 2013). A third liaison credits the necessarily slow pace and ongoing, discursive nature of the WEC process with its ability to build buy-in among her colleagues, writing that "with WEC, the Department has been engaged in a slow but very substantial process of consensus-building and consciousness-raising regarding the role of writing in our pedagogical mission and curriculum, resulting in a high level of faculty 'buy in' to the WEC process" (WEC Liaison Survey 2011).

Useful in describing and tracking attitudinal shifts triggered during WEC discussions is a classification system introduced by Stephen Brookfield (1995). Interested in understanding assumptions that inevitably underlie, shape, and give direction to teaching practices, Brookfield organizes assumptions about teaching into three stepped levels as illustrated in figure 11.3.

Causal assumptions, at Brookfield's top level, are explanatory and predictive ideas that guide our understanding of how actions and reactions do (and might) play out. Prescriptive assumptions, one level below, relate to the ways things *should* work and how stakeholders *ought* to behave. At the deepest and most tacit level are paradigmatic assumptions, which Brookfield considers foundational to the extent that those who hold them may not see them as assumptions at all, but as facts (Brookfield 1995).

WEC meeting transcripts reveal that causal and prescriptive assumptions about writing and writing instruction typically arise in the course

of the first of four faculty meetings. At the surface, or causal level, one of the first assumptions voiced in WEC discussions is this: "If we have to devote class time to writing instruction, we won't get through the content teaching we are actually hired to do." An example at the prescriptive level would be, "Students ought to enter our courses with higher levels of writing proficiency." As WEC discussions progress, assumptions lurking at the paradigmatic level can surface. I've found that these include the assumption that effective writing can be broadly and generically defined across all disciplines, that it is reasonable to expect writing skills to be mastered prior to students' matriculation to post-secondary institutions, and the parent assumption from which these emerge: that teaching writing and teaching content are fundamentally discrete activities. Beneath these core assumptions may reside the most influential—and the most cloaked—assumption of all, namely that these faculty members suspect that they don't know how to go about teaching writing.

Happily, WEC meeting transcripts are also filled with hints of shifting attitudes. When faculty members deliberate accurate ways of describing desired writing abilities (as the two faculty groups are doing in the opening excerpts), an assumption that writing can be generically described and that students can be expected to understand what is meant by such commonly used grading criteria as logical, substantive, or clear—two assumptions that have previously been unchallenged—begin to shift. When Professor A says, "Right, right. Until right now that seemed so obvious," a shift is hinted.

*Changes in instruction*

Asking faculty members again and again over the course of four meetings to explicitly describe for and with each other the characteristics and function of relevant, effective student writing is changing the ways they in turn teach and talk to students about writing. "Whenever we talk about writing now," writes one liaison, "we are . . . using our WEC language" (WEC Liaison Survey 2011). Along those lines, another writes, "I think [WEC] has helped many of our faculty be more thoughtful and self-reflexive about their teaching. It has helped others find language to talk with students about what they are doing in writing assignments" (WEC Liaison Survey 2013). A third notes, "We have learned better ways of helping students do what all along we hoped they would do. There are far more faculty discussions about writing in classes" (WEC Liaison Survey 2009). This faculty member goes on to reflect that "the idea that
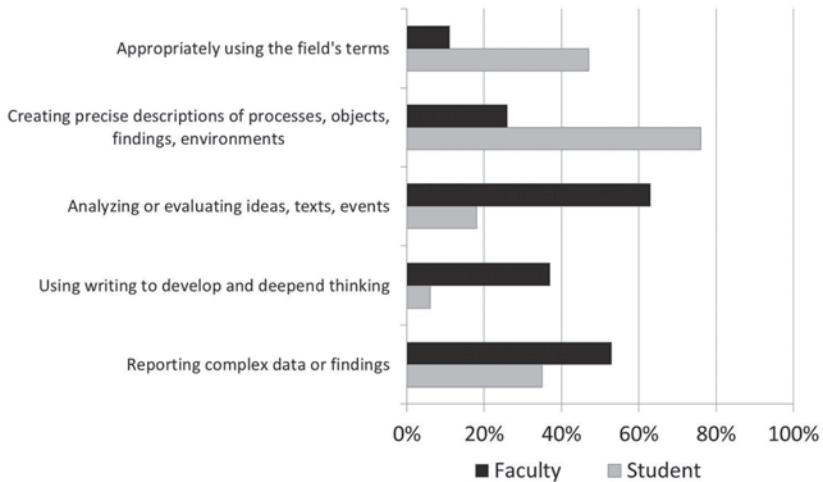
Figure 11.4. Data yielded in a science department by the WEC survey question, What are the three most important writing abilities majors in this unit should be able to demonstrate by the time they graduate?

pedagogy, especially writing pedagogy, can be improved by a process of breaking down and more clearly describing the tasks you are asking students to perform . . . is a huge revelation. The practices and attitudes of those faculty who have engaged with the WEC process have been transformed." (WEC Liaison Survey 2012).

Changes in the language these instructors use to talk about and assess student writing are triggered by reflective review of survey data during the first WEC discussion we hold. On their surveys, both faculty and students are asked to rank critical writing abilities. Data reveal that abilities ranked highly by faculty are often not the most obvious to students. An excerpt of survey data drawn from a science department (see fig. 11.4) includes a provocative juxtaposition of perceptions related to high-priority writing abilities.

Reflecting upon the contrasting perspectives illustrated by these data, faculty members were compelled to consider the source of students' impressions.

PROF E: But why are they so hung up on creating precise descriptions? That's . . . *easy* compared to analysis.

PROF F: Not for them, maybe.

PROF C: I mean, what the students think we want from them is . . . the more technical information, but what we really want in most cases, at least for me, is the ability to synthesize.

PROF A: Yes, we are emphasizing synthesis but what do we grade them on? I realize from these discussions that what we want is synthesis, but when I when I told students in my course that's what I wanted, they didn't know what it meant. They'd never heard that before, so when I graded them on their ability to synthesize I had to figure I was ahead of where I guess I should be.

PROF B: Well, unless we all tell them that's what we want, right? So by the time they get to you, they know what we're talking about.

(Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior Faculty 2008)

At least two important ideas are raised in this excerpt, and the first is that writing abilities develop over time. Professor F responds to Professor E's exasperation by suggesting that creating precise descriptions, an old hat routine for faculty, might get a high ranking from students to whom it is a new or challenging ability. The second is that if they want to see an increase in students' ability to synthesize information, faculty will need to describe it explicitly to students throughout courses in the major so that by the time students get to the capstone course (taught by Professor A), they know what we're talking about.

Curious about the degree to which valued writing abilities were being explicitly described to students, this department's faculty hired a research assistant to collect and code writing assignments and grading schemes from every one of its undergraduate courses, scouting for explicit language that correlated with the faculty-generated abilities list. As figure 11.5 illustrates, this investigation revealed that explicit mention of writing abilities faculty prized (the ability to synthesize information from disparate sources to draw logical conclusions and to analyze for cause and effect) was rare. Instead, assignments and grading criteria gave explicit mention to "accurate description of results," "grammatically accurate writing," and "use of scientific templates." Reviewing these results, Professor A looked around at her colleagues asking, "Is it any wonder that our students think we prioritize accurate description of results?" Acting on these data, this faculty group set about developing, workshopping, and cataloguing a variety of writing assignments, activities, and supplemental resources they could use to focus explicit instruction on developing students' abilities to demonstrate effective synthesis in their writing.

As the excerpt reveals, WEC discussions involve faculty reflection and the purposeful eliciting of candid attitudes and insights. Essential to the model's success has been a steadfast interest in working *with*, not *in spite of*, attitudes of resistance.
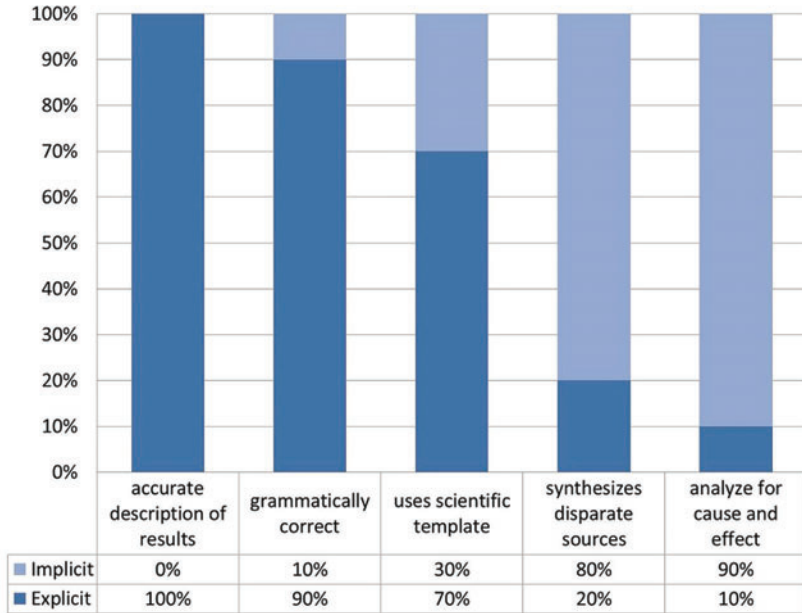
| | accurate description of results | grammatically correct | uses scientific template | synthesizes disparate sources | analyze for cause and effect |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Implicit | 0% | 10% | 30% | 80% | 90% |
| Explicit | 100% | 90% | 70% | 20% | 10% |

*Figure 11.5. Rate at which desired writing outcomes were explicitly mentioned in writing assignments in a biological sciences department.*

## Changes in Curricula

Deliberating over terms that more accurately describe expected writing can trigger multiple shifts in faculty thinking about what is meant by *writing*, but also by *writing instruction*. When the biology faculty agreed that "synthesizing information from disparate sources to draw logical conclusions" is an act of writing, they became less likely to see writing instruction as irrelevant to their curricula; the relevance was obvious. It became equally obvious to them that they could not reasonably expect undergraduates to enter the major already able to demonstrate proficiency in this area. If majors are expected to demonstrate these discipline-relevant writing abilities by the time they graduate, it became apparent to faculty discussants that explicit instructional attention should be incorporated into courses throughout the major.

Incorporating formal curricular changes can have productive systemic benefits. After an interdisciplinary humanities unit made structural changes to its curriculum to ensure that more explicit writing instruction was situated in courses majors took prior to their final year, the unit's WEC liaison noted that "the backlog for enrollment in senior paper courses has vanished" (WEC Liaison Survey 2008). Elsewhere, in a

performing arts department, the liaison described ways in which discussions about writing were helping to smooth over previously troublesome curricular fractures. "We have seen several really promising innovations within specific sectors of the curriculum that bridge artistic practice and writing instruction," she wrote, adding that she had also noticed "a greater level of awareness of the importance of clarity and rigor in communicating writing expectations to students amongst a broad range of faculty" (WEC Liaison Survey 2011).

Discussions about perspectives on writing as they relate to individual subfields and to disciplinary clusters can also have a positive effect on the curriculum, as the preceding comments indicate, and can trigger a sense of community among those who teach the component courses. Illustrating this sense, another liaison had this to say about the initial effects of the WEC process: "This has engendered a new respect and understanding of my colleagues' work that goes beyond the question of writing to embrace our disciplinary philosophy as a whole. I think this process truly has the potential to help us reshape and integrate what we do as a department. This is especially the case in my unit, as so many of our faculty are adjunct and practitioners, and not well integrated into the communications mechanisms of the [university] as a whole" (WEC Liaison Survey 2009).

Likewise, reviewing simplified visual representations of curricular structure can provoke realizations about needed adjustments. This was true in mechanical engineering, a department that routinely uses a schematic to represent its curricular mechanism and student-path circuitry (see fig. 11.6). In 2007, when the department began the WEC process, we highlighted courses that included explicit writing instruction by circling them with black rings. Before students' senior year, when they took a measurements lab and a senior design course, the only explicit writing instruction they experienced was in the required introductory physics labs and a first-year writing course. Both of these courses are situated outside departmental offerings, and both courses are waived for students with in-range AP scores. Once faculty had generated their list of writing outcomes and determined that they were largely dissatisfied with students' ability to demonstrate those outcomes, it didn't take them long to identify the problem when we projected their curriculum. The problem was obvious. As they described in the their first-edition writing plan, mechanical engineering instructors from six additional courses (indicated in the 2009 diagram) agreed to include explicit writing instruction in their courses, as indicated by the revised curricular map.
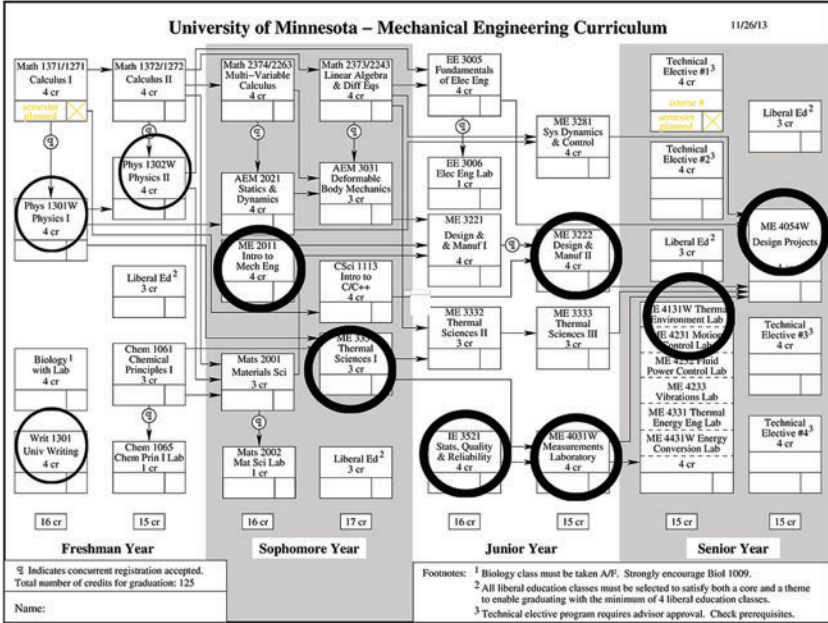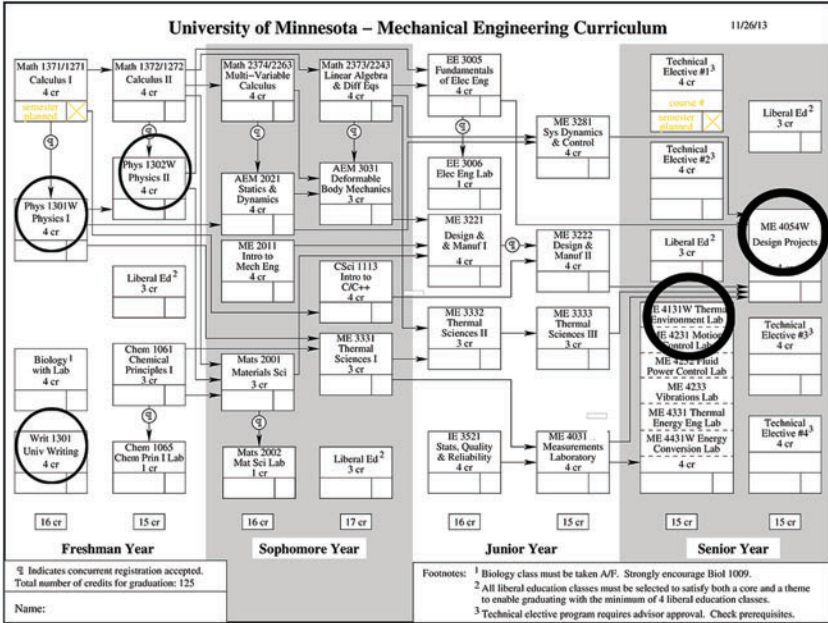
Figure 11.6. The mechanical engineering department's undergraduate curriculum flow-charts from 2007 (top) and 2009 (bottom).

Transcripts of a similar discussion in the geography department reveal complications that can occur when students' curricular paths are less prescribed than those required for mechanical engineering degrees. In geography, a department composed of diverse subfields ranging from cartography to urban studies, significant skepticism was expressed about even guessing at common writing abilities. Facilitating the meeting, I met this skepticism by reminding faculty participants that the lists of desired writing abilities they generated could be as diversified and exhaustive as they wished them to be, that no need for curricular or pedagogic change was assumed, and that their developing a meaningless list of homogenized writing standards was not a goal of the WEC program. This line of rebuttal had a generative effect. In the following excerpt we see that once the faculty accepted that *they* were in a position to make curricular decisions about the extent to which writing instruction was going to be offered in their courses, they had some issues to talk about.

> PROF H: But are you saying that . . . we can choose how much writing concentration we want for [students]? *We* can figure out how to put writing into the majors so that we catch them all?
>
> PROF I: It seems there are two ways of thinking about how writing works here. One of them is . . . saying that if students spend enough seat time in a class that's Writing Intensive then they'll have learned how to write. The other way . . . takes a look at what students are able to do and what we want them to do. It's harder, but it is really the only effective way to find out if they've learned how to write . . . Right now, we evaluate the senior project at the end and don't like the results, but by then it's too late.
>
> PROF J: The number one complaint is that [students] are not prepared for the senior project experience. Can we unify some components of writing at the gateway level so that they are in place by the time students tackle the project?
>
> PROF I: It's important to remember that students rarely take the Gateway courses before they take their other courses. So, either we change that situation, or we incorporate writing into as many courses as possible. Which way do we want to go?
>
> (Geography Faculty 2008)

Here we see faculty deliberating between permitting apathy and committing to action, between maintaining strategies that reinforce the disappointing status quo and strategies that might require work. When doing nothing is presented as an explicit choice, it can become less viable.

*Changes in Student Writing*

Changes in faculty assumptions and adjustments to curricular architecture are significant achievements for any educational initiative. Still, a sense of obligation to faculty and students involved with the WEC process propelled us to investigate WEC's effect on the quality of student writing. To this end, my team and I developed a longitudinal assessment process that is initiated by the approval of a unit's first-edition writing plan and reprised every three years. The assessment involves a panel's rating of capstone-level student writing against sets of faculty-generated criteria and engages unit faculty and panel raters in formative reflective on assessment results. Like all components of the WEC model, the process used to rate student writing is faculty driven. They generate rating criteria, identify a capstone-level course from which rated samples are collected, nominate raters, and interpret results. Rating reports comprise aggregated ratings on each individual criterion by year, but they also contain excerpts of comments made by raters during reflective debriefing sessions. In these sessions, raters discuss patterns of writing strength and weakness found in the samples they rated, and they comment on the utility of individual criteria.

Meetings held to discuss rating reports encourage their context-specific interpretation. In these meetings, the faculty discusses the ratings in reference to their criteria, and where merited, come up with strategies for targeted support. Certainly advances and regressions of these scores are affected by multiple variables, including changes in course faculty, writing assignments, and student populations. However, because the criteria were generated by faculty to describe cumulatively developed writing abilities, and because the results are provided to faculty for their interpretation and recommendations, these variables do not obscure the formative value of the assessment exercise.

Across WEC units, rating reports indicate movement in students' ability to demonstrate or achieve the standards set by faculty criteria. Although this movement is often positive (as seen in table 11.1), negative trends also occur; in most situations it is the negative ratings that lead to the most constructive faculty discussions and ensuing action. Movement is also seen in the criteria themselves. If raters report finding a criterion difficult to use, the faculty may choose to make slight wording adjustments. Adjusted wording of criteria can initially result in decreased scores (as seen in table 11.2). However, when unit faculty begin to integrate revised wording into their instructional artifacts (assignments and grading schemes), chances are good that these decreases will be temporary.

Table 11.1. Upward-trending scoring excerpts from departmental WEC rating reports

| Unit Name | Criterion: the text . . . | 2010 Score | 2012 Score | + |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| History | Demonstrates an awareness of the particular nature, value, limitations, and incompleteness of historical sources | .29 | .53 | + .24 |
| Horticulture Science | Interprets and applies data by making connections between academic and real-world situations | .67 | .91 | + .24 |
| Mechanical Engineering | Summarizes key points | .40 | .94 | + .54 |

Table 11.2. Scoring excerpts from a department's WEC rating reports including adjustments in criterion wording

| Unit Name | Original wording | Revised wording | 2010 score | 2013 score | +/− |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political Science | Contributes to discussions of questions central to the field (2010) | Explains why these questions are germane to the study and practice of politics (2013) | .60 (2010) | .36(2013) | −.24 |
| Geography | Analyzes observations (2010) | Evaluates and interprets the meanings and effects of visual and/or numerical information (2013) | .71 (2010) | .54(2013) | −.17 |

## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PEDAGOGIC ASSUMPTIONS

In WEC meetings, I've found that posing direct questions about how writing is being defined, and about the stability and implications of those definitions, can provoke revision of those definitions and the instructional approaches they inspire. I regularly encounter assumptions at all three levels of Brookfield's typology; it is thus my especial goal to unearth obstructive assumptions residing at the paradigmatic level, sensing that until these deep-seated, often unconscious ideas are brought out for examination and possible revision, sustainable pedagogic change is unlikely. Instead, the recursive swirl of causal and prescriptive assumptions, both residing closer to the surface, will continue to be affirmed and reinforced within departmental meeting rooms and hallway discussions.

Although Brookfield assures us that critical reflection on teaching will lead to confidently informed, intentional actions that can be embraced and explained rationally to students, self, and colleagues, Robert P. Yagelski isn't so sure. In his essay "The Ambivalence of Reflection: Critical Pedagogies, Identity, and the Writing Teacher," Yagelski acknowledges

having mixed feelings about reflective instructional practice, describing "a troubling space between doubt and committed action that writing teachers often inhabit, a space of both possibility and paralysis that we rarely acknowledge directly in our discussions about teaching writing" (Yagelski 1999, 32). Yagelski suspects that this sense of ambivalence, this tension between possibility and practice, can lead to counterproductive regressions. "If we try to change practices that grow out of assumptions, conventions, and institutional structures to which we have become accustomed," he warns, "then we are inevitably unsettled and feel a tendency to retreat to the familiar" (Yagelski 1999, 35).

To Schön, however, the progressive possibilities engendered by reflection-in-action depend upon achieving precisely the sort of space Yagelski characterizes as troubling. The challenge in all this is to steer reflective ruminations—in our case, reflections about writing and writing instruction—away from all this self-conscious autobiographical scrutiny, to divert the temptation of retreating to the familiar, and to increase the likelihood of collective and progressive curricular transformation.

Breaking away from the cyclical traps of self-scrutiny may require external intervention, or, at the very least, movement into an interpersonal venue. Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, a theoretical construct popularized by the 1978 translation of his *Mind and Society*, seems an apt way to describe what is wanted here. In its most essential translation, the zone of proximal development can be understood as increased developmental potential that can be achieved when independent problem solving is mediated by external instructors or peers (Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky saw learning, or change, as a socially mediated process occurring first on a social, interpersonal level and later on an internal, intrapersonal level. In other words, where one lone reflector might struggle to spark new insights, external interlocutors and thinking partners who engage in joint reflection may affect the critical distance necessary to do so.

Schön acknowledges that collective negotiation about thorny issues like writing, writing instruction, and assessment of writing require descent from the "high hard hill" (Schön 1987, 3) of technical rationality and research-based theory in order to negotiate the "swampy lowlands" (1983, 42) of messy problems that have no technical or easy solutions. "The practitioner is confronted with a choice," he writes. "Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe?" (Schön 1983, 43).

Schön's analogies help us understand why faculty members might feel some reluctance at finding their monthly meetings devoted to trips down from the high hill of their intellectual expertise and into swampy curricular murk they did not elect to plumb or traverse. Nobody, including Brookfield, said such processes would necessarily be either easy or fun. "Becoming aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act is one of the most challenging intellectual puzzles we face," he acknowledges. This awareness is also "something we instinctively resist. . . . Who wants to clarify and question assumptions she or he has lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find that they don't make sense?" (Brookfield 1995, 2).

## WEC AND MEDIATIONAL REFLECTION

Why, then, does the WEC model, which is based upon choreographed reflection, yield such encouraging evidence of change related to writing instruction? The most immediate answer is that the model doesn't stop at provoking instructional reflection. It establishes long-term alliances with departmental faculty, providing them with a sustained and sustaining partnership as they act on their new convictions. Forging this partnership is the WAC consultant.

If WEC discussions can be described as productively disruptive, it is the WAC consultant who both instigates that disruption and maintains convivial and constructive rapport with the disruptees. Ever present at each step in the process of creating, implementing, and assessing writing plans, the WAC consultant works behind the scenes to enable and mediate productive reflection. This work starts with preliminary research into the unit's curriculum and stakeholder populations and a series of advance meetings with critical departmental stakeholders. Once meetings with the unit faculty are underway, the consultant delivers digestible amounts of locally sourced data (from faculty and student surveys, student writing samples, unit ratings sessions) and persistently engages the faculty with clarification questions. Consultants record all meetings in order to provide liaisons with thorough summaries of each discussion and partner with the unit faculty as it crafts, implements, and assesses its writing plan. Without the involvement of this departmental and disciplinary outsider, discussion would likely be yanked into unproductive directions by intrafaculty politics and members' inability to step outside collectively reinforced sets of assumptions. In this way, the consultant—a cultural outsider—evokes Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and takes on the role of mediator.

The role of the mediator points us as well in another direction for analysis, activity theory. Activity theorist Aleksei Leont'ev used the analogy of the hunt, for example, to describe activity theory's emphasis on mediators and mediational tools (Leont'ev 1981). From a primeval perspective, hunting was an activity motivated by basic human needs for food and clothing and was aided by the work of beaters, individuals who moved out in advance of the hunters to flush the prey. In isolation, Leont'ev explains, the beater's actions, while essential, did not lead directly to procuring game (Leont'ev 1981, 210). The beater was a mediating tool in the dynamic process, the activity. In the WEC process, where a goal is effective pedagogic change rather than procuring game, the WAC consultant serves a mediational role similar to that of beaters by flushing out obstructing attitudes and assumptions.

What the WEC model exemplifies about activity systems is that mediational activity can proceed despite diverse stakeholder objectives. These objectives may vary, conflict, and even change in the course of the reflective discussions the model organizes. The objects or goals held by individual faculty members participating in WEC meetings might at any time include graduating more effective undergraduate writers, working around college governance to obtain funding from the provost's office, evidencing superior pedagogy and instructional commitment to external accreditors, or simply surviving (and outlasting) another university initiative. Goals held by the WAC consultant may also differ from those of faculty participants. These include uncovering and dismantling unproductive assumptions about writing and writing instruction; increasing the sense of relevance, intentionality, and faculty agency with regard to writing instruction; increasing the rate at which student writing meets faculty expectations; and so forth. The WEC model proceeds and succeeds despite this babelesque group of goals, fueled by the belief that objectives and objections are all relevant to change making and that slow change processes often result in sustainable change.

As we continue to implement the WEC model at our home site, and as adaptations of our model are implemented elsewhere, activity theory will help us address questions of longitudinal worth and programmatic sustainability. We will be looking, specifically, at the degree to which economic and technological exigencies challenge faculty control over curricula and thus impact the extent to which faculty reflection and pedagogic insights can be put to work. We will ask, in other words, whether change within the departmental activity system can be sustained when concerns relevant to the larger, institutional activity system threaten local pedagogic agency.

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