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AUTHOR Baker, Edith
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ABSTRACT

This paper explains Bradley University's (Peoria, Illinois) neophyte Writing across the Curriculum Program, which has been in existence since December of 1997. Noting that the Program started with no outside money and with just a dream of developing undergraduate students' fluencies in their writing, the paper states that the goal was to encourage and develop faculty use of writing and critical thinking in all disciplines at Bradley. It states that the Program's developers wanted particularly to encourage metacognition. According to the paper, the workshop/seminar system was chosen for the Program. The paper recounts that an online system (a Writing across the Curriculum Website for Bradley) was developed in September of 2000. The paper discusses and critiques both the workshop/seminar system and the online system. Contains 14 references. (NKA)

ON-LINE RESOURCES AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION OF THE ACADEMY FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY

Presentation for
Fifth National Writing Across the Curriculum
Conference: June 1, 2001

Bloomington, Indiana

“ Critiquing the Delivery System:
WAC Online”

Edith Baker, Bradley University

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CRITIQUING THE DELIVERY SYSTEM: WAC ONLINE

FIFTH NATIONAL WRITING ACROSS THE CURRRICULUM CONFERENCE
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

By Edith Baker, Bradley University

June 1, 2001

In this paper, I am going to explain Bradley University's neophyte Writing Across the Curriculum Program, which has been in existence since December of 1997. We started with no outside money: just a dream of developing undergraduate students' competencies to be more fluent in their writing and congruent—and divergent—in their thinking. Our goal was to encourage and develop faculty use of writing and critical thinking in all disciplines at Bradley University. We particularly wanted to encourage metacognition, what Yetta Goodman calls "thinking about thinking."

Several of the English faculty who had been to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Phoenix in 1997 met as an ad hoc group, at the English Department Chair's request, and we composed a proposal, supported by the English department. We argued for an expanded writing center, which would promote writing and thinking across the curriculum for faculty and provide support services to students. Six months later, our proposal was funded by a Provost who was moving to another position; the program thus began under a different Provost, who has supported it marginally, but has not increased the budget in three years. A separate Director of the Writing Center was named; she works with students, and my position as Director of Writing Across the Curriculum is to assist faculty in designing activities and assignments and to promote writing and critical thinking across the curriculum. For my direction of

the writing across the curriculum program, I was given released time from two courses for each semester.

In 1996, before this official creation of the expanded writing center, colleague Henry Wilson and I had developed and sent a questionnaire to all faculty and obtained data about the amount and degree of writing that was occurring at Bradley University. To our delight, many departments were developing or had designed substantial projects involving writing. Much confusion existed, however, and some faculty still thought grammar across the curriculum should be the norm. Nevertheless, faculty in isolated pockets, such as engineering and nursing, were requiring substantial amounts of writing. Math professors and art educators were requiring written critiques and evidence of problem solving. The teacher education program was developing students' skills in collection of artifacts for teaching portfolios. The English Department was creating a portfolio assessment system as a capstone course for all English majors. The Nursing Department decided to develop common language for all assignments, so there would be a sequence to critical thinking activities.

In the seven semesters the Writing Across the Curriculum Program has existed at Bradley, we have tried numerous approaches, based upon multiple practices at various institutions. I have written small grants to obtain funding from the office of faculty development to pay faculty to participate in seminars, which we have offered for three semesters. We have brought in faculty consultants (David Jolliffe from DePaul and Elizabeth Rankin from the University of North Dakota) and invited people with expertise to direct sessions on evaluation, detection of plagiarism, team approaches, critical thinking, collaboration, assignment construction, and assessment.

During the first two seminars, from twelve to twenty faculty (out of 338 full-time faculty) self-selected the semester sequence and then chose topics and projects of interest to them. We met monthly in the first semester (Spring 1999); we had an extended lunch hour, with lunch provided. Topics ranged from critical thinking and activities to stimulate and sharpen students' thinking to portfolio projects to linking criteria sheets and evaluation instruments. For participating during the semester, faculty were given a token stipend (and those free lunches!): \$200 initially and then \$300 the next year. When we run another seminar this fall, we are going to pay faculty \$500, for participating in at least five seminar meetings. The focus on this fall's workshops will be faculty development of their personal and/or professional writing; I will direct the seminars and hope to model effective practices in the teaching of writing and critical thinking.

I noticed in the first years of the seminars that faculty liked to have the task of a specific project to critique and workshop, in written form. We used some of the models of seminars from the Fulwiler and Young methods, as well as ideas from McLeod's collection of essays. Having tried these established methods, we are now adapting the format during the fall semester of 2001 to include a faculty writing group; faculty members will be participating in all the stages of the writing process together, meeting several times a month. This approach is based upon consultation with Dr. Elizabeth Rankin, Professor of English and Director of Faculty Development at the University of North Dakota, who has just written a forthcoming book on this topic for Jossey-Bass. She consulted with us in the spring of 2001, and we are following her format for organization of the writing groups.

What I would like to discuss today is a critique of both the workshop/seminar system and the online system (a Writing Across the Curriculum website for Bradley), which I developed for Bradley in September of 2000. I wish that I could say that faculty embraced the ease of accessing the website (our URL)

www.bradley.edu/wac.html).

However, to my knowledge, only individuals who are already familiar with the Writing Across the Curriculum Program have availed themselves of the website. Perhaps the website needs to be more visually-oriented, rather than heavily print-oriented, a common tendency of text-oriented, English professors. Perhaps the three mailings of brochures to faculty (with the web address) during 2000-2001 have not had sufficient impact to engage faculty to embrace the website. My initial conclusion is that faculty have used the website only if they are already familiar with the program and seeking specific information, perhaps in the creation of a specific writing assignment.

As faculty design more online courses and institutions develop a heavy investment in online courses, a concomitant problem is that writing assignments—and communication—need to be carefully structured. Students may be writing in chat rooms, but they also need to learn the rhetorical conventions that communications are received by an audience only when they meet the audience's needs and interests. At Bradley University, Barb Kerns of the Instructional Technology Office indicated in May of 2001 that there has been a four-fold increase in the use of the Blackboard (delivery) System: in 1999-2000, 32 faculty had online courses, using the old Cyberprof software package; in 2000-2001, 128 faculty delivered their courses online, using Blackboard. While the Blackboard courses impacted 3200 students (student credit hours), there is no

corresponding way to track the student impact of Cyberprof courses in 1999-2000, because those records were not kept. From a Writing Across the Curriculum point of view, we are left to ponder the impact of this huge growth in learning potential and ask the question: is the students' writing and thinking across the curriculum development growing at a corresponding rate? Tremendous possibility for growth is evident here, but we must be more innovative than simply recreating the old format of early correspondence courses. As Hawisher and Pemberton state, there is a "promise" of Asynchronous Learning Networks(ALN), but there is also the danger that

computer networks can be used to support teaching approaches every bit as ill-conceived as those found in old correspondence courses where instructors send out course materials to students who are then expected to absorb the material and send back answers to prescribed questions, sometimes illustrating all too vividly Freire's banking model of education. (17-18, in Reiss, Selfe, and Young)

All conclusions suggest that creation and evaluation of online courses need to be thoughtfully executed. Someone with expertise in writing needs to consult in designing assignments, contributing questions for reflective and analytical thinking, and in assessing and critiquing students' online writing. These skills can be learned by all faculty; however, training for faculty tends to be driven by technology, not pedagogy.

My initial evaluation of both the website and the semester-long seminars is that the personal connection with faculty in groups is essential; without it, faculty do not have incentive to add to their already hectic schedules. Most faculty at Bradley have a four/four course teaching load, so demands to publish compete with all good intentions to improve the quality of undergraduate writing. Faculty members are just like students; when they collaborate, they learn. They share problems and successes. No cold website will promote as much learning as the face to face faculty seminar format does. If the

rationale and philosophy are understood in advance and the groundwork of collaboration is present before faculty log online, then perhaps the website will be of benefit to faculty. For example, I put a criteria sheet in a zip drive on the website for faculty to use as a model in designing an evaluation tool. The source of that information is the National Writing Project, but it is similar to many other criteria sheets, readily available in many textbooks. I am always shocked at how faculty, other than those in the English Dept, think these criteria sheets are revolutionary. One business department member created so many distinctions that he was giving one and two points for each error. I finally told him that I did not think I could ever finish grading his stacks of papers; it would be all right to lump 40 points together into categories of mechanics, grammar, sentence structure, etc.

However, I am now convinced that the personal connections with faculty in seminars need to be established first—then, the backup information of the website can be provided. Marketing seems to be one of the most important strategies a director of writing across the curriculum can embrace. I have attended office parties, retirement parties, holiday parties; I have chatted with faculty in the elevator; there is simply no substitute for the personal connection. At this point, I have received from participants their written, anecdotal evaluation forms at the end of every year. The same faculty have continued to use the website, from my cursory observations; I have not found new faculty (who have e-mailed me, anyway) with the use of the website. Perhaps faculty members are like those individuals in Vygotsky's learning groups: we learn better with other people around us, sharing our enthusiasm for learning. I will attempt to design an instrument or method for evaluating the website; I would be interested to see if any of you in the audience have ideas for such assessment and evaluation.

Sometimes I find it ironic, when I recall the story Lee Odell tells about a faculty member who finally understood what was required in using writing across the curriculum. He said simply, “That’s what we used to call college.” In this day of accountability, design of measurable objectives, and an attitude of students as clients, the concepts of incorporating the teaching of writing and fostering critical thinking require extra effort. However, the results in student learning make the efforts very rewarding. Yet we must go beyond anecdotal evidence and obtain research that supports this position. That is our challenge in the years ahead as we continue to critique the methods of both the seminar and the website formats in the delivery of information, learning, writing, and thinking across the curriculum.

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Signature: <i>Edith M. Baker</i>	Printed Name/Position/Title: <i>Assistant Professor; Director - Writing Across Curriculum</i>		
Organization/Address: <i>Bradley University 1505 W. Bradley Ave. 328 Bradley Hall Peoria, IL 61625</i>	Telephone: <i>309-677-2448</i>	Fax: <i>309-343-6038</i>	Date: <i>June 29, 2001</i>
	E-mail Address: <i>edith@bradley.edu</i>		

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