Writing About Writing: A Snapshot in Time

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Writing about writing (WAW) pedagogy is becoming a dominant approach to teaching writing, yet lacks descriptive empirical studies. In response to this deficit, we surveyed postsecondary instructors using WAW in the US and Canada to discover how they define WAW conceptually (what they think) and operationally (what they do). We used grounded theory to code data and inform our analysis of surveys, interviews, and course materials, including reading and writing assignments. Participants defined WAW as a movement, a pedagogical approach, and a subject matter whereby students read disciplinary literature in writing studies, use writing to investigate and understand writing and writing processes (especially their own), and develop metacognition about writing (including for transfer). The course subject or focus was writing itself, disciplinary content of writing studies (including research), and students' own reflective awareness. Instructors used a range of readings to teach disciplinary content and research methods in writing studies. Classroom activities included practicing and reflecting on writing and researching writing. Assignments focused on the topic of writing including rhetorical analysis and real-world writing tasks, often emphasizing reflection and metacognition.

> "What I would loathe to see . . . is someone come out with a rule book on writing-about-writing with a step-by-step outline to follow. We need to be much more open and allow our teaching to be much more situated than that." – Christina Grant

Writing about Writing (WAW) pedagogy is gathering attention in research and practice, yet descriptive empirical studies are lacking outside of self-reports, and few empirical investigations focus on how instructors themselves conceptualize and enact WAW. The lack of such empirical studies limits our understandings of WAW in practice and our ability to define WAW with respect to how it is enacted in writing classes. The study we report on here aims to fill that gap: to determine WAW's operational and conceptual definition based on information gathered from a broad group of practitioners. That said, a brief overview of WAW is warranted, at least to anchor our discussions of WAW texts and case studies that contextualize the study. WAW is an approach to composition using writing assignments based on primary research on writing, students' literacy experiences, and course readings that

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include writing studies and non-academic texts about writing (e.g., famous writers' writing memoirs or laypeople's autobiographies on writing and literacy). WAW adheres to the idea that, as writing experts, faculty should teach their expertise. To investigate actual practice in WAW and establish a descriptive (rather than evaluative), empirically-driven baseline of practitioners' conceptions and employment of WAW, we conducted a triangulated, mixed-methods study using surveys, interviews, and instructional documents.

There are many ways to learn about WAW. One way is by examining textbooks. Initially, WAW textbook choices were limited for US practitioners to Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs' *Writing about Writing*, Wendy Bishop's *The Subject is Writing*, Eleanor Kutz's *Exploring Literacy*, or books on language (but not on writing specifically). More recently, books such as *Focus on Writing* (McMillan) and *Language Diversity* (Looker-Koenigs) appeared, and *Writing about Writing* was published in subsequent editions. Added to this small set are published lists (e.g., "Teaching Resources"). Across these texts are examples of assignments such as autoethnographies and activity-based genre studies. But it is not clear from such examination that WAW practitioners use only these textbooks; it is also not clear how or why WAW practitioners choose their materials, nor how they would enact WAW in the classroom.

Another way to learn about WAW is by examining individual classroom cases. Bird et al.'s *Next Steps* discusses mainly the implementation of specific WAW courses that, taken together, demonstrate a range of approaches in first year writing (FYW), English as a Second Language (ESL), writing across the curriculum (WAC) and professional writing (PW) courses. That said, the purpose of *Next Steps* was not to examine any patterns emerging from the individual cases. Whicker and Stinson examined published accounts of WAW, many from *Next Steps*, and developed a categorization scheme to plot approaches on various axes of attention to transfer, social aspects of writing (rather than social issues such as jobs and housing), and political issues involved in writing. They categorized the approaches as Process, Language/Literacy, Academic Discourse, and Context Analysis. Process focuses on the writer's own writing process, the process of famous authors, or process research. Language and Literacy pays more attention to political matters; these courses examine issues of diversity and social justice through topics such as literacy sponsors. Academic Discourse deals primarily with either similarity and difference in academic discourse generally or with differences among disciplines and genres. Context Analysis appears to focus on transfer, such as "teaching students to analyze communities, activity systems, and/or genres as a means of more efficiently learning to write in local contexts" (Whicker and Stinson). Whicker and Stinson conclude that further research is needed to determine the efficacy of a focus on student dispositions and transfer in writing studies courses.

While revelatory, these examinations of small sets of individual textbooks or a few individual cases are not enough to understand the fullness of WAW in practice. The next step is to consider many cases together in a cognitively flexible manner in order to attain a deeper layer of understanding. Cognitive flexibility is the ability to think in multiple, adaptive ways to acquire expertise in complex, ill-structured domains (Spiro et al.). This report argues that the goal of cognitive flexibility is to avoid oversimplifying or overregularizing by acknowledging that "knowledge is not as simple and orderly as it might first seem in introductory treatments" (16). Conceptually, WAW as a subject domain is both complex and ill-structured; many interwoven parts interact contextually, and "patterns of combination are inconsistent across case applications of the same nominal type" (2). Borrowing from Kristopher Lotier's metaphor for analyzing the history of postprocess–zooming in on individual cases and zooming out to consider a group of cases–we may come to similarly understand WAW at an advanced level: "At a lower resolution, fine-grained distinctions . . . become invisible. But, sometimes, invisibility is useful. In some cases, too much information produces conceptual static, unnecessary noise" (6). In other words, rather than relying on published texts inflected by the specific practices of individual experts or concentrating, as Lotier has done, on WAW's roots in previous composition pedagogy, we have borrowed Lotier's guiding metaphor to study a diverse range of contemporary practitioners. Our goal is to understand more about WAW as conceptualized and instantiated in widespread practice.

Besides offering an understanding of how practitioners define and instantiate WAW, this study also contributes to composition studies by providing a field-based look at how the theoretical principles of an approach transpire in teaching. This study is significant as the first survey of instructors since Downs and Wardle's small survey ("Reimagining") that asks about WAW teaching practices and beliefs, and it should be useful to practitioners (especially novices) and experienced scholars alike. In reporting descriptively and empirically, we aim to discuss our findings as impartially as possible, without evaluation. Although we are not evaluating WAW in any way, it is appropriate to mention that Cochran and Babcock were using approaches consistent with WAW at the outset of the study, and all three authors are members of the WAW Standing Group. Dean came to the pedagogy later but is an active practitioner.

WAW in the Literature

As a teaching practice, WAW has multiple origins. One traces back to Aristotle and his dual emphasis on knowledge of and practice in rhetoric (Bird et al., "Writing" 13). Regarding more contemporary pedagogy, WAW may evolve from postprocess (Lotier). Another perspective is that contemporary WAW practice is traceable to Doug Downs, who, in his 2004 dissertation, outlined

a course asking students to read, discuss, write about, learn to conduct library research on, and perform composition research, with attention to writing and discourse theory, research methods and questions, and students' own literacy experiences. In Downs' model, students created a research question, designed research methods, and reported/speculated on their findings; students also reflected on themselves as writers (83). Downs argues that FYW should lead students to interrogate their conceptions about writing in dialogue with the larger field. This kind of pedagogy, Downs argues, is difficult to enact given the training of FYW teachers, which he considered to be lacking in theory (at least circa 2004). Downs also attempted to counter the belief that anyone can teach writing, regardless of their specialized disciplinary knowledge. Downs and Wardle later explain that WAW teaches students "flexible and transferable declarative and procedural knowledge about writing" helping them understand writing as "situated, motivated, contingent, material or embodied, and epistemic" ("Reflecting" 279) and something that is collaboratively and dynamically used and produced within "communities of practice" to generate new knowledge, and a skill learned and developed over time (280).

In 2005, the WAW Special Interest Group (SIG) of the CCCC began, and Elizabeth Sargent and Cornelia Paraskevas published *Conversations about Writing*. For a 2007 *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*) article, Downs and Wardle investigated the teaching of writing studies in an FYC class entitled "The Writing about Writing Course" (564). Many compositionists, including several of our study participants, credit this 2007 *CCC* article as kicking off interest in WAW. Its publication caused a stir (and more than a few misunderstandings), resulting in several published responses… and responses to responses. (Those unfamiliar with these exchanges can consult the pages of *CCC*; space prohibits lengthy discussion here.) The WAW approach gained exposure through Wardle and Downs' textbook, *Writing about Writing*, originally published in 2011. Wardle and Downs later reflected, "our field has knowledge and conceptions of writing that are valuable to students," specifically when we advocate a set of principles: "engage students with the research and ideas of the field, using any means necessary and productive, in order to shift students' conceptions of writing, building declarative and procedural knowledge of writing with an eye toward transfer" ("Reflecting"). Elsewhere, Downs and Wardle reported on a small survey of instructors who said that WAW empowers students by teaching them methods and content to "better understand themselves as writers and users of language" ("Reimagining" 136). During the rise of WAW, studies of the efficacy of WAW (Blaauw-Hara et al.; Moore) have taken on increasing importance, but their focus deviates from ours here, which is on course content.

We reasoned, however, that before becoming heavily invested in research on the effects or evaluation of WAW, scholars should establish a baseline of what WAW means to everyday practitioners and learn how they operationalize their definition by what they do. To find out more about instructors who use WAW, we performed a study investigating what WAW has come to mean to a diverse group of practitioners. The study population for our study includes graduate students, contingent faculty, and other everyday teachers using the pedagogy, in addition to some well-known WAW researchers.

Methods

Research Questions

Considering WAW's newness and the dearth of descriptive empirical research, we planned to study the range and boundaries of WAW, including how instructors define WAW and develop their classes. Thus, we developed these research questions to find how WAW is enacted and defined at a particular moment in the US and Canada:

1. How do participants define WAW conceptually?
2. How do participants define WAW operationally? That is, what themes, readings, and assignments do they include in WAW courses?

Data Gathering, Recruitment, and Dataset

We reasoned that collecting multiple forms of data would help us discover how practitioners use and define WAW: instructor surveys, their course materials (e.g., syllabi, writing assignments, reading lists), and interviews of survey participants served as data for the study.

We gained permission to conduct the research from Cochran's IRB. In 2015, we posted an open invitation on the WAWN, WCenter, and WPA-L (now known as the Writing Studies listserv) listservs because they are active and highly populated; from these venues, we recruited 31 participants for the initial survey. These lists include primarily post-secondary instructors, so we expected—and found—all participants were at the post-secondary level. We did not purposefully sample for only US and Canadian practitioners, but all participants were located in those geographical areas.

We used survey, interview, and text analysis as primary data-gathering methods. We created the survey instrument (see Appendix) using Google Forms and distributed a link on the three aforementioned listservs. Based on survey responses, we sent a follow-up letter to those who agreed to be interviewed and to share course materials. Interviews were conducted from fall 2015 to spring 2016 via Skype; participants unable to complete a live interview responded to an emailed set of interview questions. During the recorded interviews, one

researcher took notes and the other asked questions. The questioning interviewer also took backup notes. A research assistant listened to and transcribed the recordings, double-checking the notes.

For our sample, 31 US and Canadian instructors completed the survey; 8 sent course materials; 11 completed in-depth online interviews (4 live and 7 email interviews). One participant did not teach but was a writing center director. This sample was not selected randomly from all composition instructors in the US and Canada, so it does represent a self-selected group invested to some degree in WAW. Some participants are more experienced than others in teaching WAW, and, as a group, they work at a wide range of colleges and universities.

Method of Analysis

This is a mixed-method study using grounded theory–an approach to data analysis that allows relevant information to emerge and discourages researcher's preconceptions from imposing upon the data–for analysis (Babcock 109-110; Corbin and Strauss). We examined surveys to determine categories of responses to each question. Both primary researchers individually counted answers to closed-ended questions and individually coded open-ended ones. We reviewed all Skype and email interviews and examined related course materials. We coded the interviews, syllabi, and other materials for readings, writing assignments, and course themes (topics). We worked through qualitative data recursively: after initial coding, we checked each other's work and discussed the codes until reaching a consensus. We completed the later analysis of our codes with modified grounded theory, using qualitative, interpretative methods. The back-and-forth, constant checking, re-checking, and consensus-making were quite rigorous but necessary because our survey contained open-ended questions, the answers for which had to be interpreted to be categorized. These rounds of coding gave us the structure to track comparison across our data sets.

Using the codes, we formulated holistic lists for each research question. We cross-referenced data points wherever participants mentioned relevant information (in survey responses, interviews, emails to the authors, or provided materials). Specifically, we created a full list of all course readings from the syllabi and then added any readings mentioned elsewhere in the data. We tallied the readings that more than one instructor mentioned. Similarly, using the syllabi and the other data, we created a full list of all writing assignments. Through grounded theory, we categorized and chunked the various assignments until we had a schema that encompassed what we saw in the data. Finally, using the lists and the original data, we developed a codebook to indicate which participants mentioned a given topic in order to create a list of course themes.

Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations resulted from our desire to take a snapshot of WAW at a particular moment. We contacted no instructors outside of the aforementioned listservs, which meant excluding instructors outside of Canada and the US. We asked survey respondents neither their rank, years of experience with WAW, academic backgrounds, nor areas of expertise, although some participants volunteered this information. We did not ask survey respondents specifically about assignments, readings, goals, or objectives, although participants mentioned these in survey responses and some provided course materials. We later realized that the simplistic wording in some survey questions did not go far enough in asking why people assign what they assign—or even whether they view all their assignments as part and parcel of WAW (see Appendix for questions.) All participants self-identified as using WAW, but, unless participants provided a syllabus, we do not know whether their whole course or a portion of it fits into a WAW construct.

Results

Below, we present the results of the research by topic. Some participants opted to use their real names, and we honor that choice in this article. We refer to anyone choosing anonymity by a participant number. Where pertinent, we report participants' views using their original language.

How Participants Came to WAW

Participants came to WAW in various ways, including some survey respondents who were teaching in a program using WAW. All eleven interview subjects reported how they came to and why they preferred WAW. Three reasons emerged why interviewees chose WAW:

1. It fit with what they already knew about writing pedagogy or with their emerging philosophies (n=5).

   For instance, Barbara Bird said, "When I studied what [George Jardine 1742-1827] was doing, I thought, 'That's the way writing should be taught.'" Christina Grant found that WAW fit in with her "commitment to giving students the straight goods about rhetoric, writing, and the real communications world out there." Jeffrey Klausman wrote that WAW "made sense, especially in the context of the research I'd been reading."

2. It fit what they were already doing or wanted to do (n=3).

One participant was working with genre, one was developing a writing program, and one wondered why Donald Murray's writings could not be shared directly with students.

3. Their reason was inherent in the pedagogy itself (n=3).

   For example, Samuel Stinson wrote, "WAW approaches directly position students as writing researchers and provide students a critical apparatus for engaging not only the threshold concepts of our field but also educational transfer." Participant #17 indicated that they were "drawn to the pedagogy because of its emphasis on writing, and secondarily, research on writing." Barbara Lewis wrote, "It immerses college writers in theories about writing and composing; it allows and encourages self-reflection about writing practices; and raises their awareness about the choices they're making in communication, in general."

Conceptual Definitions of WAW

When asked to define WAW, survey participants called it an approach, a concept, a philosophy, a pedagogy, a curriculum, and a movement. Many indicated that the subject students write about in such a course is writing itself and mentioned academic writing and texts, professional writing, writing research, and "[w]hat other writers and researchers have said/discovered about the process of writing" (Barbara Lewis). Participants described WAW as the study of writing, genre, and adaptation. Jack Keningsburg declared it an approach in which writing is used "to inquire about writing itself"; Matthew Ortoleva called writing "the key learning tool" of a WAW approach. Several survey participants offered general definitions:

> "WAW offers opportunities for viewing writing through an ecological frame as well as intersecting with expressivist, cognitive, and social epistemic ways of understanding writing process. . . . WAW remains a flexible concept that subsumes theory, content, and curricular matters. The central theme of WAW pedagogy is writing and focusing on student understanding of writing." – Stinson

> "[Students] spend most or all of their time reading, writing, and talking about what experts and experienced writers have to say about their own struggles to write, their philosophies of what writing can do in the world, what learning to write with power and clarity has done–or not done—for them, and how they actually go about it." – Grant

As part of their definitions, some participants described their approach. Participant #6 wrote that their approach to WAW teaches students "about writing, rather than any one form of writing." Other course content included "the scholarship of our field" (Michaud), research methods, "what we know as writing professionals" (Stinson), theories and research from rhetoric/composition, the importance of metacognition, "how to learn to write" (Participant #6), and declarative and procedural knowledge about writing.

Taking what seems a proactive stance, Michael Michaud wrote:

> "someday the title 'Writing about Writing' needs to go away. [WAW] is what Writing Studies scholars SHOULD be and ARE, in many cases, teaching in their classes. We don't need an extra name for this kind of teaching, although perhaps we did initially. I see WAW as connected to a larger disciplinary movement to claim our knowledge and practices and to teach them to our students [and] . . . as connected to efforts towards writing majors/minors, etc. Someday it will seem silly that we needed a name for the thing that we should have been doing all along: teaching our students what we know (both the declarative and procedural aspects)."

Operational Definitions of WAW

Beyond finding how participants explicitly defined WAW, we wanted to know how they enacted it in teaching; that is we wondered how their operational definitions of WAW were evidenced in their course goals, overall thematic focus/subject, topics, classroom activities, readings, and writing assignments. Although participants used a variety of terms to describe their courses, the categories grew out of our grounded theory analysis of data that allowed us to determine what WAW meant to the instructors, not just in theory but in practice.

Classroom Activities

Certain classroom activities help to define WAW as highly interactive and both cognitively and socially situated. Grant wrote, "Ideally, the approach also involves some research-supported pedagogical elements such as small class size, workshop format, student-versus teacher-led teaching, teacher-student conferencing, shared freewriting (i.e. inkshedding), lots of feedback on content (first) and lower order concerns (second), portfolio grading, and contract grading" and "thinking about others' ideas *in relation to themselves*" (emphasis in original). Other participants mentioned writing, metacogni-

tion, and practice with various genres, including "helping students practice writing" (Michaud).

Course Goals

Part of the operational definition of WAW arose from the course goals and objectives participants listed in survey responses, interviews, or course materials. In our grounded theory analysis, we phrased these as objectives with infinitive verbs (some were already phrased that way). Students were to:

- understand how writing works
- learn different kinds of writing
- understand or theorize writing
- develop abstract knowledge about literacy, writing, and rhetoric
- "increase transfer through self-study, meta-cognition, and practice with various genres as examples of application of abstract concepts (such as rhetorical awareness and rhetorical situations, activity systems, discourse communities, etc.) rather than as ends unto themselves" (Participant #7).
- "acquire knowledge and experience that transfer to other writing situations" (Participant #16)
- "develop a flexible collection of writing process strategies" (Grant)

Although not all of these objectives are measurable, this list provides a start for designing WAW course objectives.

Overall Focus of the Course

The definition of WAW also emerged from the focus of participants' courses. As expected, the most common subject and focus areas mentioned were writing and the study and practice of writing, though participants phrased it differently one to the next. Courses focused on "writing itself" (Kenigsberg); "understanding how writing works" (Pat Burnes); "writing—including the students' own texts" (Grant); "reflective awareness" (Burnes); and "writing (in a 'meta' way)" (Participant #22). People also mentioned as course foci writing as a "discipline," "writing studies disciplinary content" (TJ Geiger), and "research on composition, literacy studies, and rhetorical studies" (David Stock). Stock said writing appears as "both an activity and an object of study" with a "twin emphasis on writing and writing research." Finally, participants described the focus as "reading and writing about the activity of writing" (Lewis) and "students' reasons for writing and what they write and why" (Bradley Bleck).

Specific Course Topics and Units

To further understand variations in the focus of the courses, we examined specific course content by asking participants what themes (meaning topics or units) they included. To probe the issue, we also examined their course materials. Following grounded theory techniques, we clustered data into categories that seemed to cohere, and then re-examined the data to further collapse and combine categories. In all, we counted eighty-seven different words or phrases regarding themes and topics, and each became a token. The top topics before combining like tokens were process, discourse communities, and genre. After combining like codes into categories, the top focus was Literacy, including visual, rhetorical, workplace, information, digital, alternative, and personal (all of these words collocated with Literacy). Specifically mentioned were literacy narratives and "critical literacy autobiographies," although in some cases it was difficult to determine if respondents meant these as topics students study (perhaps through assigned readings), as assignments they write, or both. Another prominent topic was Rhetoric, including visual and digital rhetoric, rhetorical situation, rhetorical awareness, rhetorical reading, and rhetorical analysis. The count for Rhetoric rises to twenty-seven if we include things like voice, style, exigence, audience, persuasion, and argument. After further combining and refining categories, Process gained the subcategories of invention, freewriting, revision, and "reading, writing, and thinking as processes." A final set of topics related to Social Considerations, which included discourse community, genre, and cultural studies (see Table 1.)

Table 1. Combined Course Topics

Literacy	Rhetoric	Process	Social Considerations
Visual Rhetorical Workplace Information Digital Alternative Personal	Visual Digital Situational Awareness Analytical Reading Voice Style Exigence Audience Persuasion Argument	Invention Free-writing Revision Reading Writing Thinking	Discourse community Genre Cultural studies

Regarding themes and diversity, Grant said in an online interview,

> "One theme I might add is awareness of diverse rhetorical traditions. It's important for all students to acknowledge and value their home country's rhetorical traditions and not see them as deficits to their learning or development as writers and thinkers. We need to help all students move towards a truly global culturally and linguistically diverse future in order to embrace and mobilize all ways of seeing and being. . . . The power language and ideology of Euro-American English must be tempered with flavours and colours from across rhetorical worlds."

Reflecting that thematic approaches may change, Michaud wrote,

> "My WAW courses are always changing. I've done work with literacy narratives and with rhetoric. I've looked at writing process and auto-ethnography. But lately I've been branching out and making up my own WAW courses and assignments. It's like Doug and Liz's book was the inspiration, a model, and permission and now I have picked up the ball and run with it. I've turned a multi-major professional writing course into a WAW course in which we read work by . . . Deborah Brandt and Anne Beaufort. In my FYW courses I've designed units and courses entirely on revision and on the five-paragraph essay. I'm having fun with it and I see endless possibilities . . . once you make the switch from teaching other people's 'content' to teaching your own."

Readings

As part of the definition of WAW, participants mentioned the types of readings used in their courses. These materials were used to help determine what people mean by WAW. Instructors included texts on writing, writing theory, writing research, and writing "introductory research articles" (Cat Mahaffey); instructional texts; "key disciplinary literature" (Ortoleva); scholarship/research on novice writers; scholarship from the discipline or field of writing studies; and "articles, chapters, and other texts by writing scholars" (Clay Walker). Walker also told us he assigns "readings on a variety of writing studies issues (e.g., genre studies, rhetorical reading, literacy studies)" and that "students read selected texts for class discussions in preparation for writing projects." Jennifer deWinter's students, on the other hand, choose a "keyword" from writing studies and then, in groups, research and write about it.

To find out more about course readings, we examined course material and actual references provided by eight instructors and eleven instructor interviews without duplicating information from six instructors who provided both. We

found that several (not all) courses used *Writing about Writing* (1st or 2nd edition)[1]. The most popular reading (used by six instructors) was Wardle's "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces." When asked in an interview about readings, Lewis said she used "excerpts from . . . Peter Elbow, Annie Dillard, Stephen King, John Barth, Berthoff and others." Participant #10 specified "readings from Robert McRuer, Helene Cixous, Gloria Anzaldua, Geneva Smitherman, Lisa Delpit, etc." Readers may note that the list includes not only writing studies scholars but people in other areas, such as philosophers and both literary and popular writers. We found five readings used in common by four instructors; these include three about discourse communities, one about activity theory, and one about literacy sponsors. Of readings used in two or more courses, all but two readings (92%) appeared in the first and second editions of *Writing about Writing*. However, of the 105 readings mentioned by only one participant, eighty-two, or 78%, did not appear in the *Writing about Writing* textbook. This suggests that shared readings are often textbook based, but that, outside of that context, people tend to choose different and non-overlapping readings, even some apparently from outside of writing studies itself. We cannot assume causality, so perhaps the textbook is driving the pedagogy, or perhaps Wardle and Downs included readings that were already popular. The entire list of readings can be viewed in "Readings for WAW Courses" on the WAW Blog (https://writingaboutwriting.net/2023/05/17/readings-for-waw-courses/).

Writing Assignments

When asked to define WAW, several participants mentioned types of assignments (n=30) as a defining program element; for example, three said assignments focused on the topic or nature of writing. Others mentioned rhetorical analysis, "'authentic' writing tasks" (Dan Bommarito), and assignments that "end with students reflecting on what they have done and often comparing that to what they have been reading about" (Burnes). Bommarito said that "writing is the centerpiece of all the assignments." In many courses, students do primary research; in some primary and library research assignments, students researched academic or professional writing, writing process, or writing pedagogy: "The major writing projects also concern writing issues, such as exploring the writing and genre conventions in a professional field" (Walker).

We examined all the data for mention of specific writing assignments. The following list includes both unique and common assignments, ordered by the most to least common assignment category:

- Research writing: annotated bibliographies, source evaluation, library research paper, synthesis paper, research or professional conference proposal or presentation, literature review, bibliographic essay
- Reflections: literacy narratives, portfolio reflections (including letters), writing logs, autoethnographies on writing, writing to discover self, think-aloud protocol analysis, reflections of writing process and product, letter arguing for grade
- Analysis of texts in context: rhetorical analysis, genre analysis, exploring writing in a particular field, profession, or discipline
- Analysis of writing as a contextualized act or sociocultural phenomenon (could include primary research): discourse community analysis, science accommodation writing activity, new media
- Summary and responses: writing about readings, writing to learn, extended definitions (could be argumentative)
- Exploratory: prewriting, writing to explore, journaling, freewriting
- Argument: a theory of writing, writing to prove your point, critique, critical summary, grading rubric
- Explanatory writing-to-learn and instructional writing: extended definition of writing studies terms, research on key writing studies concepts, "Five-part Guide" to explain reading, writing, and revising
- Peer review: of presentations and drafts (often written out as a memo or letter)

Despite perceiving an emphasis in WAW on genre study, few respondents reported assigning genres outside of personal narratives, analyses, arguments, research papers, and reader responses. Though these assignments mainly focused on writing studies content, the genres are common to many composition courses, with some exceptions: Several people assigned a letter (e.g., one attached to a portfolio), a genre often left for professional writing courses; several assigned research reports on students' first-hand research. A few assigned presentations, multimodal writing (e.g., online portfolios that could contain a variety of genres), or new media writing assignments. Overall, the preponderance of assignments called for academic and personal writing; though some were professional writing assignments, no civic writing appeared.

Discussion

Despite going into the study with no preconceptions about how WAW would be defined or enacted by participants, we found diverse definitions. However, one common theme emerged: these college instructors consider "writing itself" to be the focus of WAW courses. But WAW emerged as more than a pedagogy. They also defined WAW as a movement, a philosophy, and a

concept/subject matter. As a pedagogical and curricular approach, WAW asks students to read and write about disciplinary literature in writing studies and to use writing to inquire about their own writing processes and writing in communities.

WAW is becoming common in composition pedagogy, finding its way into writing-related courses and gaining proponents. However, not all of our study participants define themselves as WAW proponents. Answering whether they considered themselves a proponent or explorer of WAW, a clear majority, 65% (n=20) considered themselves proponents, and 20% (n=16) identified as explorers (five said both; one gave an off-topic answer). This result reflects the variety of stances toward WAW of the composition instructors who participated and may reflect distinctions in how much autonomy individual instructors have in a given teaching context.

Understandably, WAW course goals vary, but most courses include goals regarding learning about and understanding writing studies and writing itself; other goals are to learn for transfer, develop writing processes, and improve metacognition about writing. The course subject or focus is writing, and the disciplinary content is predominantly writing studies (including research) and students' reflective awareness. Instructors teach content and research methods of writing studies as well as common writing and rhetorical skills and genres, drawing from the humanities and social sciences in their approach to writing studies. This emphasis on writing studies content is the most predominant way that WAW pedagogy is distinguished from other composition pedagogies.

We found the main course topics and units of courses to be *Process*, *Rhetoric*, *Literacy*, and *Social Considerations*; we believe these categories are consistent with and confirm the conclusions of Whicker and Stinson, who found the four theoretical axes of WAW to be *Process*, *Language/Literacy*, *Academic Discourse*, and *Context Analysis* (i.e., teaching for transfer).

Interestingly, many WAW courses rely, in part, on rhetorical analysis as a key to introducing students to writing studies, likely reflecting the instructors' own background in rhetorical studies. Classroom activities, while drawing on forms common to other composition pedagogies, also commonly include practicing and reflecting on writing and writing research. Assignments focus on the topic of writing (including rhetorical analysis), academic writing, and professional writing. Reflection and metacognition are usually included. Early uses of WAW– like the one highlighted in Downs' dissertation–tended to be in FYW, typically a course requiring a research paper. In this study, however, some instructors reported using WAW with writing center tutors or graduate students, others in undergraduate courses before or beyond FYW, including ESL courses. This finding is consistent with the range reported in *Next Steps.* Just as FYW is not students' only opportunity to learn to write, WAW is not

limited to FYW, a point Wardle highlights in an interview: "At the end of the day, first year composition is still just one class at one place at the beginning of a student's educational experience. And we already know that that will never be enough. . . . We need to work with faculty from across all the years and all the disciplines as well, so they can continue the work with student writers" (Olejnik 64).

Our analysis showed that many instructors explicitly identified WAW with the Wardle and Downs *Writing About Writing* textbook, while others were initially drawn to WAW by the 2007 Downs and Wardle article or discovered the approach on their own or with books like Wendy Bishop's *The Subject is Writing*. We found that the Wardle and Downs' text liberates some and confines others. We did not expect, but found, that some equate this textbook with the pedagogy. (That the textbook and the pedagogy share a name is perhaps a source of this conflation). Other individuals developed their own approaches, perhaps starting with readings that appear in the Wardle and Downs book and then adding their own. Our study was not about the textbook, nor did we ask about it, but eight survey respondents referred explicitly to it and some apparently expected us to know what they were talking about (e.g., "the text").

The identity relationship between WAW and the textbook *Writing About Writing* arose repeatedly. Several respondents shared Participant #20's view: "I take issues with some aspects of the textbook *Writing about Writing*, but the concept works." For some, such as Participant #26, the textbook enables sophisticated teaching: "What I appreciate most about the text is that I learn while teaching it, and it doesn't dumb things down for the students." Keningsburg's initial reaction to some of Wardle and Downs' work was "omg hell no would that ever work in a classroom. I thought then that it was important for teachers to know, but not necessarily for students to read. I am–slowly–coming around to having my students read more of the dense, abstract stuff as a way to frame the more concrete, practical stuff." This comment revealed an initial disinclination to use WAW based on the Wardle and Downs textbook, but he became more of a proponent "with each passing semester." One participant remarked that "the Downs and Wardle book just seemed much too bulky," though we don't know if this is meant literally–as in the book's physical properties–or conceptually. Yet other participants reported having a wider vision of WAW than captured by *WAW*. One wrote, "It's important to consider WAW's expanded definition and not just the Wardle and Downs approach." Participant #10 mentioned that new TAs used Wardle and Downs' book, but that the department had added readings for teaching multimodality, using "none from *WAW* 2nd ed. because we found the chapter to be pretty useless for our needs." That participant added, "WAW [the textbook] doesn't address the role identity plays in the creation and negotiation of texts."

The many instructors who selected alternative readings do not, apparently, identify WAW with only *Writing about Writing*, the textbook. Thus, using a WAW reader may be, for some, a way to teach their expertise and flexibly to forge new pathways; for others, the textbook felt unnecessary. In both cases, it seems that, as an approach to teaching writing, WAW allows practitioners to draw on their writing studies background and interests when selecting the course readings.

Given what practitioners in our study reported about their classes, the range of approaches is consistent with those reported in *Next Steps.* Moreover, instructors vary in their approach in ways that reinforce the categories derived by Whicker and Stinson. Some see WAW as a distinct pedagogy with unique features, including those for which Downs advocates. Some participants incorporated WAW with other approaches (one used cultural studies, and another mentioned its compatibility with critical pedagogy). Some were explorers who reported that they came to WAW because it fit in with what they already knew or what they had already been doing before WAW was named as such. The most vocal proponents in our study had come to use WAW as the basis for their entire course, incorporating the strands of writing scholarship they saw as important for their goals. For some participants, WAW appears to have altered their previous conception of what a writing course should be. The range of assignments, while predominantly academic writing, certainly suggests that WAW is adaptable to various types of writing courses (including levels from developmental to graduate); nothing in the data suggests it is necessarily limited to academic writing. Nor does using WAW limit instructors to any given approach: it "has never been a single monolithic curriculum" (Whicker and Stinson). WAW also seems flexible for participants who reported changing topics and readings from semester to semester or course to course; recall Wardle's comment that even the same WAW instructor may take different approaches to the same end ("Reflecting" 281).

Most writing assignments in our study were academic, a finding similar to findings by Graves et al. and by Melzer in studying composition and WAC pedagogy. But the strong emphasis on self-reflective metacognition through self-study, auto-ethnographies, and literacy narratives in WAW enables expressivist writing in an academic setting, and many instructors included personal narratives of some sort. The assignments promoting reflection, coupled with data-gathering–especially of one's own writing and writing processes–helps WAW blend the expressivist and the academic insofar as the subject matter combines writing *itself* and writing *my self.* Perhaps this idea explains some participants' strong feelings about WAW (two participants used the word "love"). Some participants applauded WAW as a route to help students make transitions into college and into becoming researchers. WAW is indeed unique

in its emphasis on studying writing per se—as an act, process, phenomenon, set of genres, and so on.

Finally, WAW is likely to change along with the discipline. WAW themes and readings follow scholarship in the field, so works like Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's textbook edition of *Naming What We Know* can encourage variation in the readings selected for a WAW course. In addition, philosophical changes in the discipline can also inflect WAW pedagogies and materials. One example would be WAW's relationship to postprocess. If the move from composition to writing studies is, in fact, a paradigm shift resulting from the end of postprocess (Lotier), we might expect other approaches and theories–like WAW–to ascend disciplinarily. Conversely, if this move is not a paradigm shift–if WAW is, rather, a phenomenon that is "inextricably bound-up with and connected to" postprocess (122)–we would have a way to understand how WAW draws from several composition pedagogies and movements, incorporating elements of process, genre, and reflective writing into assignments of largely academic and expressivist (i.e., reflective) writing.

Then again, perhaps our disciplinary context doesn't quite fit with Lotier's framework. A study like the one represented by this article is important at this time not only because WAW is becoming a standard in composition pedagogy, but because WAW draws from the whole of composition and rhetoric, the whole of writing studies and sister fields such as linguistics, literature, and education. WAW practitioners do assign mostly familiar academic genres for students to write in, but this study has demonstrated that WAW practitioneres also draw from a wide range of readings in writing studies. In this regard, WAW is perhaps not a living offshoot of postprocess, but a natural outgrowth of the entire writing studies field. Practitioners come to WAW from various traditions and approaches: historical, rhetorical, genre studies, social constructivism, Soviet psychology, even expressivism. All these have a place and a space in WAW.

With apologies to Walt Whitman: Does WAW contradict itself? Very well then it contradicts itself. (But it is large, it contains multitudes.)

In practice, then, WAW takes the logical step from writing in the disciplines, investigating discourse communities, and having teachers teach from genres that they know and use, to the idea of teaching writing studies content in the composition course (which is, presumably, the instructors' expertise). Because of the strong emphasis on writing studies as content emerging from the WAW movement, we propose that the term *writing studies pedagogy* better captures the diversity and richness of perspectives through which students can learn about and practice writing via WAW.

Ideas for Future Research

The study results hint at pedagogical connections we did not investigate explicitly. First among those was expressed by one reviewer for this article, who was surprised that so many participants used rhetorical analysis in their coursework. But, considering the array of backgrounds of composition instructors—many who were schooled in rhetorical analysis—it seems logical that they would emphasize this humanities-based approach in their WAW courses. More to the point, the instructors chose to include the content of writing studies while retaining many of the types of writing assignments common to composition classes of all sorts. Second, the emphasis on learning about writing and writing studies, rather than simply learning how to write, appears to be one of WAW's most distinguishing features, which we might choose to explore more.

Much research work remains for studying WAW. We suggest a large-scale quantitative study of WAW course syllabi and a full-scale study of readings and writing assignments used in WAW courses that would expand the findings of this study. Starting with the reading and writing assignments we found in this study, we wonder: would one find a canon developing in the larger community of WAW instructors? Similarly, syllabus analysis could include a study of specified goals and objectives that would broaden and deepen the findings here.

Surveys of a larger group of instructors could reveal more about WAW reading and writing assignments, including how they may have changed since the inception of this study. An interview study could reveal more about how instructors' backgrounds relate to their choice of readings and writing assignments, going into more depth about what they consider central to writing studies and WAW. From such studies, we might learn more about why instructors make the choices they do. Such studies could research the effects of using WAW to teach graduate teaching assistants, writing center tutors, and/or WAC/WID instructors: Would perceptions of writing studies or composition instruction differ across time, curricular level, and program type? How might their teaching and perspectives compare to those who learned to teach writing in more traditional ways? It would also be useful to consider more broadly how WAW may be used with various student populations (e.g., in secondary, developmental, and ESL courses). Further research could then follow-up on studies of WAW efficacy, examining effects on transfer of WAW pedagogy compared to non-WAW approaches.

As with many qualitative studies, we end–happily–with more questions than when we began.

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Notes

1. *Writing about Writing*'s 3rd, 4th, and now 5th editions hadn't appeared when we collected our data, but because our research is not about the textbook, its readings–no matter the source–remain relevant. This snapshot is historical.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be a proponent of WAW or more of an explorer in WAW?
   To what extent and in what ways?
2. How do you define "writing about writing"?
3. What kinds of themes do you include in your course? (These themes may appear in readings, units, assignments, etc.)
4. For what level of students do you use WAW?
5. What delivery method do you use?
6. Who uses writing about writing at your institution?
7. Anything else you want to tell us:

I agree to participate in a follow-up interview (potentially by phone or email). I understand that my participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and also understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time before, during, or after the study.

I agree to submit materials to be used as data in the study. (If you agree you may be asked to submit your syllabus, WAW assignments, and any other relevant materials such as rubrics or WAW reading lists).

__ yes, use my real name   __yes, use a pseudonym   _ no

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