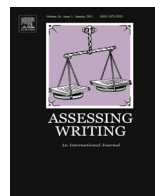




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Assessing Writing



Contexts of engagement: Towards developing a model for implementing and evaluating a writing across the curriculum programme in the sciences



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ABSTRACT

Reflective in nature, this paper describes the process of implementing a WAC programme in the sciences at a university in the Anglophone Caribbean. It also outlines attempts to justify its continuity by employing 'utilization-focused evaluation' which is designed and organized around what information would be most useful to the administration and the way in which this information would be applied. A multi-pronged/naturalist-based approach to evaluating outcomes is applied with a view to offering a spectrum of outcomes based on varying levels of inquiry from a variety of contexts which enable a more informed exploration of the myriad of emergent issues brought to light. The suite of intervention strategies and the quality of evidence produced were well received by the administration who facilitated further funding. Suggestions for programme implementation, evaluation and sustainability are offered.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Delineating the problem

The implementation of early WAC (writing across the curriculum) programmes in the United States was fuelled to a great extent by grassroots advocacy which emerged as a result of concerns relating

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to the pivotal role of writing in students' intellectual development and career preparation. Indeed, [Anson \(2006, p. 101\)](#) contends that the efforts of WAC advocates were to a great extent focused on persuading teachers in other disciplines to "incorporate writing into their instruction for a variety of purposes" rather than on concerns such as the role of WAC programmes in institutional contexts and continuity over the long term.

This strongly suggests that attempts at winning over 'converts' to WAC philosophy and pedagogy may have in many cases occurred at the expense of deep analysis of and research on critical issues such as those pertaining to the viability and effectiveness of WAC programmes, their sustainability and continuity and the type of contexts within which they operate. Indeed, [Condon \(2001\)](#) reminds us that the literature about WAC is only beginning to address questions that extend beyond the effectiveness of faculty seminars. And [Fulwiler \(1988\)](#) has pointed to the paucity of hard data on the success or failure of WAC programmes while [Smithson \(1995\)](#) has also lamented the lack of hard evidence as to whether students in WAC programmes actually write better or comprehend course content better than those who are exposed to less writing.

In all fairness however, efforts to quantify the outcomes or effectiveness of WAC programmes have been beset by many challenges ([Ehrfurth, 2009](#)). In fact, [Fulwiler \(1988\)](#) noted that WAC programmes tended to be idiosyncratic, complex and varied. He further contended that WAC programmes tended to be more results oriented than research oriented and this led to programmes frequently being "long on data that are easily collected and anecdotal in nature, but short on either quantitative or qualitative data collected and analyzed methodically or over a long period of time" (p. 62). Closely related to this, continued Fulwiler, is the fact that quantitative approaches to measuring improvement in writing and writing ability proved little and were considered marginally useful, and for this reason he concludes that "evaluating writing across the curriculum programmes may be as complicated as evaluating such things as "good teaching" or "successful learning" (p. 65).

This position finds strong support in [Condon's \(2001\)](#) assertions which speak to the complexity of teaching writing and measuring writing ability. This according to him is made increasingly more complex by teachers' desire for assessments that support instruction and, on the other end of the spectrum, the public's demand for proof of effective instruction, particularly in the case of programmes such as WAC.

Other issues attributed to the dearth of empirical evidence concerning the outcomes of WAC programmes relate to their dubious sustainability which is often due to the absence of central administrative involvement in its implementation and consistent leadership ([Ehrfurth, 2009](#)). This is entirely consistent with [Mullin and Schorn's \(2007\)](#) report of events at their institution – the University of Texas at Austin – which clearly illustrate how lack of administrative support may negatively affect measurement of the success of WAC programmes. In this instance, the administrators' withdrawal of support for the institution's WAC programmes led to the lack of "any concerted efforts to measure the effectiveness of the WAC pedagogy" (p. 6) as well as failure to sustain the interest and motivation of the teaching staff.

The apparent link between the effective evaluation of WAC programmes and their mode of implementation/operation, funding/sustainability, and monitoring had been highlighted earlier by [Jones and Comprone \(1993\)](#) who argued for integration between administration, pedagogy and research. They further suggested that this merging of interests could best be achieved via the establishment of a central administrative unit to manage WAC programmes. This unit they recommend should be "coordinated by someone who has the research record, curricular vision, and interdisciplinary insight that will encourage a balanced emphasis on research and teaching in every part of the WAC programme." (p. 64). The individual would ideally encourage cooperation with discipline faculty, set minimum standards concerning the number and quality of research papers to be produced and establish guidelines for the delivery of the writing component of WAC courses and for assessing student writing while providing sound leadership.

In support of the last point, [Condon \(2001, p. 31\)](#) has contended that the evaluation of students' ability is a key component of accountability which involves clear documentation of a programme's effectiveness and demonstration of "its benefits to different stakeholders" as well as the justification of its "existence or continued growth". [Anson \(2006, p. 101\)](#) has also argued for "clearer and more generative models for implementation and assessment" in a context where there is an increased

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