A Writing Retreat at the Intersection of WAC and Civic Engagement

Catherine Savini
Westfield State University, csavini@westfield.ma.edu

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Partnerships between writing across the curriculum (WAC) and civic engagement (CE) programs are not given much attention but these partnerships improve each program significantly. CE programs can borrow models from WAC for professional development and obtain support for specific kinds of writing assignments; WAC programs can find among CE instructors a willing audience for critiquing the structural oppression inherent in literacy and for valuing dialectical, linguistic, and genre diversity. This snapshot focuses on a faculty writing retreat that emerged out of a WAC/CE partnership and demonstrates how such partnerships can open the door for critical WAC pedagogy.

Keywords: WAC, critical WAC, service learning, community engagement, CE, faculty writing retreat

A successful WAC program creates a culture of writing on campus by taking a two-pronged approach: first, by providing professional development to instructors from all disciplines who teach writing and/or use writing to learn; and second, by creating institutional structures that ensure writing skills and knowledge are reinforced throughout a student's college career. When budgets and time are tight, as they are at my public institution where faculty teach a four/four load, cultivating such a culture of writing is no small task.

Promoting WAC is further complicated by the fact that literacy education is not a neutral endeavor. In a 1996 article entitled "WAC as Critical Pedagogy: The Third Stage?," Donna LeCourt makes the case for critical WAC, an approach that promotes assignments that enable students to examine and critique the ways in which academic discourse functions to silence students and/or "inscribe students as subjects" (LeCourt 390). Victor Villaneuva and Michelle Hall Kells have also been critical of traditional WAC programs for "too narrowly privileging academic discourse over other discourses and communities shaping the worlds in which our students live and work" (Kells 373). In response to this problem, Villaneuva and Kells promote an approach to literacy that embraces linguistic, cultural, and dialectical diversity. Kells re-envisions WAC as "writing across communities." The primary goals of writing across communities at UNM are to "cultivate critical awareness of the ways that literacy practices are shaped by ever-shifting sets of economic, political, social,

cultural and linguistic factors" and to invite all stakeholders, including students, into conversations about writing in their various communities of belonging (Kells 373). Despite this powerful strand of scholarship, a quick glance at the recently released WAC Statement of Principles and Practices reveals that critical WAC is not yet mainstream.

One way for critical WAC to gain traction on our campuses is for WAC programs to partner with CE programs, which tend to be invested in exposing and tackling systemic inequities. [1] Despite the fact that WAC and CE are natural partners—both are alternative, high-impact pedagogies that originated in the 1970s—there is little scholarship on the potential for partnerships between WAC and CE initiatives (Joliffe; Parks & Goldblatt). This snapshot aims to help fill that gap by describing and examining a model for CE/WAC partnerships that can advance a critical WAC approach: a writing retreat focused on CE based scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). As Anne Ellen Gellar and Michelle Eodice's *Working with Faculty Writers* demonstrates, writing retreats are an effective approach to cultivating a culture of writing, and a writing retreat with a CE theme invites productive cross pollination between two alternative pedagogies.

WAC programs stand to gain much in partnering with CE initiatives, including the following:

- An audience of instructors enthusiastic for alternative pedagogies; instructors who are not wed to the lecture model will likely be more inclined to embrace WAC pedagogy.
- An audience more likely to value linguistic and dialectical diversity; effective partnerships value community expertise and do not prioritize academic expertise/discourse.
- An opportunity to develop writing assignments aimed at public audiences in nonacademic genres, such as letters to representatives, oral histories, documents for nonprofits, op-eds, podcast scripts, etc.
- An opportunity to promote reflective and low-stakes writing practices; reflective writing is widely recognized as an essential component of successful CE courses and a key to assessing the effectiveness of these courses.

In the next section I will provide an overview of the retreat and then I will discuss how CE/WAC partnerships can open the door for critical WAC pedagogy.

Retreat Goals and Overview

Our retreat goals were to cultivate awareness of critical service learning (CSL) scholarship, increase the number of CE courses offered, recruit faculty participants to the CE committee, support faculty writing, share peer review practices, foster collaboration across disciplines, create a culture of writing and CE on campus, and initiate a conversation around anti-oppressive pedagogy.

The five-day retreat was held on the second week of June in our campus library. The 17 participants from nine departments were at different stages in the process; some were drafting SOTL articles and others were designing courses and research studies simultaneously. Each participant was paid $1500 and all were eligible for $500 for conference travel. Prior to the retreat, participants were asked to read a collection of CSL articles and anti-oppressive pedagogy articles from the following fields: education, rhetoric and composition, history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology. One of the challenges of service learning is that the term means different things to different people. The reader provided us with a common vocabulary and an overview of the current CSL scholarship, which values a justice-oriented approach to engagement. Faculty who teach a four/four course load and are expected to contribute to service and scholarship would otherwise be unlikely to delve into this field.

On the first day of the retreat, we invited faculty, staff, and community members from the area to participate in developing learning outcomes for our CE program. This work established a strong foundation for the retreat. First, we worked collaboratively with multiple stakeholders. Second, we identified our learning goals for students. The remainder of the week consisted of writing, establishing goals, engaging in peer review, and attending optional workshops. We offered four hour-long workshops to support SOTL research: ethnography, survey design, grant writing, and reflective writing assignment design. We also led a roundtable discussion on anti-oppressive pedagogy. If we are to take a justice-oriented approach to engagement, we reasoned, then our own classrooms must strive to be equitable and inclusive.

The 17 participants were divided into three small groups based on what stage they were in in the writing process. The groups met daily with their facilitator to identify obstacles to progress and to provide one another with feedback. Although multidisciplinary, these groups shared the common goals of designing courses using CSL principles and studying the effectiveness of these courses. Our shared purpose made it possible for us to communicate across disciplines and even borrow from one another's disciplines. For example, an economics professor reflected, "I never intended to use ethnography, but now I have a design in mind and am developing my project accordingly."

A post-event survey demonstrated that the retreat was successful in promoting a justice-oriented approach to CE, building community on campus, and cultivating a culture of writing. All of the 15 respondents to the survey said that the retreat increased their investment in our university's CE initiative and that the retreat would influence their teaching. Ninety percent of the participants also indicated that the "retreat's focus on the writing process (peer review, reflective writing, transfer, revision) impacted" how they would teach in the future.

As a direct result of the retreat, there have been two publications, 14 conference presentations, and five new courses. The retreat also resulted in a letter to administration that made the following requests: develop a center for CE with a full time administrator; support grassroots and proven pedagogies, such as

learning communities and WAC; capitalize on existing expertise; and support immersive, compensated opportunities for faculty development. Overall, this retreat demonstrated how valuable WAC approaches, such as a writing retreat, can be to cultivating a culture of CE on campus. This retreat also enabled me to set a new course for WAC.

An Opportunity for Critical WAC

For me, the retreat and the partnership provoked a shift in my approach to WAC by opening a door to critical WAC. The retreat encouraged a critical WAC approach in three very specific ways: first, through reflective writing assignments that explore systemic inequities and invite linguistic and dialectical diversity; second, by forging a connection between anti-oppressive pedagogy and WAC; and third, by shifting the focus to genres for public audiences.

Reflective writing assignments are central to CE courses, so during the retreat I led a workshop entitled "Reflective Writing in the CE Class" with the goal of promoting reflective writing as an opportunity to improve student learning and to gather artifacts for SOTL. One of the most popular methods for getting students to reflect in CE courses is asking them to keep a journal. While journaling is an excellent way for students to use writing to reconstruct and process their experiences, journaling about CE with a focus on the personal has its pitfalls. For example, a persistent problem in CE courses is that students get stuck on the "magical moment" of personal transformation whereas structural oppressions remain invisible (see Murphy and Rasch, and Herzberg).

WAC leaders can support faculty in developing writing prompts that push students past the magical moment to explore structural oppression, such as this triple entry journal prompt.

TRIPLE-ENTRY JOURNAL

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3
Describe an interaction you've had or witnessed during your community engagement with someone who is of a different race, sexuality, gender, ability, and/or class than you.	Select three relevant quotations from three relevant readings/lectures.	Use these quotes as a lens to examine your experiences. How do the ideas/concepts/theories presented in these quotes enable you to see your experience in a new way?

Another prompt I shared with the retreat participants asks students to tell a story in response to Ann E. Green's "Difficult Stories: Service, Race, and Class" in which they reconstruct a moment when their race, class, ability, sexuality, or gender

conferred them with any sort of advantage. In addition to providing sample prompts, I encouraged instructors to invite dialectical and linguistic diversity into journals; instructors invested in tuning students into structural inequities are more inclined to recognize the value of inclusive writing assignments.

The retreat also helped me begin to connect WAC with anti-oppressive pedagogy. In *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice*, Kevin Kumashiro identifies four forms of anti-oppressive pedagogy: "improving the experience" of marginalized students; "changing the knowledge" students have of those who are labeled different; examining and challenging structural inequalities; and addressing why anti-oppressive pedagogy is so difficult to practice (xxv-xxvi). While we only scratched the surface of anti-oppressive pedagogy, our roundtable discussion laid the foundation for a pedagogy retreat I organized the following summer called Fostering Inclusive and Equitable Pedagogy, which was co-sponsored by our CE and WAC programs and included faculty, staff *and students*, in the spirit of Kells' writing across communities. During this retreat, faculty reworked their writing assignments and syllabi to be inclusive of multilingual students, students with disabilities and mental health conditions, students of color, and LGBTQIA students.

The partnership between the WAC and CE program has also led me to emphasize the importance of teaching students to participate in public discourse. As a first step, I am currently surveying four departments to determine what percentage of their writing assignments are for academic, professional, personal, or public audiences. As a state institution in Massachusetts, our charge is to prepare students for citizenship, and as a WAC coordinator involved in CE, I am well-positioned to encourage this shift and support faculty in developing writing assignments for public audiences.

Conclusion

David Jolliffe urges WAC and service-learning to join forces to "produce a reform effort that would be, if not pan-curricular, at least broader—and eventually healthier for higher education in general—than either movement could generate on its own. Each movement can look to the other for a source of strength" (92). This partnership not only strengthened each initiative but it led me to reconceptualize WAC work so that our program is deeply engaged in issues of inclusion and equity on and off campus. I support faculty as they pose questions, such as how do our writing assignments reflect our commitment to a more just society? And, how are we preparing students to be what Joseph Westheimer and Joel Kahn call "justice-oriented citizens"(240)? Joining together as a community of writers committed to engaging with the community on and off campus created a solid foundation for both our WAC and CE programs. The fruits of this partnership continue to grow and spread new seeds for anti-oppressive WAC work.

Notes

1. Note that the Statement of WAC Principles and Practices does not include a discussion of critical WAC nor does it list CE initiatives among its list of potential partners.

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Author Bio

Catherine Savini is the WAC Coordinator, Writing Center Director, and an associate professor in the English Department at Westfield State University, a teaching institution two hours west of Boston. Her research interests are at the intersection of writing centers, WAC, community engagement, and anti-oppressive pedagogy. She recently published an article entitled "Are You Being Rigorous or Just Intolerant?: Promoting Mental Health in the College Classroom," in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that emerged out of her interest inclusive pedagogy and WAC. Catherine is also the co-editor of mothershould.com, a website for women on the fence about motherhood.