Having a Vision and Building a Community: Getting Started Creating a Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum

Christopher Thaiss ◇ Diana Waigandt

The present interview is a review, reformulation, and update specially conducted by Dr. Christopher Thaiss for this publication. It originated from a conversation held during his visit to the Faculty of Engineering at the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos (UNER) in 2018. This took place within the framework of the Writing Programs in Higher Education Project.[1] Throughout the discussion, Dr. Thaiss addresses topics relevant to the creation and development of writing centers and programs across the curriculum, contributing to the dialogues that are of interest within the member universities of RAILEES and to colleagues from other Argentine and Latin American universities.

1 Editor's note: The Writing Programs in Higher Education project was designed by five national universities (UNC, UNER, UNRC, UNVM, UNQ) and submitted to the Fulbright Specialist Program, whose funding enabled Dr. Christopher Thaiss's trip to Argentina in August 2018. As part of the mentioned project, the Jornadas sobre Procesos de formación y programas de escritura para la inclusión y calidad en la educación superior were organised, which included actions aimed at diverse audiences: teachers, researchers, administrative staff, and the general public. For twenty-one days, Dr. Thaiss toured the different campuses, replicating activities according to the specific interests of each academic community.

Diana Waigandt: –You are one of the world's most recognized authors in the studies of writing in the disciplines and across the curriculum. You are an emeritus professor at the University of California, Davis, where you served as the director and professor of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the University Writing Program. Based on your extensive experience, where does the power of the Writing Across the Curriculum approach lie in developing academic literacy?

Christopher Thaiss: –Well, first, the concept of "writing across the curriculum" recognizes that no matter the discipline, or the area of study we are talking about, language is always part of it. All disciplines develop through language, and proficiency in language is essential to research and teaching in every discipline. When students are in school, almost always they'll have at least one class that is focused on language in some way. But even if they have such a course, students might not realize that all their other subjects are also dealing with language, if only indirectly. So a program that specifically supports language development across all disciplines helps everyone.

If the school or the university indeed has built a "writing –or a language– across the curriculum program", then that will make students aware that in *every subject* they have, they must think about the words that they are using, how those words are used to convey meaning, and how they can develop their own skills as communicators not only in their courses but in their lives and careers beyond school.

I mention the phrase "language across the curriculum" because when the concept of "WAC" was first developed, back in the 1960s, the phrase was actually "language across the curriculum," not writing across the curriculum, because the pioneering British developers, including James Britton and Nancy Martin, wanted to capture the idea that all forms of language –writing, speech, listening, reading, etc.– were intimately involved in learning in every field. Britton's *Language and Learning* (1970) was an important book in that development, and Martin's *Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum* (1976) was the first book that used the term "writing across the curriculum." The book that summarized the ten-year project of which they were a part was indeed titled *A Language for Life*.

Let me add that the idea of writing –or language– across the curriculum is as powerful for teachers as it is for students. There are teachers of, say, Mathematics or Sciences, or any subject actually, who may not think about the importance of language as they are teaching their subjects. They may be so rightly focused on theories, data, and procedures in their fields that they neglect the intimate connections of their subjects with the words scholars choose and how their subjects have developed through language.

A school or university's writing-across-the-curriculum efforts can give teachers an opportunity to focus on those neglected areas, to discuss with one another across subject borders, and to create assignments that can help their students use writing, reading, and speaking not only to learn subject matter, but also to think more critically and creatively about the subject. In fact, many writing across the curriculum programs also include workshop opportunities for teachers to write about their subjects for one another—or to develop writing projects for publication in their fields. The result then is a greater linguistic awareness by the teachers, as well as by the students.

And, more than that, a result can be mutual awareness that everybody in the school is in this learning process together, that we all have a stake in the students' and our own ability to grow as learners and thinkers and to employ language tools to help us think and learn.

Diana Waigandt: –When we analyze the literature, we notice that different models for developing writing are mentioned: writing centers and Writing Across the Curriculum... Could you clarify the difference(s) between these concepts?

Christopher Thaiss: –The idea of a Writing Program is an organized effort to try to help students develop written language and deepen learning through writing. There are different major models for building these writing skills and there are three major models that are popular in different places in the world:

◇ what we call a writing center, which I'll describe,

◇ required writing courses that students can take within a school and at the university, including beginning and advanced courses and even majors and postgraduate degrees in what we call "writing studies" or "writing and rhetoric"

◇ writing across the curriculum, which may include a collection of courses, but is basically an effort to work with faculty and teachers across all subject areas to make them more aware of the linguistic possibilities in their subjects, and have them develop ways to build that awareness within their teaching to help their students learn more and express themselves more effectively.

So, you asked specifically about Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum.

Let me say that a writing center is something that has been very popular around the world now for fifty years or more. The first ones grew up in the United States, going back to the 1930s. Two of the earliest were at the University of Iowa and Purdue University. Two periodicals, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and, in 1975, *The Writing Center Journal* (now WLN, https://wac.colostate.edu/wln/#gsc.tab=0) have chronicled this growth and gave practitioners avenues to share ideas about starting centers and creating best practices.[2]

Writing centers have now become a widespread phenomenon in countries around the world. A book I co-edited, *Writing Programs Worldwide*, which was published on the WAC Clearinghouse in 2012, reported the results of a survey project that sought to show how many places were developing these centers and related writing programs, and all evidence is that the phenomenon keeps growing.

What is really important about a writing center is, ironically, that the word "center" is not the most accurate thing that you can say about the concept. The word "center" implies to most people a specific and fairly complex

2 Editors' note: There are various sites that can be consulted for updated information and discussions on these topics, such as the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) https://writingcenters.org/, the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) https://europeanwritingcenters.eu/, and the Red Latinoamericana de Centros y Programas de Escritura (RLCPE) https://sites.google.com/site/redlacpe/?pli=1, among others.

physical location where students can go within a university or school. A place where students can go when they feel the need to get some commentary, or "feedback," on writing assignments that they are doing for classes. But the specific place can be as simple as one small office with a desk, or a table in a cafeteria with designated times for visits. Most writing centers start very small (like the one I helped begin at George Mason University in 1975, which was just 10 hours per week in one small office cubicle) and then, if successful, can grow into more elaborate places with multiple visit areas and computer facilities (such as the current George Mason University Writing Center).

What is really important about centers are the people who staff them and give their time to helping students. These people can be teachers or postgraduate students who are trained to give writing help or they can be peer undergraduates: other students in the school who have facility with language and are interested in working with other students on their writing. So it can be any of these arrangements.

The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) are two professional organizations that have many resources for those interested in beginning centers at their institutions.

Why are writing centers such an important service? Having a center, even a small one, is a powerful strategy because it´s a place where students can go to seek help when they need it, but it´s not a required course. So students don´t have to go there on a regular schedule, but only when they wish to, and they are not graded by the tutor. So there is no pressure, no reason to feel intimidated. Most students who visit the center have been assigned to write to assignments given in one or more of their classes. The students are working on these writings and feel the need at some point in the process to get some commentary on their drafts by a conscientious, knowledgeable reader. They just want someone who'll read their drafts carefully, perhaps ask them questions about the assignment, and give them a few suggestions for improving the draft. It´s not –and you´ve got to understand this– a writing center is not a place where students can take their papers and say to a tutor,

"Find all my grammatical errors and fix them. I'll be back to pick it up later." A writing center is not an editing service.

And the reason it's not is because teachers who are making these assignments will not like the idea of somebody else taking the student's papers and changing them. The philosophy of writing centers is that if I bring a piece of writing to you in the writing center, that piece of writing still belongs to me. It doesn´t belong to the tutor. The tutor cannot take my piece of writing and change it, to make it the way the tutor would like it.

Writing center tutors are trained to honor the ownership of the piece of writing by the student. So what tutors will do is to read the draft, ask the student questions about its goals and content, all to help the student clarify or sharpen their thinking for themselves about what they are trying to accomplish. And they may see, while they read, a few grammatical errors, or a pattern of errors that they can identify for and sometimes explain to the students. But the tutor's task is not error correction.

The key idea of all, is that if I´m the student and you´re the tutor, you are not my teacher, you cannot grade me. You don't presume to know what the teacher is expecting, because you are just an interested, conscientious reader who can ask me questions about my draft to help me clarify what I'm trying to accomplish. So tutoring sessions proceed as dialogs between student and tutor. You as the tutor can help me see some possibilities for my writing and suggest a few ways I might approach them, but the writing stays mine.

Now, Writing Across the Curriculum, or its acronym, "WAC." WAC is closely related to writing centers because the idea of a writing center is actually based on the idea of Writing across the Curriculum. When students receive writing assignments in their courses in different disciplines, for example the humanities, arts, and social sciences, they can take their drafts to the writing center and usually get some helpful feedback on that draft.

However, if I´m a student in, let's say, Mathematics, and I have an assignment to write a proof, and I have some questions about my draft, I can show it to a tutor in the center and the tutor can ask me questions about it

to help me sharpen my thinking about what I'm trying to achieve. But it's unlikely that the tutor in the center will be a Maths specialist, unless the center is set up to have specialists in distinct subject areas. Some writing centers are that large and sophisticated, but many are not. So the feedback that tutors in most writing centers can give in STEM disciplines will be limited, unless, again, there are tutors for those disciplines.

Overall, the ideas of WAC and the writing center work powerfully together. Centers often measure their effectiveness by noting how many students come to the center from a variety of disciplines.

Diana Waigandt: – I agree that a writing center is an important service, but at the same time, making it work seems complex. What are the steps to follow to create a writing center in an educational institution?

Christopher Thaiss: – First thing I´ll say is that I totally agree that there are steps. And that anybody who has an idea of beginning something like this can begin very very small. Most writing centers start up with one person who has an idea, and who is willing to spend some time working with students outside of a class, to give them some comments on their writing.

The persons who have this vision have usually been inspired, at least in part, by what they have read or heard about other centers, perhaps through the IWCA or EWCA. As you learn about successes at other institutions, never hesitate to contact some of these leaders to get advice. We're all enthusiastic and willing to share thoughts. And definitely, if you have the opportunity, attend conferences of these organizations.

Another early step is to find allies, other faculty and perhaps administrators in the institution whom the initiator can interest in this idea of a writing center, including somebody, an administrator perhaps, who has access to some funding: who can buy a little bit of time from the initiator's schedule, so the idea person can actually continue and expand this work.

I would recommend to anybody who´s interested in starting something like this that they join organizations such as IWCA or EWCA, and begin to read the ample literature on centers. The organizations will help the visionary identify faculty at other universities who can be contacts, with

whom the initiator can discuss issues, tactics, and problems, which any idea person will inevitably have to deal with. There is no substitute for a small or large network of like-minded leaders who can be of mutual assistance and inspiration.

Diana Waigandt: –And it surely also requires a lot of persistence…

Christopher Thaiss: –Well, all of these aspects demand a good deal of persistence. One reason why persistence is necessary in starting a writing center (or a WAC program) is that such a cross-disciplinary effort is not part of any particular department, though it can eventually be important to them all. When a program is not part of a specific department, the chairperson of any particular one does not feel responsible for a writing center or a WAC program. Chairpersons can say, "Not my problem." So, the person whose vision it is to create a writing center or WAC program may have to build interest and allies by having talks with many faculty and administrators across the institution –which is exactly what I did back in 1990 when my university moved toward designating "writing intensive" courses in every department. Over two years, a colleague and I spoke with every department chair, about 80 of them, to encourage them to sign on to the new idea. Moreover, every year, the leaders of that writing center visit individual departments or send tutors out to talk with them in order to keep up interest in using the services of the center – even though the writing center at the university has now been in place for fifty years. Because with all of the responsibilities that departments have, they may forget about the writing center and how important it can be for their students and for the success of teaching across the university.

So, if starting a writing center or a WAC program is your idea, you need to realize that you'll be spending a good bit of time knocking at doors, calling people, sending them e-mails, and holding events just to keep people reminded –and keep the flow of money going– and also continue to keep your allies across the institution inspired and doing this work.

Fortunately for anyone starting a center or WAC program now, there are so many such efforts succeeding in various places around the world, and there are the professional organizations who provide resources.

Therefore, it´s definitely easier now to start something like this than it used to be. There are so many other people who have led the way and want to help those just beginning. Moreover, because there are these networks and records of success, you can refer to the many precedents in other places to inspire support in your own institution.

Diana Waigandt: – What recommendations would you give to teachers who want to start using writing in their classes? Could you share some examples of activities to engage students?

Christopher Thaiss: – I have been doing workshops for teachers on Writing across the Curriculum for more than forty years. In that time, a robust literature on methods has grown up, including an ever-expanding publishing venture called the WAC Clearinghouse (http://wac.colostate.edu),[3] which for 20 years now has been publishing periodicals and books. I serve on that board. In addition, since 1978, there has been an International Network of WAC Programs, which in 2017 became the Association for Writing across the Curriculum (AWAC),[4] which is closely allied with the Clearinghouse.

So, there is not only a vast amount of evidence to show that WAC succeeds in a wide range of disciplines and teaching environments, but, even more important, there are many resources for those wishing to start WAC programs and many established directors willing to advise those just getting started. As with writing centers, WAC programs at any institution necessarily start small, with a visionary person as an initiator who begins by building allies and attempting to secure some funding to support the work with faculty in departments. Usually, the group of allies will include faculty from a range of departments, these faculty already using writing assignments as part of their teaching, and who can then serve as ally-builders in their own departments.

3 Editors' note: Further insights into the development of open-access policies in the field of writing studies by this publisher can be found in the chapter "Opening Up: Writing Studies' Turn to Open-Access Book Publishing" by Mike Palmquist. This chapter is part of the book Writing as a Human Activity: Implications and Applications of the Work of Charles Bazerman, published in 2023.

4 E. N: Association for Writing across the Curriculum (AWAC) https://wacassociation.org/

In my research on the growth of WAC programs, the International WAC/WID Mapping Project (http://mappingproject.ucdavis.edu), which I began in 2005 and continues through other scholars, data show that the phenomenon keeps expanding, while there are many programs that are now 20, 30, and 40 or more years old. http://writingprogramsworldwide.ucdavis.edu/

For the teacher in any department who wants to begin using writing in their teaching, there are many ways to begin, including some that involve little expense of teacher time, but that can have surprisingly helpful results.

For example, in my workshops, I describe a method I call Discussion Starter, which I've used for many years, which is aimed at getting students focused on the theme of a particular day's class. At the very start of the class period, instead of beginning a lecture, you say "I have a question for you. And I would like you to write about it for a couple of minutes. I´m not going to collect it, I´m not going to grade it. But I want you to start thinking about it through writing."

And you can ask them a question that you actually intend to answer in the lecture. But first you want the class to wrestle with the question, to focus their attention on the inquiry. For example, in a maths class, you might say, "All right, we´ve been doing Algebra in this class for several months. What I would like to ask you is: Why is Algebra important? Why do you think Algebra is important? Write about that for a couple of minutes, and then we can talk about it."

The point of the exercise is to get students thinking about the subject, and the writing gives them a feeling of investment in the answer. The students are primed and ready to think about it, and ready to listen.

A tiny exercise like that one exemplifies one of the key principles of writing across the curriculum: the power and usefulness of "writing as a tool of thinking and learning." The exercise is not graded, there are no right or wrong answers; it´s just a way to get people thinking and beginning to clarify their thinking about something complex by putting it into words.

If you want to extend the exercise a bit more, you can then say, after they have written for a minute or two, "Who has something to say in regards to

that question?" You will get respondents, because the students have written about it already, so at least some will have something to say. Whereas, if you just had asked, "Who can tell me why Algebra is important?" you'd get a sea of quiet, nervous faces. The writing makes the difference, because it encourages both thinking and the confidence to participate.

A somewhat more sophisticated tool you can employ to encourage thinking through writing concerns technology. Most schools now have some kind of online learning management system. I know that at UNER you use MOODLE. There are all kinds of systems. At UC Davis we use Canvas. All these systems allow a teacher to set up a forum for communication among the students and between students and teachers. Consider using the forum tool to launch regular discussion forums, say weekly, that focus on that week's readings or lecture. I like to pose a question at the start of the week and ask the students to submit a response by mid-week. I always use questions that can spark a range of perspectives. The beauty of the forum is that it allows each student to express themselves and to see what others have written.

Part Two of the weekly forum is to ask each student to respond to another student's posting—or to use the mutual reading of posts by the students to spark new ideas for each student's second post of the week. I'm careful always to define principles of civility and mutual respect in the forum, and to mirror these principles in my own weekly summary of what the students have written.

The goals of this kind of assignment include, for one, to help build mutual respect within the class among students. And, secondly, to build a thinking community of class members. And, third, to get students' comfortable taking other people's ideas seriously and engaging in the struggle to write cogently about different ideas.

We all know how often a student will, even in a large class, remain isolated in their own thoughts, and how often classes just remain assemblies of non-communicative individuals. A forum like this one can be a powerful way to help students understand what others are thinking. And then to respond in respectful ways to the diversity of perspectives in order to make the class a living community.

Just as with WAC program building, so there are many published resources for teachers across disciplines who want to get into using student writing in their teaching. The many issues of two journals on the WAC Clearinghouse, *Across the Disciplines* and the *WAC Journal*, have articles on classroom practices in different fields, and there are more specialized journals, such as the *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine* and *CBE: Life Sciences*, that also feature articles on classroom practices. A popular book, now in its third edition, that features many strategies for teachers across fields is *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*.

Diana Waigandt: – This is your first visit to Argentina. What do you think about what you have seen and heard so far, especially regarding what is happening here in our universities related to your field of expertise?

Christopher Thaiss: – The first thing I should say is that I´ve been familiar with the work of Paula Carlino at University of Buenos Aires for a number of years. And actually she and I´ve been collaborators on the 2012 book *Writing Programs Worldwide: Profiles of Academic Writing in Many Places*. So, I´m aware of some of the things that are happening in Argentina, through that process.

For example, I´m familiar with the Universidad de Flores ...the Program PRODEAC[5], which is actually a model of Writing Across the curriculum, with Estela Moyano. That model is of language teachers working with teachers in other disciplines, to help them develop assignments and exercises that use writing with students across disciplines. And then, when those teachers get experience with those methods, they can become persons who bring some of these ideas to other people at the institution. I think that´s a wonderful way that this idea can work.

I´m also familiar with some colleagues of Paula Carlino at the University of Buenos Aires, Ana de Micheli and Patricia Iglesia, who´ve written an article for that book. They are biologists who wrote about using some

5 Editors' note: PRODEAC stands for Programa de Desarrollo de Habilidades de Lectura y Escritura Académica a lo Largo de la Carrera, developed at the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento.

of the methods similar to those that I described earlier to help students think and express themselves as they´re learning concepts in Biology.

So, those are people that I was familiar with before coming here. But now I´m very privileged to meet teachers at UNER and some other institutions in Entre Ríos and other parts of Argentina, who are very interested in these ideas. And they are thinking very creatively about their own teaching and are also thinking about the potential of working with other teachers in their institutions to try to express some of these ideas and help those teachers develop some appropriate assignments.

Now that I have the opportunity to be here for a few weeks, I'll be able to learn from faculty in Córdoba, Rio Cuarto, and Buenos Aires, as well as here in Entre Rios. So I feel very very positive about the potential of these ideas in Argentina.

Diana Waigandt: – If you had the opportunity to send a message to teachers and researchers working on projects related to Writing Across the Curriculum, what would you say to them?

Christopher Thaiss: – Patient and persistent, yes. Continue to be creative, think about different ways to solve problems and constantly be looking for allies in your schools, universities, and at other institutions. And think about collaborating with other developers, and in continuing to build your excellent consortium. So that people really are developing a community and will help each other as this develops.