# WHAT'S WRONG WITH WAC ANTHOLOGIES?

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Writing [is] no longer a single, generalizable skill learned once and for all at an early age; rather it [is] a complex and continuously developing response to specialized text-based discourse communities, highly embedded in the differentiated practices of those communities. (Russell 5)

In the twenty-some years since they first gained the attention of teachers across the curriculum, these WAC premises have come to inform much of our pedagogy. Two applications are now particularly widespread in colleges and universities. In one, writing instruction is brought into the disciplines through "writing intensive" courses - that is, through biology and business and history classes which, at the very least, emphasize written work, and which in some cases instruct students in the special practices of their discipline. In the other application, notions of discourse community and specialized practices are brought into the first-year composition class in order to establish the connection between writing and disciplinary inquiry from the beginning of a student's academic career. The latter application is more familiar to composition teachers, but even for those of us who are convinced of its pedagogical value, it is not an easy application to make. Confronted often with heterogeneous undermotivated students, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place: if we borrow what is useful about writingintensive courses, placing content at the center of our curriculum, those first-year students who are neither clear about their academic goals nor highly motivated may see little value in the subject matter *we* choose to focus on. On the other hand, if we retain too much of what James A. Berlin has called the "expressive" paradigm, that is, letting students select any topic that interests them (including their personal experiences), they may still be unprepared for their upper-level courses after a term of composition. The key is then to show our students what academic communities do without forcing them too quickly to behave as members of those communities. As Russell argues, we must somehow strike "a curricular balance between the interests of the learner and the demands of the discipline" (301).

Given the pedagogical difficulties of striking such a balance, small wonder that an abundance of WAC anthologies is now available for teachers of composition. At first glance, the anthologies seem to be exactly what we need, more useful, certainly, than traditional belletristic readers or readers arranged according to the "four modes of discourse." Indeed, WAC anthologies appear to offer a remarkably convenient solution to the problem of initiating recent high-school graduates into the "differentiated practices" of disciplinary inquiry. The selections in them suggest the kinds of topics that disciplines consider worthy of pursuit, the modes argumentation and exposition that distinguish one discipline from another, and the extent to which rational debate among informed experts can result in disagreement. If a composition teacher values group work, the anthologies' organization of content into several subject areas seems to promise efficiency in the classroom as well: students can simply group themselves with others who share their subject interests, collectively construct a fund of knowledge by reading the appropriate sections in the anthology, and develop a sense of community as they exchange ideas from informed vantage points. In short, one expects these books to make life much easier for those of us who wish to recreate, in our classrooms, the kinds of informed, knowledge-seeking activities that characterize sophisticated disciplinary communities.

But as much as they may appeal at first sight, do these anthologies ultimately do that for which they were designed? Do they help us apply WAC premises in the first-year composition course or help us teach writing, not as a

"generalizable skill," but as "a complex and continuously developing response to specialized text-based discourse communities"? If the anthologies stopped at what we have described thus far, the answer to these questions might well be "yes." But in most cases they do not stop there. Convinced, perhaps, that a steady diet of scholarly articles would bore firstyear students or strain their abilities, anthology editors often leaven the academic menu with more "accessible" readingsusually journalism and fiction. There are fire-breathing editorials, epoch-defining speeches, heart-stopping confessionals, and compelling narratives, full of pathos, or rage, or cool irony. Admittedly, such pieces can be pure pleasure for instructors and students to read, for they are consistently energetic and vivid, and they are usually relevant to issues of current interest. But when these pieces are juxtaposed with disciplinary discourse as part of a WAC reader, their appeal has a hidden cost: they confuse the focus of the anthology and of our students by increasing rhetorical and analytical demands. With their multitude of topics, genres, and modes, the anthologies establish no principle of conceptual or discursive unity, and they probably give our students a false notion of what it means to operate within a discursive community. The very feature that seems to make these texts more accessible may be blocking access to genuine academic discourse communities.

Research on the connections between reading and writing does suggest that these anthologies have some value: better to have any readings than none at all. But their value may be only developing the kind of generalizable skill whose appropriateness for the university Russell questions. While reading of any kind, done in sufficient quantities, seems likely to improve one's writing, improvement is more likely to occur-and more likely to meet the complex demands of specialized text-based discourse communities - when one's reading closely resembles the kinds of writing one does (Stotsky; Tierney and Shanahan; Engelhard, Gordon, and Gabrielson). In other words, the connection between reading experience and the development of writing ability operates more specifically than generally. This is true, for example, of the traditional modes of discourse. Noting that students who cannot handle exposition or argumentation can nonetheless write fairly sophisticated narratives, researchers have speculated that the difference may be accounted for by the ubiquity of oral narration, or storytelling, in the lives of young children (Freedman; Crowhurst). Children can write good stories because they have been read to and have learned intuitively how stories work. When students do learn to write effective exposition, their new abilities may be indebted to new reading habits, especially greater exposure to expository and argumentative prose (Engelhard, Gordon, and Gabrielson; Crowhurst).

The idea that students write exposition more effectively after reading exposition will surprise no one. As Charles Bazerman said over fifteen years ago, "The connection between what a person reads and what that person then writes seems so obvious as to be 'truistic'" (656). We should perhaps not be surprised, then, by a similar connection suggested by recent studies of reading and writing: that experience in reading specific genres facilitates the development of writing in those genres. The connection between reading and writing genres seems less clear than the connection between reading and writing in modes, and is highly complex; for example, effective performance within a genre may depend much more on immersion in the community that uses it, since genres are more audience-determined than modes of discourse. Nevertheless, a knowledge of genre (understood as "a complex of formal and substantive features that create a particular effect in a given situation" [Miller]) appears to be an avenue into the academic disciplines.

Few teachers, however, are actually using readings in academic genres as a way of expediting their students' development, that is, if one can judge by the WAC anthologies on the market. This ought to give pause to those of us whose first-year composition courses are rooted in WAC pedagogies. We need to ask ourselves: Why are our students not reading the genres in which they will be expected to write? And why do WAC anthologies fail to meet this need?

The easy answer to these questions is that composition texts and readers are always a little out-of-date; we have known this since Richard Ohmann's devastating critique of them in 1976. But that answer seems to lay the blame *entirely* on the

doorstep of publishers. Surely part of the responsibility lies with writing teachers who influence, if not determine, what publishers think the market wants. Many teachers still seem to want the old belletristic readers, or at least something like them. These teachers seemingly object to academic articles because they fear such articles may provoke thoughtless, superficial imitation and discourage original thinking.

Later in this article we address this possible objection to the use of disciplinary readings in first-year WAC composition courses and explain why we believe it erroneous. First, though, we review three kinds of WAC anthologies, explaining how they frustrate WAC aims, sever the healthy relation between reading and writing, and subject students to nonacademic rhetorical situations. We also describe what we believe to be the ideal WAC anthology. Of the anthologies under review, we distinguish among those like Behrens and Rosen's Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum, which offers neither academic genres nor topics; those like the Comely, et al. Fields of Writing: Readings Across the Disciplines, which offers academic articles so unrelated by either discipline or topic that they cannot support each other; and those like Kennedy, Kennedy and Smith's Writing in the Disciplines: A Reader for Writers, whose academic readings are indeed related by topic, but so unrelated conceptually that they cannot stage a disciplinary conversation.

# Anthologies with Nonacademic Genres and Nonacademic Topics

Perhaps the most unsatisfying kind of WAC anthology is that which features broad, popular topics and a mix of nonacademic genres. These texts include Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum (Behrens and Rosen), Reading and Writing in the Academic Community (Kennedy and Smith), and The Informed Argument: A Multidisciplinary Reader and Guide (Robert K. Miller).

Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum, for example, a "combination rhetoric-reader," is "designed to help bridge the gap between the composition course and courses in other disciplines" (xxii), and, in particular, to help students "become familiar with the various subjects and styles of academic

writing" (xxvi). Its readings, say the editors, "represent the kinds of issues studied—and written about—in courses throughout the curriculum" (xxii). The last of these claims we hesitate to accept. The "issues studied" in Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum seem broad—not the kinds of topics upon which academic discourse communities focus directly, but the kinds that the public believes academics address or ought to address, for example, "Business Ethics" or "The Brave New World of Biotechnology." Specialized scholars would tackle these issues directly only when writing for popular magazines or when lecturing in large public forums. Academics tend to focus their attention on more highly specialized topics, most of which are related to broad public issues but in ways that may be difficult for nonspecialists to ascertain. Students need to know this.

But more disturbing than the breadth of the issues studied is the plethora of nonacademic genres and styles represented in the readings. The section in Writing And Reading Across the Curriculum on political science entitled "America's Crisis of Confidence" offers an illuminating example of what is wrong with the potpourri approach in WAC anthologies. Of its eleven selections, there is not a single academic article. There is a scene from a play. There is a poem. There are two presidential speeches (primary sources, not academic discourse). There is an opinion piece from the Washington Post. There is a piece by a long-time editor of the National Lampoon who takes "a biting and often humorous look" at the drug problem (420). (The editors kindly print his toll-free number as a footnote so students can call up for more biting humor.) There are, additionally, two magazine articles from Forbes. There remain two pieces from popular books. The first, by a sociologist, takes advantage of the catchy journalistic notion of "wilding": America, it appears, is a "wilding society." And there is a longish story about a man who lost his job and his confidence excerpted from yet another mass-market book. Not one item is from an academic journal or book. Indeed, three selections are just plain stories, and several more pieces mix light discussion with large wodges of narrative. In total there are about twentyfour pages of narrative, seven pages of drama, three pages of poetry, six pages of presidential "speechifying," two and onehalf pages of newspaper opinion, and about twenty pages of light analysis and discussion.

The problem with such readings is that they miscue students, who assume that this mishmash of journalism and opinion represents academic discourse and that they have been invited to write their own unsystematic reflections in the same personal or narrative veins. But the second problem, worse than the first, is that the readings do not provide the conceptual framework with which academic inquiry begins. There is, in fact, no disciplinary conceptual architecture in any of the articles, and no disciplinary commonality among them. There is no theoretical approach to any issue, unless we take as theory the kind of journalistic paradoxes rife in these readings; for example, that we have a problem with drugs because in prosperous America everyone can afford them, that we have so many murders in prosperous America because everyone can afford Uzis, and so on (432-433). What the student confronts is a collection of opinions, a great deal of storytelling, and a few generalities loosely organized journalistic nonacademic topic.

In most content courses students get lectures which define terms and lay out concepts, theories which account for data in systematic ways, and topics which can be approached via the theories. In short, students are initiated into a discursive community to learn its intellectual premises and protocols before they themselves try to generate an essay within that community. Yet such unrelated readings as we have described above leave students conceptually in the lurch. Although students can emulate the opinionizing they have read, they are unable to conceptualize the topic because they have been given no theory and no demonstration of disciplinary thinking. They cannot, in fact, write in a discipline because they have not read in the discipline. Although the editors may have thought this assemblage of narrative and opinion would be refreshing for students, it is only disorienting, giving students no reference points for an exercise in real disciplinary thinking, which the instructor presumably hopes for. (Not to hope for it would be to expect the kind of nonacademic, belletristic essays WAC readers were designed to move students beyond.)

## Anthologies with Academic Readings Unrelated by Topic or Discipline

A second kind of WAC anthology avoids the nonacademic genres but still manages to disorient students with topically and conceptually unrelated selections. Examples include Fields of Writing: Readings Across the Disciplines (Comley, et al.) and Communities of Discourse: The Rhetoric of Disciplines (Schmidt and Vande Kopple). The very successful Fields of Writing, for example, though it adheres to academic genres, prevents conceptual relationships from emerging among its offerings. First, the anthology is organized under the loosest of modal rubrics: reflecting, reporting, explaining, and arguing. These capacious categories are only vaguely refined in shopping-bag subsections of "Arts and Humanities," "Social Sciences and Public Affairs," and "Science and Technologies." Except for an occasional pairing, articles in these subsections have virtually nothing in common-neither topics nor conceptual overlap. Even in its most academic section, Fields of Writing has severe problems. "Arts and Humanities" (under "Arguing") contains a set of paired articles, Edward Hallet Carr's "The Historian and His Facts" and Barbara Tuchman's critical response to it, "When Does History Happen." From this beginning of an academic conversation, three or four more articles on historiography would have made for one. But the rest of the articles in this section offer topical and conceptual variety rather than commonality. James Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" lies cheek by jowl with Edmund White's anthropological treatment of gay behaviour in "Sexual Culture"; George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" follows on John Fiske's "Romancing the Rock," a poststructuralist inquiry into Madonna and female fantasies of power. John Berger contributes a meditation on Hiroshima, and Alice Walker supplies "Am I Blue," an essay about a lovesick stallion put out to stud. All but the last of these articles do purvey academic arguments in an academic vocabulary, but the topics are diverse, the treatments do not overlap conceptually, and the section as a whole does not illustrate disciplinary conversation in any academic community. These articles make fascinating reading, but they do not introduce students to

systematic disciplinary orientation and do not supply the intellectual matrix out of which students would generate their own apprentice academic essays. In short, most of the articles do not support each other as would readings in a regular university course. Perhaps this is why the editors supply a "Topical Guide to Contents," trying to connect articles through categories with, again, fairly nonacademic headings like "Life and Death" or "Values and Beliefs." Questions at the ends of articles also force such pseudoconnections. For example, after having read Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language," the student is asked to read Alice Walker's essay about the lovesick stallion, "paying particular attention to paragraph 17" (on the horse's language) and to answer the question "To what extent does [Walker's] argument support Baldwin's position on Black English?" Compare Black English with horse language? Such "connections" are strained, even implausible, and certainly not disciplinary.

## Anthologies with Academic Readings Related by Topic but Unrelated by Discipline

A final category of anthologies strives hard for academic substance and coherence but misses the mark another way, by drawing on so many disciplines that the readings cannot support each other conceptually even when they do treat the same topic. We have in mind here texts like Making Connections Across the Curriculum (Chittenden, et al.) and Writing in the Disciplines: A Reader for Writers (Kennedy, Kennedy and Smith). The editors of Making Connections Across the Curriculum, for example, seem entirely aware of the problems we have just canvassed in Fields of Writing and wish to distance themselves from what they call such "miscellany" anthologies. They offer selections that are not only analytic but that have been grouped around general subjects like "The Frontier Indians" or "The Urban Experience." As they say, "too often, students lack either a context in which to read an essay or a critical perspective from which to evaluate it" (v). Apparently the articles in each section are to support each other with related perspectives and relevant information. This sounds as if the editors intend to stage a disciplinary conversation on each of these topics, say,

one in anthropology about the frontier Indians and another in sociology about the urban experience. But in fact they do not. Rather, they draw their selections from across the curriculum and compile a miscellany of another kind. As the articles come from numerous disciplines, they offer a hodge podge of incommensurable vocabulary and conceptual structures. Articles in "The Frontier Indians," for example, all treat frontier Indians but not in common, or even related, terms. In "Ojibwa Ontology, Behaviour and Worldview," an anthropologist distinguishes between "animate" and "inanimate" nouns in Ojibwa and then considers whether the Ojibwa can properly be called animists (they cannot). In "The Conflict between the California Indians and White Civilization," a biologist demonstrates with statistics that disease and malnutrition killed far more Native Americans than did warfare. In "The European Failure to Convert the Indians: An Autopsy," a historian explains why Catholicism's emphasis on good works for salvation appealed to the Native Americans' practical intelligence better than the more abstract Protestant notions of arbitrary grace and the inscrutable will of God. The editors even include a nineteenth-century phrenological analysis of Indian character. Altogether the student will read snatches of anthropology, biology, statistics, linguistics, history, theology, and phrenology. All of these selections are fascinating, but what do they have in common? Except for the general subject matter of frontier Indians, virtually nothing. Not conceptual schemata, not vocabulary, and not even the same topic. Being on the same general "subject" simply does not bring these articles close enough together to support each other.

What is clear from this brief survey, we hope, is that an instructor using any of these anthologies could not create the kind of rhetorical situation students face in all their other university courses. Very few of the readings share vocabulary, conceptual models or even, for the most part, topics. Almost none of the articles propose a theory or proposition which is directly taken up, in any way, by any other article. Each stands alone, bereft of context: a vivid essay on a burning topic, often enough, but a universe unto itself rather than a part of a disciplinary conversation. And some do not even stand very well on their own. Fiske's "Romancing the Rock" is a case in

point. Few first-year students could follow an argument purveyed in terms of "jouissance," "producerliness," "syntagmatic gaps," "commodity," "hegemony," "representations," "desire," and "the economy of the male gaze," all in the service of a complex argument shot through with epistemological meditations. Students are not likely to have read Barthes, Marx, Gramsci, Lacan, and assorted poststructuralists one must read before one can process such an argument—especially as none of the other articles deploy the same vocabulary, nor broach a similar project. Students need significant background on any topic before they can find their feet in it, acquire a working conceptual model, and begin to process information on their own. Many of the articles we have discussed have been abridged, and some have been cut down to snippets of just two to three pages. Nowhere else in the academy are students asked to work with such fragmented and decontextualized input.

Since academic writing is not, as was once thought, a generalizable skill, students have to learn to do it within a discipline, within an academic conversation or discourse community. They must read the disciplinary discourse before they write it; they must listen to the academic conversation before they join it; they must absorb the conceptual models and lexicon of a community's discourse before they can generate that discourse themselves. Practically, this means that students must read academic essays, but also that these essays treat the same topic. Students can then see the disciplinary conversation in operation, see how academics make sense of information from a conceptual perspective, and see how they accept or refine each other's models and arguments. Students will see themselves entering an academic dialogue, intervening in a real conversation in which they have found their footing. All this is indispensable if the students are to write apprentice academic essays themselves, rather than opinion pieces that are not in dialogue with any academic community.

#### The Ideal WAC Anthology

The ideal WAC text would recreate, in the WAC classroom, a rhetorical situation similar to the one students will face everywhere else at the university. It would offer sections

from several disciplines, say psychology, sociology, biology, geography, and history. All articles in each section would focus on not only the same "subject" but the same specific topic, so basic information would be repeated from various perspectives, and vocabulary and concepts would be iterated through the readings. Students need this kind of repeated exposure to a complex conceptual scheme to assimilate it. For the same reason articles would be presented in their entirety—snippets and excerpts would be banned. Academics usually work a topic from a number of angles, or make their cases with multiple illustrations and arguments, all of which together substantiate their claims. Students need this kind of saturation input to absorb an argument in depth.1 Snippets deliver only vivid claims or illustrations, and leave out all nuance and qualification - part of what makes the discourse academic rather than journalistic. The articles should ideally engage each other as well, so that students actually witness a disciplinary conversation rather than imagining one. Since dispute is the very dynamic of dialogue in most disciplines, a group of articles should address and cite each other as they argue their way toward a disciplined consensus. Finally, since academic articles are written for insiders, editors would preface sections with an introduction to terms and concepts. And they might provoke student interest by pointing out the stakes at issue within the debate. Together the preface and articles would provide students with an in-depth introduction not only to a topic, but to the very voice and logic of a disciplinary community.

### The Conversational Model: Social Contract versus Social Control

We would like to recognize at least one objection to our argument which a number of WAC instructors will surely make: that our ideal anthology would suppress students' own voices. As the organizers of the 1990 Santa Barbara conference on writing in the disciplines noted, teachers involved in WAC programs tend to group themselves into camps: the writing-to-learn camp, which emphasizes voice, learning, and process in the hope of "empowering" the individual; and the writing-in-

the-disciplines camp, which emphasizes form, discourse, and performance in the hope of helping students fit into a tradition (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff). The main complaint against the latter camp has been that, in extreme cases, it resorts to "prescriptive schema," which lead to "passive, even mechanical mimesis, a politically conservative mechanism for social control, and, finally, to a conventionalized commodity" (Kirscht, Levine, and Reiff). It is easy enough to see why, from this perspective on writing in the disciplines, the use of academic articles to facilitate the development of discipline-specific discourse skills is anathema. It is precisely in having students read academic articles that we seem to run the greatest risk of eliciting "passive, even mechanical mimesis," of suppressing students' critical thinking, and of enforcing "social" control.

But this suspicious view of academic articles in writing courses is unnecessarily reductive. For one thing, it is a perspective that simply is not shared by teachers of content Bazerman points out, "Although current composition theory largely rejects [the] tradition/apprentice model as stultifying, teachers of other academic disciplines still find the model attractive, because writing in content disciplines requires mastery of disciplinary literature" (656-57). Indeed, Bazerman would argue that we cannot teach students how to write for a particular discipline without having them read, and even imitate, the genres commonly used in that discipline, for "the accumulated knowledge and accepted forms of writing circumscribe what and how a student may write in disciplines such as history, biology, and philosophy" (657). Words like "accepted forms" and "circumscribe" may set off alarm bells among composition teachers from the writing-to-learn camp, who fear that such talk uncovers the old current, traditional paradigm hiding behind a new, disciplinary guise. Bazerman's view, however, is much more complex than that. He sees the use of models as an important means of informing students about how academics interact as a community. Reading disciplinary literature and imitating disciplinary models is a process of initiation into academic conversation: "Conversation requires absorption of what prior speakers have said, consideration of how earlier comments relate to the responder's

thoughts, and a response framed to the situation and the responder's purposes" (657).

Bazerman's views find support in current genre theory. Academic genres are not molds into which ideas are poured—static forms, impervious to change, innovation, originality, and individual variations. These genres are evolving "stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands" (Campbell and Jamieson, qtd. in Miller, 153). Genre, as Carolyn R. Miller defines it, is "more than a formal entity"; it is "pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action" (153). The difference between this definition and the one implied by the WAC camp described above is the difference between social control and a social contract. If one defines and teaches genres in the ways current theory suggests, their use can offer students a window on disciplinary conversations—a way of seeing:

[T]he social action realized in the genre is best understood not just as a response to a particular assignment specified by the instructor on one particular day, but more accurately as a response to the whole disciplinary context for that assignment as expressed in the lectures, seminars, and course readings as well as to the implicit institutional values of a university where writing is elicited as part of a social contract committed to by students, instructors, the institution itself, and society at large. (Freedman, 12)

Using academic articles as models of how a disciplinary community thinks and converses need not mean that we are suppressing critical thinking. In fact, as students witness the processes of academic conversations, they are more likely to become effective critical thinkers, because their perspective is informed. They become "disciplined."

We want to make it clear that we are not denying the value of anthologized fiction and journalism in writing classes, nor are we suggesting that all writing courses ought to be rooted in WAC premises. Like most writing teachers, both of us have taught many courses based on an "expressive" or a "cognitive" approach (not always recognizing that we were doing so), and

both of us have found fiction and literary nonfiction as useful as it was entertaining for our students in these courses. Neither are we suggesting that an anthology can ever substitute for the hard work of curricular planning and implementation; we would agree with Christenbury and Kelly, that "sole reliance upon a textbook does not open the world but circumscribes it" (80). We believe, however, that an effective textbook, while no panacea, is indispensable in a WAC-based course: the very nature of such a course demands samples of disciplinary discourse - samples that stage a disciplinary conversation. That anthologies designed especially for such WAC-based composition courses include so many nondisciplinary pieces, and beyond that, that they jumble selections together so they cannot support each other either topically or conceptually, seems to us unfortunate for both students and teachers. The variety and entertainment value these books offer simply are not worth the cost in conceptual confusion.

#### **NOTES**

1. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss it at length, research in schema theory supports this claim. In the vocabulary of cognitive science, students need to be saturated with information so they can form and then refine their declarative knowledge in "schemas" or "schemata." Students form a fairly general schema after exposure to a few instances of a proposition or argument, then go on to refine the schema as they encounter additional instances. Only highly refined schemata allow them to infer, to induce and to deduce accurately - to think critically about a topic. The refined schemata in turn make it easier for them to absorb additional reading and to "elaborate" their schemata. Saturation reading refines schemata, and refined schemata drive complex critical thinking and writing. If students do not read enough about a topic, they are stuck trying to generate their essays from very general, immature, and finally very inaccurate representations of the subject matter. For an excellent brief introduction to the relations between schema theory and reading and writing, see Kucer, "The Making of Meaning." For fuller discussions of schema theory see Gagne, Yekovich and Yekovich, The Cognitive Psychology of School Learning, especially chapters 5 and 8.

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