

**Strachan, Wendy. *Writing Intensive: Becoming W-Faculty in a New Writing Curriculum*. Utah State University Press, 2008. (ISBN: 9780874217032)**

Reviewed by Margot Soven

*Writing Intensive: Becoming W-Faculty in a New Writing Curriculum* lives up to its claim. It is indeed “one of the few book length studies of major post writing across the curriculum initiative from concept to implementation” (Book jacket).

**The Concept:** In 2002, the Vice President at Simon Fraser University appointed a committee to “evaluate the undergraduate curriculum and make suggestions to improve it” ( xi). Writing was identified as central to curriculum revision. The committee decided on a “Writing in the Disciplines” approach to teaching writing and eventually (2004) mandated that all students “take at least two writing intensive courses” that met certain criteria.

**Implementation:** This is the story of how Wendy Strachan, Director of CWIL (Centre for Writing Intensive Learning), and her colleagues worked with professors and departments at Simon Fraser to develop these courses. As Denise Krebs, Professor of Psychology, says, it is a case study of “what is possible to achieve given conditions that subsequent events have proved essential” (xii). This case study shows that much of this work proceeded “one on one” and that often the CWIL staff had to overcome reservations and mythologies held by the faculty. Krebs points out that the key to their success, perhaps limited on some scales, is the “time, energy and commitment” necessary to carry out such an enterprise.

The first two chapters summarize the administrative framework that served as a background for CWIL’s work, the next five chapters describe their participation with faculty, and the last chapter includes an assessment of the progress at Simon Fraser after several years, and the administrative changes which took place, such as changing the name of CWIL to the Writing Intensive Learning Office.

Strachan demonstrates that if curricular change is to be transformative, it must be a slow, individualized process. If it “works” then the process is a journey, and not a “blue print.” Strachan points out that “new pedagogies . . . may make a significant difference in students in particular courses, but they need to be part of a much more widespread shift in values, norms and structures, if they are to transcend individual behaviors . . . and they must be achieved incrementally and by consent . . .” (5). Strachan believes in the collaborative approach to faculty development, that especially the adoption of a WID (Writing in the Disciplines) approach depends on mutual dialogue between writing consultants and faculty members. Using this strategy, “genre theory” did not result in formulaic teaching. The WID consultants did not come in with all the “answers.” The stakeholders were involved at every stage.

During the pilot phase of the program, CWIL assisted professors on a “by-request” basis. Strachan demonstrates that workshops can do only so much, that there is no way around working “one on one” and that all of the players must understand the changes intended and support one another.

Strachan’s book covers curriculum change from every angle. There are accounts of the complex relationships developed between trainers, the TAs and the professors. She includes interviews with all of the parties involved in which, amongst other concerns, questions are raised by instructors about the reward system for their participation.

Administration: Most importantly, the author describes the shifting identity of the writing consultants as requirements became solidified, and the danger to the intellectual integrity of faculty development being compromised once the administrative structures for ensuring its implementation multiply. In other words, the administration gave up the primary leadership informed by expertise and experience (e.g., CWIL) settling for administrative oversight and management of resources. Strachan explains:

As administrative and institutional frameworks for the writing requirement began to be articulated and more people across levels of governance got involved in the planning and implementation process, CWIL was swept into the confluence of larger institutional currents, financial and political, logistical and bureaucratic . . . CWIL faculty contributed substantially to these processes when consulted, but were often excluded, sometimes inexplicably . . . and were missed out in the lines of communication. (204)

For writing program administrators or other faculty who are called upon to conduct faculty development, regardless of the kind of curriculum change being sought, Strachan's book is a "must read." Granted, it is filled with "thick description," but well worth every chapter. Strachan exposes the tensions that accompany all faculty development efforts. This is a book that should also be read by academic administrators who, though well intentioned when they launch curriculum change, may fail to understand the complexity of the enterprise, especially the need to obtain individual consent for new curricular initiatives, if they want them to have more than a short life span.

This review should not end without a comment on the Appendices, an excellent resource for faculty and administrators interested in conducting WID or WAC curriculum change. They include the "Proposal for the Development of Writing Intensive Courses at SFU," the Pre-Course Questionnaire, Survey Data from the Third W-Course, Categories for Analyzing Students' Written Responses, Questions for Structured Interviews and Sample Assignments.