Starting with Ourselves: A Dialogue about Changing to Improve the Education Process

Jessica M. Kahn, Ph.D., and Richard Holody, D.S.W. Lehman College/CUNY

Faced with a shared dissatisfaction about their students' writing skills, two social work teachers came to realize that change needed to begin with them. This dialog presents a journey of their transformation, as it was influenced by the faculty development initiative known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). *This narrative describes a journey of professional change and self-awareness that benefits both teachers and tomorrow's helpers.*

We teach social work at a diverse urban college, and, like teachers throughout the country, we encounter issues in student writing that frustrate us. This frustration is intensified because we are also social workers and we know that the ability to write well is *sine qua non* to serve clients effectively. Though we began with a shared dissatisfaction about the formal assignments our students completed, we came to realize that *we* needed to change in order for the students to have the opportunity to improve.

Our change began with our respective introductions to a faculty development initiative called Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Martha Townsend (1994) describes WAC as based on the "…notion that writing should be an integral part of the learning process throughout a student's education, not merely in English courses but across the entire curriculum…" (p. 1299). WAC has been supported in our college since 1999, though we are both recent converts to its approach and have become enthusiastic about its possibilities.

We use this dialog because it is a natural format to highlight our shared and different experiences and to model for other teachers—regardless of discipline—who might consider adding WAC to their repertoire of teaching approaches. The dialog implicitly reflects the dualities we encountered, which include different levels of experience, different course content, and teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Despite this, we share a common pursuit that transcends our individual growth. By talking with each other (Rutz, 2003) and bringing our peers into the discourse, we go beyond focusing on students with writing problems. Instead, we want to effect change throughout our department and throughout social work education by challenging pedagogy at the college and graduate levels. We're modeling a journey of change and self-awareness that benefits both teachers and tomorrow's helpers. What follows is a reflection on this journey wherein we found WAC, had our teaching informed by WAC, and used one strategy, called scaffolding, which is a versatile tool that can also illustrate the main tenets of WAC.

Dissatisfactions

Our different backgrounds informed our expectations. Jessica M. Kahn (JMK) is a junior faculty member teaching a second year graduate course in research. Richard Holody (RH) has been teaching for fifteen years and was concerned about the results of his undergraduate social work practice course.

RH: I had taught this course a dozen times and each time I was unhappy with the results of the term paper assignment, known as a biopsychosocial assessment. I was disheartened that the students never seemed to be able to integrate material that was being presented to them over the semester in a coherent way. No matter how I seemed to present the course content, their papers read awkwardly, were filled with grammatical errors (though many of those students wrote

well enough in other assignments), and were, for lack of a better word, disappointing in thought and expression. The students seemed to save their least effort for the end of the course. And of course, there was not time left to do anything about it.

JMK: At least you had the benefit of several years that you could reflect on and were willing to examine your own role in the teaching process. Though I had very little to build upon, I, too, was disappointed by some of the written products in the first few semesters. At the time, I "blamed" it on the students and the particular course content as being particularly challenging, and did not assess my own responsibility to help them. In addition, as the newest faculty member, I simply used the syllabi and materials that had been developed by others.

RH: Even though I am more senior, I had agreed to use a program-wide term formal assignment. It is an unwieldy document, reminiscent of the joke: "A camel is a horse designed by a committee." No surprise that the students struggled with this paper; and yet I would be surprised every spring at the poor work, wondering where I went wrong and where they didn't get it.

JMK: We both inherited formal written assignments that we didn't compose, a common experience for new faculty, but for others as well. Once we agreed to use the assignments in our respective syllabi, the challenge became about how to maximize their usefulness for the students.

RH: I had a choice: I could continue to struggle by myself, or I could look for a new approach to teaching. If I didn't change, it was likely that my disappointments with my students' written work would continue.

How we came to WAC

RH: I received an email that my college was offering a three day workshop for faculty who wanted to use writing differently in their teaching. The workshop was given by something called the "Writing Across the Curriculum Committee." I didn't know what to expect from WAC, as it's called, but I knew I wanted to be a better teacher. I had been teaching for over a decade and needed a place to talk about teaching—just teaching. I began in the WAC faculty development workshop saying, "I can teach social work, but I can't teach writing. And my students' writing needs to improve." Much to my surprise everyone else said the same thing: I can teach music, anthropology, and so forth, but I can't teach writing. I wasn't alone. That formulation—teaching the content of social work but not being able to address my students' need to improve their writing—was a false but an interesting duality: setting the two as different skills rather than complementary. "Writing to learn" was my clouds-parting-sun-shining moment.

JMK: I went to WAC because you said it was informative, influential, and useful: a good thing to do. I was ignorant as to what WAC involved and knew nothing of its techniques— let alone that these techniques had names. I learned of new ideas such as "low stakes writing" and "scaffolding," which had an immediate impact on my thinking. I had always viewed writing as a means of assessment rather than a technique of thinking and learning. To have another technique to facilitate students' learning was very appealing especially since I felt I needed help in knowing how to be an effective instructor.

RH: WAC was incredibly stimulating for me. It was fun to talk about teaching with non-social work teachers. It was satisfying to read the literature about composition that had existed for so long; though until now, I had no awareness of it. Later, participating in the year-long WAC immersion program, I worked with a WAC fellow to re-think and re-design many assignments both in-class and take-home. One great lesson from WAC was the difference between low-stakes (or informal) writing assignments, and high-stakes (or formal) writing assignments, which are sometimes called term papers.

JMK: This distinction impressed me, too. The idea that some writing assignments would be informal (in-class) and not graded was new to me. I immediately saw how these content-driven assignments—that were not focused on grammar or even structure—could engage all students, even the quiet ones, in the process of learning. Understanding the term paper as

a high-stakes assignment helped me to consider the purposes of such work, especially the importance of allowing students time to revise their work, which reinforces their learning.

RH: Another appealing characteristic of WAC is its adaptability. It allows flexibility, creativity, and experimentation. When I get stuck, such as with a seminar class that has a low rate of participation, I turn to writing to increase engagement. One of the standard texts in the WAC discourse is John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* (2001), a wonderful title that exactly expresses what we want students to do: to become engaged with ideas.

JMK: WAC helped me to help the students engage with ideas throughout the semester, not just in the final few weeks of the term before the high-stakes terms paper assignment was due. That awareness energized me and also made me more aware of the students' learning process throughout the term.

Right Brain, Left Brain

Part of our growth through WAC was the recognition that different courses make different demands on the students' learning processes, including on the types of writing that they must do.

JMK: Research courses challenge social work students because much of the social work curriculum is more experiential and focused on the interpersonal and transactional process of becoming a professional helper.

RH: What you're describing is how some courses within the curriculum are experienced as anomalous because they require different patterns of thinking.

JMK: For example, there's not necessarily a right answer or approach when exploring personal values, which all social work students must do. While there's not necessarily a right approach in research either, there's greater specificity in research. In a course about social work practice, you want students to show empathy with all clients. They have to generalize skills. In research, for example, we can only use a particular analytical technique if the data is structured in a particular way. Students have to be able to distinguish which strategies are appropriate, and this derives not

from their preferences and intuition but from established formulations of research inquiries. To use layman's terms, research is more "left brain" oriented, while much of other social work education appears to be "right brain" oriented.

RH: This "right/left brain" duality is based on Roger Sperry's study of the relationship between the brain's two hemispheres (Dew, 1996). According to this theory, the left half of the brain processes information in an analytical, rational, logical, sequential way while the right half tends to recognize relationships, integrate and synthesize information, and arrive at intuitive insights. This is not only evident from course to course but also within one course. Typically in a social work practice course—a "right brain" course if there ever was one— the writing assignments are self-reflective, exploratory, and experiential. However the keynote assignment in this course, and one common to all social work programs, is the biopsychosoical assessment which prepares students for their work both in their internships and in the workforce. In both settings, they need to collect, organize, and analyze data for the purposes of understanding and helping the client. It is a central task of professional social work.

This is a "left brain" assignment because students need to summarize data, decide its appropriateness and relevance, analyze the information for the purpose of action, and do all of this in a way that would make a client and his/her situation understandable to a third party. When I taught the course before, the students under-performed; perhaps because they were accustomed to writing freely in prior assignments and so felt straight-jacketed by the requirements of the assessment outline.

What to do, what to do?

Understanding the differences between high and low stakes assignments prepares the instructor to employ the WAC technique known as scaffolding (D'Alessio & Riley, 2002) which in turn helps students utilize both their "right" and "left brains."

RH: It was in my WAC immersion year that I learned how to use scaffolding where low stakes assignments provide a framework

and support for the students' final product - the high stakes assignment. It's probably best understood in contrast to the approach I had used: early distribution of the final assignment, which was due in its entirety at the conclusion of the term. Students had little time to do more than patch their original papers, assuming I allowed for enough time at the end of the semester for revisions. Further, prior to scaffolding, I couldn't modify course content or instruction to reflect the specific learning needs of a particular group of students.

JMK: Right. Scaffolding helped me modify the presentation and emphasis of the course content which, in turn, helped the students develop their ideas. It provided me with a quick and easy method to clarify misunderstanding and to support the students when they "got it." I learned that scaffolding generates examples from the students that help me illustrate the ideas I want to get across; including from students who don't speak in class.

RH: So, what did we learn on our journey about what scaffolding is?

JMK: First, I learned that change is possible but complicated. Changing the assignment really involved changing how I would teach the course.

RH: It's worth exploring the details of how we used scaffolding very specifically, for the details reveal how we grew as teachers.

JMK: WAC taught me to use short write-to-learn assignments, which build the formal writing assignment in a logical, integrated process across time. This process is called scaffolding, a recursive process in which the students engage with the material on an ongoing basis as the material is being presented and with my active participation.

RH: What a great description, Jessica! Okay, now let me describe what I did using scaffolding in the course that had given me so many disappointments before. In our program, the biopsychosocial assessment is in seven parts and the first five sections contain demographic and other data about the client. The sixth section is the student's professional judgment about the first five sections, and the final section is the plan of action.

This is a pre-internship class and so the students did not have "real" clients. Consequently I asked them to complete the assessment using the protagonist of a movie (the New Zealand film, *Once Were Warriors*) as the client. I began by showing the first forty-five minutes of the film and asked the students to prepare a draft of the first five parts of the assignment. This assignment was the first piece of scaffolding and was done at the beginning of class as were all of the in-class writing assignments. After they wrote their individual answers they met in small groups to compare what they had written, made corrections if they chose (the second stage of scaffolding) and submitted the writing to me. I read these papers to see how well they understood the questions: did they get it? While the questions in these sections are pretty straightforward, past students often displayed some difficulty organizing their answers in smooth, coherent sentences and paragraphs. They tended to use very short sentences, resulting in paragraphs that plodded along. This time, I marked the papers only if there were egregious errors of understanding, such as not identifying the ages of the children. (It makes a big difference in understanding the client, for example, if her five children are in their teens or are pre-school!) As you said before about taking the temperature of the class, I used what the students wrote as a basis for later review of the course material.

The following week, I showed the remainder of the film, wherein considerable changes occurred to the protagonist and her family. Thus, the work that the students did for the first sections needed to be re-done in light of the new information they had discovered, so I asked them to do this third stage of scaffolding at home. We moved on to the next piece of scaffolding, Sections VI and VII, which I thought were harder conceptually. We wrote these sections in class, and I gave students feedback in the next class. The students then submitted a complete version of the assessment. If they submitted it by the due date and were dissatisfied with their grades, they had an opportunity to rewrite their papers for enhanced grades. This opportunity to revise can be thought of as the final scaffold.

JMK: Before I talk about how I used scaffolding in my course, let me put the assignment in context. As with the biopsychosocial assessment, a research proposal is a common assignment in social work education at the graduate level. It teaches students how to write for funding, how to structure an inquiry, and how to make their thinking more rigorous. In my course, the students proposed a research study based on prior published research, and developed a detailed plan of action based on the research concepts they learned in class.

When I inherited the assignment for the research proposal in the second year research course, it was structured as one long paper. I realized that there would be no opportunity to evaluate the students' understanding of the concepts prior to the submission of the finished product. The structure of the course would have inhibited both the students' learning and my teaching because I wouldn't have been able to give feedback until it would have been too late for the students to incorporate it usefully. So, my first step was to scaffold three complementary assignments that built on each other. As a result, there was no final paper in the traditional sense, and each of the three stages was graded separately. However, the content and instructor feedback from the first section informed the second and third sections, and the second section contributed to the third section. I explicitly encouraged students to incorporate their evolving understanding into the subsequent sections. In these ways, the latter two assignments were scaffolded out of their predecessors.

In turn, each of these formal writing assignments was supported or scaffolded by in-class, low stakes writing tasks. These writing exercises flowed directly from the class material on the given day. So, on the day that we discussed independent versus dependent variables, I asked the students to identify an independent variable and a dependent variable that would be relevant to a research project of interest. We used the examples the students generated for class discussion. I didn't collect the students' writings each time; sometimes I had students write their answers on the board or voluntarily share what they had written. We took the time to evaluate the accuracy of what they had written, focusing on the positives and the potential.

I was very encouraged by students' willingness to share the examples that they generated in the low stakes scaffolding. Students appeared very eager to ensure that they "had it right," and this made for rich class discussions that covered a variety of topics and yielded many useful examples. Also, I was able to identify common misunderstandings, and individual students seemed to feel better when others in class shared the same learning struggles.

Evaluation of our Scaffolding Efforts

As any good helping professional should, we ask: "How well did our efforts work?"

RH: Talking about how well we did raises the question of measurement. First, let's talk about measuring our students' performance.

JMK: This can't be scientific. We don't have a baseline, we don't have comparison groups, and we don't have any structured, established measurement instrument. We're relying on our perceptions, and our perceptions are informed by our desire to show improvement.

With that said, here's my evaluation of the students' performance. I had twenty-six students, and I had serious concerns about four. They passed, but with grades low enough that their standing in this graduate program was jeopardized. More importantly, they will be representing my profession and that bothers me. The question is, "Does this statistic reflect on the efficacy of scaffolding?" Probably not. Those students might have had more struggles without the scaffolding. Even if I had used multiple techniques apart from WAC approaches that fit their learning styles better and had tailored the course to fit the learning needs of those four students, would they have learned more? And, if I had done that, would the others have learned less?

As it was, the other twenty-two students can be evaluated in terms of the process and their final products. Indeed, they seemed to be much more engaged when I used writing tasks in class. They bought in to the process of scaffolding even though they were rushing

from work and internships to make a 5:00 class. By the third formal assignment, the students did demonstrate a more secure and accurate use of research terminology, principles, and so forth, and they improved their critical thinking and analysis skills.

RH: I had two ways to evaluate the students' output. First, my years of experience teaching this course, and second, a feedback design that I added late in the semester. From prior years I knew that the final product had often been unsatisfying, and the grades for the assignment often lowered the students' overall course grade. That didn't happen this year, again, like you, with a couple of exceptions. One example is interesting. The student who by far did the poorest final assessment also had a severe lateness problem, and therefore often missed the opening writing assignments or did them in a hurry. I still think it's best to begin the class with writing—certainly the other students got accustomed to this process—and I don't think I should have changed it for this one student. My first standard of evaluation, informal comparison with prior years, supports the notion that scaffolding helped the students with their final products.

In terms of feedback, I devised two feedback forms: one to be completed in the last (pre-final exam) class, the other an informal take home assignment. In both, the students were asked to evaluate their growth, identify assignments that worked for them, and make suggestions. The in-class assignment was conceptualized as a snapshot: only 10 minutes to complete. The take home allowed the students to be more contemplative. So I do have feedback in terms of student self-evaluation.

JMK: And what did they say?

RH: They felt very confident about their beginning level of work and, much to my surprise that they understood the significance of the assessment and how it helped them to think about their work and their client. That's an important point because in the past this assignment was seen as the-last-piece-of-work-we-have-to-do; a burden, not an organizing framework for the content of the semester. These in-class and at-home feedback assignments provided enough evidence of positive change in students to continue to use WAC strategies.

JMK: And how about that student who did the worst? What was her perception of the writing exercises?

RH: After noting that "no class is perfect," the student said very little in evaluation of the writing exercises and instead wished that there had been more role-plays, saying "…a hands-on experience is the best preparation." I have several thoughts about this response. Obviously it is true that some students learn better by doing, and others by reading or writing or watching someone model for them. It's also true that this student did poorly in her writing and so she arguably needed to participate in more, not fewer, writing exercises. One reason why "no class is perfect" is that no class can be perfectly attuned to the learning styles of every student in a class of twenty-five.

JMK: In addition to having evidence that most students benefited, we changed as teachers. We began with our dissatisfaction and went to WAC to address this dissatisfaction, so we can't evaluate the success of WAC without reflecting on our own growth. I have the greater challenge of self-evaluation because I have very limited comparative material. Still, I believe that the three months of WAC faculty development workshops better prepared me to create the conditions to maximize student learning. I didn't want the burden to be on the students to adjust to a course that could be distinctly challenging because it emphasized a different kind of thinking.

Scaffolding helped me to concentrate on the important issues of the course, to identify the take-home messages, to approach the material from the students' perspectives, and to see the course from their eyes. Composing the students' writing tasks was a fundamentally different process of preparation. This is teaching: structured writing tasks supplement the lectures, class discussions, and textbook reading assignment.

Without scaffolding, I might have assumed that my students understood content based on their classroom response and not discovered common areas of confusion until their final

papers were submitted at the end of the semester. In terms of week-to-week work, the students' scaffolded assignments isolated what I needed to reinforce from classroom lectures and discussions. In one particular instance, I did not use scaffolding and now realize that I should have. The students were expected to do a critical evaluation of empirical articles relating to their research proposal topics. Naively, I thought the students would have had experiences with this type of assignment in some undergraduate course, even if in a different discipline. Therefore we did not do any low stakes assignments in which the students were required to critique empirical articles. And what they ended up providing were superficial summaries without the critique. Even the disappointing results on this assignment provide me with the opportunity for future growth.

RH: My self-evaluation begins with satisfaction about how I was able to improvise throughout the semester. My planning was always subject to revision based on what I was learning from the students, and I had to work fairly creatively to get the full scaffolding done in class. As always, time went by so fast. This ongoing process helped me to rethink how the assessment outline really worked, and also how I wanted the students to structure their answers. It's important to teach in a way that reflects my expectations of student performance and really, of student thinking. This year, I was more successful in conveying more specifically what I wanted them to do.

Final thoughts

JMK: So what did *we* learn in this journey that might benefit other teachers in their professional growth?

RH: We've learned that the journey is one worth taking. Think of the alternative: being stuck with our continuing dissatisfactions with both our students and our teaching - a recipe for cynicism.

JMK: In other words, we should take our dissatisfactions seriously and act on them, whether the opportunity presents itself via email, or the urgings of a colleague, or is self-created. It doesn't matter whether the helper has been doing the job for fifteen years or is

new to the field; for both, the possibility of change and growth exists.

RH: We definitely benefited from WAC in no small part because the characteristics of WAC—openness, partnership, and transparency—parallel those of the helping professions. Using WAC involves the simultaneous evaluation of us and the students. Clearly, we want to continue to use what works, and the flexibility of WAC allows us to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of the particular class. We need to think through more what we want our students to learn and how they are going to learn it and our openness to WAC allows us to do just that.

JMK & RH: The payoff of WAC is greater student engagement with the material. More importantly, WAC enlivened us and made us better helping professionals.

References

• Bean, J.C. (2001). *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

• D'Alessio,D.,& Riley, M. (2002). Scaffolding writing skills for ESL students in an education class at a community college. *The WAC Journal, 13,* 79-89.

• Dew, J.R. (April, 1996). Are you a right-brain or a left-brain thinker? *Quality Progress Magazine, 2(4),* 91-93.

• Rutz, C. (2003). Up close and personal with a WAC pioneer: John Bean. *The WAC Journal, 14,* 7-17.

• Townsend, M.A. (1994). Writing across the curriculum. In, Purves, A.C. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of English Studies and Language Arts: A Project of the National Council of Teachers of English.* Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic, Inc.

Jessica M. Kahn, Ph.D., and Richard Holody, D.S.W., are both Assistant Professors of Social Work at Lehman College/City University of New York. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: jessica.kahn@lehman.cuny.edu, or richard.holody@lehman.cuny.edu.
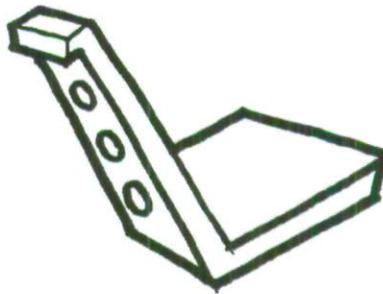
An Overview of WAC

Writing Across the Curriculum, or WAC, is based on an agreement that writing should be an integral part of the learning process throughout a student's education, rather than be isolated to specific courses or departments. A pedagogical movement that has become entrenched in many educational settings over the past three decades, it views writing as a habit acquired during lifelong practice. As Townsend (1994) notes in her history of the WAC movement, "...learning to write and think is a vastly more complex process than is usually acknowledged."

Perhaps ironically, while WAC programs typically begin when a critical mass of faculty come together and share their many concerns about their students' ability to spell correctly, write in complete sentences and other similar grammatical concerns, WAC's main purpose is not to address what are called "surface errors" of writing. Rather, given the complexities required for students to master academic discourse, WAC views the teaching process as iterative in which the teachers are coaches and students discover and create their understanding of course material.

While there is no one "WAC way" embraced by all, some common themes emerge in instructors' approach to learning, assignments, and use of class time. The process of thinking, synthesizing, analyzing, and applying course material is paramount, and writing is central to this process. In short, students use "writing to learn." "Learning to write" becomes a by-product of student writing through focused instructor feedback and repetition of student work. In addition to using multiple drafts to scaffold an assignment, WAC encourages free-writing assignments, double-entry journals, collaborative writing, and in-class "write to learn" assignments (for example: asking students to summarize the lecture they just heard).

WAC facilitates the students' intellectual growth and simultaneously allows faculty to identify where students need additional support. Thus, students and instructors adapt, change, and grow together.

An excellent introduction and overview of WAC can be found at wac.colostate.edu/intro. Two journals (both available on-line) are especially good sources for information about how teachers are using WAC. *The WAC Journal* (published by Plymouth State University) and *Across the Disciplines* (Colorado State University). Many colleges and universities that have started WAC programs have websites where their goals and approaches are explained. Our college WAC site, for example, can be found at: www.lehman.edu/lehman/wac/about.html.