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Cover Page Footnote

Anne Ellen Geller is Associate Professor in the English Department at St. John's University. As Director of Writing Across the Curriculum in the Institute for Writing Studies, she works with faculty from all disciplines to support the teaching of writing at all levels of instruction in all departments along with teaching non-fiction and writing studies. She is co-author of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (Utah State UP, 2007).

The Difficulty of Believing in Writing Across the Curriculum

Anne Ellen Geller

I do not know how our culture managed to drift so far from its human moorings, to a lost and lonely place where “tips, tricks and techniques” have become the commonest words in the literature about everything we do—from teaching to raising children to making love. But I do know that we must rescue teaching (and loving) from such gimmickry and manipulation, because teaching-and-learning at its best is one of the most ancient and elemental of all human exchanges.

(Parker J. Palmer. Foreward to Mary Rose O’Reilly’s Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice ix)

Every now and then, after a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) event—a lunch or a workshop—a faculty colleague will take me aside as he or she leaves and say, “I am so sorry that so and so said x.”¹

The first time this happened to me, long ago, was after a lunch workshop designed to help faculty improve their writing assignments. In the final minutes of that workshop, before everyone rushed off to 1:20 pm classes, a very senior, almost retired, psychologist raised his hand. He read aloud from writing he had scribbled alone at a back table when he was supposed to have been working with a faculty colleague. His long passage brought together his thinking about Nabokov’s *Lolita* (main character described in vivid detail), the lessons for teaching which might be gleaned from the novel, and his disdain for the assignments being discussed. After he read, he stood up and limped out of the room. Glares and sighs followed him, just as they always did.

Later that afternoon, he emailed his writing to me, typed and attached. Sexist as I found his take, and difficult as that made it for me to try to hear what he was saying, there was also something interesting about his ideas, something that left me trying to listen to him and trying to consider the lens through which he wanted to view teaching and learning. And I wished others could have suspended their judgment of him long enough to hear what he was offering. I also wish he hadn’t included a critique of everyone else in the room in his tirade for that certainly didn’t leave them wanting to listen.

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¹In this essay I use “writing across the curriculum” as an umbrella term for writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines programs.

Exchanges such as these remind me that much as we may deeply respect our academic colleagues, we are also quite committed to doubting them. I might even use Peter Elbow's term to say we use our most well-honed academic skill and "methodologically doubt" our colleagues, especially those colleagues whose views or approaches seem most different from our own. I watch and listen as this plays out again and again in department meetings and university-wide committee meetings.

Though WAC directors claim to have evolved from the days of missionary work, we still reach out to our colleagues with a sense of doubt. I hear us group faculty into categories: those who "care only about content" or those who are "traditional" in the ways they teach writing. We even have words we use to (in)accurately describe these colleagues: the "unconverted" or the "resistant" or the "lazy" who won't assign and read drafts or informal writing. We hold workshops hopeful that sandwiches and stipends will efficiently coerce faculty into thinking about writing in ways we find acceptable.

So at the heart of this piece lies the following idea: It doesn't seem to me as if we've ever tried to consider explicitly WAC work through the lens of Elbow's "methodological believing" or the "believing game." What would it take to try to believe that every faculty member across campus knows a great deal about writing? What would happen if we were to try to believe that every faculty member does, in fact, teach writing?

Well, first, we might have to remind ourselves that nearly every faculty person wrote a dissertation to gain a PhD and writes day in and day out to gain tenure and sustain a presence within a field. We could try to believe that all of our faculty colleagues are writers.

We would also want to try to believe that all our faculty colleagues are teaching writing (and worry about parsing out exactly what that means or judging how well we think they're doing at it at some later point). We would want to try to believe that all our faculty colleagues are thinking about their teaching of writing. And, truthfully, how could they not be, when they, too, take home stacks and stacks of student writing.

"But, but, but . . .," I imagine readers thinking at this point. Those faculty are not assigning the type of writing we'd want them to be assigning. They are not responding to students' writing in the ways we'd hope. They do not even know why they write as they write. Or understand why they ask their students to write as they do. Some of those faculty are not even writing.

All are potentially true. And all based in doubting.

Elbow asks us to think of methodological believing as a tool and a lens: "If we systematically try to believe everything, we're not trying to accept everything; we're trying to find virtues we couldn't see before" (5). I'm struck by Elbow's reminder that we can separate the "*process of doubting*" something or someone from the "*decision to reject*" something or someone, but we "haven't learned to separate the *process of believing* from the *decision to accept*" (4, original emphasis).

If we were to believe that every faculty person in the university is a writer, thinks about writing, and teaches writing in his or her own way, what "virtues" would we find that doubting would lead us to "disqualify" (Elbow 7)? As WAC director, I am more and more interested in the practice of separating the process of believing from the decision to accept wholeheartedly—or reject. My role, as I

see it, is to keep faculty curious about writing and the teaching of writing, reflective about their own beliefs, and actively perplexed about the beliefs of others. Certainly there is a lot of research about writers and writing. But unless we are all prepared to agree on one best way to support writers, we should be able to inhabit the beliefs of all faculty for what they will add to our understanding of the teaching of writing.

* * *

In 2006-2007 I participated in a year-long faculty development project funded by the Ford Foundation. The Difficult Dialogues project at Clark University was a campus-wide initiative to foster dialogue about contentious and divisive issues such as power, race, religion, reproductive rights, when those in the dialogue hold very different and well established worldviews. Many of our workshops were facilitated by the Public Conversations Project, a non-profit in Watertown, Massachusetts, dedicated to work that “guides, trains, and inspires individuals, organizations, and communities to constructively address conflicts relating to values and worldviews” (Public Conversations Project).² Here is how William Isaacs describes “dialogue” in *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*:

dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking implies that you no longer take your position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to possibilities that result simply from being in relationship with others—possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.
(19)

Dialogue, like methodological believing, “explores underlying causes, rules, and assumptions to get to deeper questions” and new “framing of problems”; it invites “unprecedented possibilities and new insights; produces a collective flow” (Isaacs 41). Dialogue also “implies learning how to make explicit the thinking that leads you to say what you say” when too many “of us learn to cover up this thinking for fear that it will embarrass someone” (189). Basic principles of dialogue are:

- * “Listening”—which “requires we not only hear the words, but also embrace,
- * accept and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring” (83);
- * “Respecting”—which “invites us to see others as *legitimate*” (111, original emphasis); and,
- * “Suspending”—which means we “simply acknowledge and observe our thoughts and feelings as they arise without being compelled to act on them.” (135)

²For me, the most striking of the Public Conversations Projects is a six-year dialogue of right to life and pro-choice leaders in Boston begun after the John Salvi abortion clinic murders. At a public talk at Clark University, these women were asked if they ever thought to change their views in dialogue with one another, and they said no, that their understandings of their own worldviews grew stronger and deeper; in dialogue they found their combined views were often welcome in contexts where their disparate views otherwise might not have been. See “Talking with the Enemy” by Anne Fowler, Nicki Nichols Gamble, Frances X. Hogan, Melissa Kogut, Madeline McComish, and Barbara Thorp, *The Boston Globe* 28 Jan. 2001: F1.

These principles resonate with the ideas at the foundation of the believing game. We should be “listening and entering into the words” of others, deciding to “enter into ideas—to invest or insert ourselves,” and trying “to understand points of view from the inside” (Elbow 8).

It is not easy for WAC directors to suspend our judgment of others. Most of us call English our disciplinary home, and our education as rhetoricians actually reinforces for us again and again how not to yield if we have strong beliefs. But that rhetorical strength also leads us to defensiveness, a lack of curiosity. Sometimes that strength of belief in ourselves and what we value about writing even leads us to resist the type of dialogue which would allow us to think beyond “already established positions, assumptions and beliefs” (Isaacs 59), the type of dialogue that would ask us to “suspend certainty,” “mine for the questions,” and “externalize thought” (155). I feel particularly drawn to Martha Patton’s description of her WAC “co-inquiry” with a physicist: “The dialogue I’ve had with him and others isn’t just one-way—we share lots of reading, lots of philosophical inquiry about our assumptions, as well as questions about my teaching and assignments. But my point here is that to embrace egalitarianism is not to deny expertise, much of which is *practiced* even if not *preached*” (5, original emphasis).

* * *

As I read the history of writing across the curriculum, I find that the earliest think tanks and retreats seem to have been filled with the most cross-disciplinary collegial exploration. Perhaps this is nostalgia for good old days that never truly existed? I don’t think so because disciplinary faculty at Clark University attended early NEH funded workshops like the one Toby Fulwiler describes attending at Rutgers, “Writing to Learn in the Humanities,” and, like Fulwiler, could speak in detail thirty years later about the experience. Perhaps the newness of WAC initiatives in those years meant there was much less at stake so everyone could be less territorial? With supportive NEH funding and the excitement of cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional retreats and without the specter of shrinking state budgets and mandated, strict assessment,³ early WAC initiatives may have allowed more space for questioning, believing, and playing among faculty.

With WAC programs formalized, as they now are on so many campuses, those who direct the programs need to claim expertise campus-wide about writing and the teaching of writing. Like the professor in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* who “insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women” to gain power as a man, I wonder if we may sometimes be concerned with disciplinary faculty’s “inferiority” as teachers of writing because their inferiority allows us to sustain an image of our “own superiority” (34). Perhaps we feel some pressure to focus on what faculty across the disciplines don’t know about writing and the teaching of writing to make what we do know seem more legitimate? I think we do, and I have a feeling this evolves from our continuing worry about whether we have disciplinary status.

Like others, I read and re-read the set of exchanges that played out across the pages of *College English* twenty years ago. In April, 1988, Catherine Pastore

³I don’t believe assessment, state mandated or otherwise, need shut down opportunities for methodological believing or dialogue. See Michael Carter’s “Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines.”

Blair published a piece entitled “Only One of the Voices: Dialogic Writing Across the Curriculum.” In that essay, originally delivered as a talk at the 1986 MLA conference as part of a Council of Writing Program Administrators panel, Blair describes the WAC program at Bucknell University and argues “that the English department should have no special role in writing across the curriculum” (383). Instead, “true writing across the curriculum should be based on dialogue among all the departments, and, in this dialogue, the English department should be only one of the voices” (383). She continues (and you might feel the hair on the back of your own neck bristling a bit): “Entrusting the writing program to the English department is based on the belief that the English department has a special relationship to language and is, therefore, the department that knows the most about writing—in fact, the department that owns writing” (384).

And this is an ongoing belief. Listen to the title of Doug Hesse’s 2005 4Cs chair’s address: “Who Owns Writing?” I do believe that in his closing lines he means to bond us in a common endeavor, inspire us, and send us off hopeful. But I’d ask you to listen for the ways in which his admonitions may in fact lead us to remain, as ever, suspicious and distrustful of anyone else beyond our “we” who might also own writing. I’ve cut some phrases here, but I don’t believe Hesse’s meaning is changed:

These days all sorts of interests would organize writing. Let’s attribute good intentions to them all. But let’s remember that my good intentions are not likely yours, that intentions are always cropped and framed. . . . Make no mistake. We in 4Cs refract and frame no less than others. But we have something else—or if we don’t have it, we have no particular right to be in this place. . . . We have the lens of research and reflective practice, polished carefully. . . . Ours is the knowledge of what writing is and what it can be, the whole of it, in every sphere. Ours is the never-done knowledge of how writing develops, within a person or a populace. (354-55)

To be fair, Hesse suggests “we together must own and own up to writing, not as colonists, or profiteers, but as stewards” (355). I’m not convinced that imagining WAC directors as “stewards” is particularly dialogic, especially if we spend most of our time thinking and talking and working from what we “own.” But his suggestion that we “own up to writing” and confess or admit what we know—and don’t know—including all of our assumptions, is a more generative one especially when I think about all the writing about writing and the teaching of writing we don’t “own.”

In a presentation delivered at the 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Michael Edwards, a West Point compositionist, recounted a conversation in which a colleague from history told him “yours is not the only discipline . . . with expertise and investment in the production of writing, and plenty of other stakeholders outside composition have valid perspectives on how writing should be taught.” Of himself in that conversation, Edwards said: “I did my best not to reveal my immediate, gut-felt resistance to his response.” A moment like that one, in which we have a gut-felt resistance to such a response, might be a good one to try methodological believing.

In the last year alone, I know of these pieces about writing published in disciplinary journals, but there are likely even more: “Enhancing Students’ Understanding In Calculus Through Writing” (*International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education*, February 2009), “Using Popular Magazine Articles To Teach the Art of Writing for Nontechnical Audiences” (*Journal of Chemical Education*, January 2008) and “Using the ACS Journals Search To Validate Assumptions about Writing in Chemistry and Improve Chemistry Writing Instruction” (*Journal of Chemical Education*, May 2008). “Trafficking in Facts: Writing Practices in Social Work” (*Qualitative Social Work*, March 2008), “The History Learning Project: A Department ‘Decodes’ Its Students” (*The Journal of American History*, March 2008), and “Writing as Thinking” (*Review of General Psychology*, March 2008). Yet I seldom read WAC literature that cites this research or hear WAC directors discussing among ourselves the research about writing published in disciplinary journals. Is that, I wonder nervously (especially as someone currently untenured), because we in English doubt the value of these articles since we categorize them as scholarship of teaching and learning?⁴ If so, I wonder how we in writing studies, in writing across the curriculum, and in writing in the disciplines would explain the type of research about writing that we do value.

If we were, as recently as three years ago when we listened to Doug Hesse’s 4Cs chair’s address, concerned about who owns writing (and, now I see, potentially confused about just what type of scholarship about writing we are willing to own), it is easy to imagine the reception Blair faced when she suggested WAC should be shared more cross-disciplinarily. In the January, 1989 *College English* three comments on the piece were published, and Blair responded. In the April, 1989 issue a comment co-authored by three appeared, and Blair responded. In impassioned arguments, Blair critiqued those who wrote back to her for suggesting “on the one hand that English ‘composition experts’ can make available the full selection of teaching methods to prospective teachers of writing in other disciplines and in the next breath propose that they steer these teachers into choosing the right ones” (104). “This English-department knows best attitude will be the death of interdisciplinary dialogue,” she wrote (104). And Blair imagined even then how prevalent freestanding departments of writing would become, warning their creation would “simply risk creating another ‘department that owns writing’ and therefore dominates the interdisciplinary dialogue about writing” (435).

In a fall 2008 *Pedagogy* article Joan Mullin raised a similar, but slightly different, conception, noting that “rather than prescribing ways to teach, faculty developers can best effect change by listening, articulating faculty dialogues for further reflection, and facilitating internal change in faculty while modeling teaching practices they and others could adopt” (496). Mullin notes: “This requires of facilitators a certain disciplinary neutrality, a meta-awareness of their own frames. A WAC developer often claims a department of English, writing, or rhetoric as their home department; as a result, cross-disciplinary programs may become codi-

⁴A recent article surveying the acceptance of the scholarship of teaching and learning suggests “the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Humanities has been inconsistent and slow to develop. It may seem at first surprising that it has not been a central focus within the well-established disciplines, yet perhaps because of their long traditions of teaching and learning, they are slower to incorporate this contemporary meta-conceptual concentration” (Witman and Richman 13).

fied through the disciplinary lens of one person and the field or group to which he or she belongs" (496).

Those exchanges in the pages of *College English* are certainly discussions about the most appropriate administrative housing of WAC programs. Should the director be a faculty person from the English department? Should the budget for such a program belong to an English department or run through a different university line? But, as Joan Mullin points out, where the WAC program or director is housed may also have a great deal to do with the lenses through which entire programs are "codified." And in that codification certain assumptions about writing held by the program or the program director may be "particularly invisible to us because we are living as part of a community and culture" (Elbow 6). "It's hard to doubt what we live inside of: we can't see it and we unconsciously take it for granted" (6). But, as Elbow notes, "Here's where the believing game comes to the rescue" (6).

* * *

I understand what the act of "playing" the believing game might look like in WAC work because I equate the believing game with David Bohm's notion that we can *think* our differences, rather than just *thinking about* our differences. To "think" our differences means we "go through" our thoughts together to "let [them] produce whatever [they're] going to do, . . . let [them] stand in the body in consciousness without being suppressed and without being carried out" (88). We "*think together*" (30, original emphasis). By thinking together, "Everybody will be sharing all the assumptions in the group. . . . Whereas if we all have different assumptions and defend them, . . . we won't really take in the other person's assumptions. We'll be fighting them, or pushing them away—try to convince or persuade the other person" (31).

Thinking our differences together is slow work—the stuff of retreats, intensive weeklong workshops, and the very best collaborative assessment research (see Carter; Thaiss and Zawacki). The time requirement alone is why I think this work so seldom happens in WAC programs. Workshops that offer tips and techniques to faculty—how to respond to students' papers or how to integrate informal writing into courses or how to break the research paper into steps—seem efficient and are certainly more easily advertised than requests for faculty to spend time dwelling in ideas about writing and the teaching of writing that are different from their own, ideas they may never want to adopt and we might not suggest they adopt. And yet what one might come to learn about one's own ideas about writing and the teaching of writing by being willing to both doubt and believe the ideas of others would, I think, be valuable for all.

Here is an example of Bohm's thinking together and a description of how an act of thinking together has echoed out beyond the spaces where it was first experienced—by me, by faculty at St. John's University, within a professional organization's listserv, and then back into the faculty talk of at least two departments of psychology. In the Difficult Dialogues workshops at Clark University, the Public Conversations Project had us consider the restrictions we placed on talk in our classrooms by asking us to brainstorm what we "prohibited, allowed and preferred" in the talk in our classrooms. That exercise was powerful for me as someone who had not previously thought so explicitly about talk in my classrooms. I imagined the exercise would be similarly powerful if cross-disciplinary

faculty who had not thought individually about writing in their classes in these ways could be thinking together. So in a number of workshops, including two intensive summer workshops with St. John's faculty participants from across the disciplines, I've adapted the exercise to writing and asked those assembled to individually fill three columns in answer to these three questions: What do you prefer in the writing for your courses? What do you allow in the writing for your courses? What do you prohibit in the writing in your courses?

I added one more step to the exercise when I read Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's *Engaged Writers/Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. After faculty filled their columns, I asked them to go back and try to note "why" they wrote down what they wrote down on each list. Before faculty began to dialogue from their lists, I shared with them the "five contexts" Thaiss and Zawacki see at work in any writing assignment: the academic, the disciplinary, the subdisciplinary, the local or institutional (local policies and practices), and the idiosyncratic (138). I asked faculty to consider their "whys." Is what you prefer informed by these contexts? Is what you prohibit informed by these contexts? Then, we had open dialogue about what faculty included in their "prefer" and "prohibit" columns.

It is difficult to recreate what these dialogues sounded like (and I haven't yet recorded any of them), but I am reminded when I am in them that "discussion seeks closure and completion" while "dialogue is about evoking insight" (Isaacs 45). There has been a tremendous amount of new understanding about disciplinary beliefs and how they are reified ("Oh, that's why you chemists/literature people always X") as well as an ownership and acceptance of idiosyncratic beliefs and investigation of how those come to be formed ("well, when my dog was young, she would run off with the loose pages, so I started to require my students to use staples, and then I liked it" or "when I began to include narrative into my own scholarship and got comfortable with it, I began to ask my students to write more narrative").

Resistance to local or institutional policies has been questioned and commitments to disciplinary and subdisciplinary beliefs have been stretched and strengthened and carried out into new dialogues. For example, two summers ago the chair of the St. John's University psychology department, Ray DiGiuseppe, was a participant in this dialogue and began to interrogate his own beliefs about the use of the active and passive in psychology writing. Recently he emailed to say that the listserv of the Council of Chairs of Graduate Programs in Psychology (COGDOP) was in the midst of an online discussion of the use of active and passive prompted by a chair who wrote:

I am aware that it is trendy to use first person voice in submission to many psychology journals, and last I knew this was the position of the APA style manual. However I also know first hand that many journals will reject articles that are written in the first person voice. Given this inconsistency, how do you teach journal article writing in your graduate research methods courses? Do you teach both styles?

Here is what Ray wrote about his engagement in this online, nationwide chairs dialogue about the use of the first person:

This question came up on the psychology chairs listserv concerning teaching writing. In the past I would have ignored it. But I have a stronger interest now and an opinion. I will collect the responses and bring them to my faculty.

When I asked Ray if I could include his email in this essay, he wrote “Please feel free. It was a great discussion.” What I think, however, is that he meant it was a great dialogue, a great disciplinary dialogue among colleagues who didn’t agree and didn’t need to seek “closure and completion.” It was a dialogue he wanted to enter because he had already explored what he preferred and prohibited in dialogue with cross-disciplinary colleagues. And notice that he does not say he will tell the faculty in his department what he thinks about this issue. He writes that he will bring the varied responses from the listserv to the faculty in his department, creating once again the possibility for differences to co-exist, creating once again another opportunity for dialogue and believing, and perhaps some doubting too.

When I emailed the poster of the original question, Wallace Dixon, chair of the psychology department at East Tennessee State University, to ask if I could include his question in this essay, he wrote to say it was a colleague of his, Andrea Clements, who “implored” him to ask the question on the chairs’ listserv. And he also wrote:

You may find it interesting to know that I took the COGDOP listserv responses to a department meeting to get a dialog going within my department, and we found that not only was there no consensus about how to teach writing, but some of my faculty did not even know that first person active voice was the preferred mode of the APA manual 5th edition. Andi’s question was the first question my faculty had ever pondered with regard to writing standards in the discipline.

Exchanges like these—face to face and asynchronous listserv communication—are the necessary and “elemental human exchanges” Parker J. Palmer writes about in my epigraph. We could all be deliberately creating, or better yet, co-creating moments and situations in which we would set aside our reliance on, even our inclination toward, persuasion and participate fully in dialogue and methodological believing. Promoting everyone’s engagement with writing—recognizing all our assumptions, articulating all our beliefs and listening deeply and respectfully to divergent values with suspension of judgment—will not reduce a WAC director’s expertise. As only one of the voices—just as valuable to and just as limited as other voices within or beyond English—in any deep dialogue about the teaching and learning of writing, we may not only encourage our cross-disciplinary colleagues to come to what they had not yet fully articulated about writing. We may, ourselves, also come to know what we could not even imagined on our own about writing.⁵ ☐

⁵Portions of this essay were delivered April 4, 2008, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans, LA. The panel—with Lauren Fitzgerald and Lisa Lebduska—was Changing Collaborative Realities: Dissensus and Dialogue. Thanks to Lauren and Lisa for encouraging me to continue thinking about these ideas. Thanks, too, to those who read and responded to drafts of this essay —Peter Elbow, Michele Eodice, Harry Denny, Neal Lerner, and Gino DiIorio.

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