

MURAJ: In Focus - Beyond the First Draft: Crafting Discipline-Relevant Writing Programs

By *Emily Shim*

Writing is undoubtedly an integral part of undergraduate education at the University of Minnesota. From Writing Intensive courses to senior capstone papers, writing-related requirements affect every student. Of course, there is a lot of work that happens behind the scenes when it comes to planning such a curriculum. I had the chance to talk to researchers at the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) Program about their research and work concerning writing instruction across a variety of departments and academic disciplines.

The WEC Program, now in its fourteenth year, works with departments to ensure discipline-relevant writing instruction is incorporated into their undergraduate curricula. The WEC team supports faculty within a given department in developing, implementing, and assessing undergraduate writing plans. In total, around 80 to 85 percent of the undergraduate student body is involved in a WEC department.

The WEC Program was founded at the University of Minnesota in 2006, based on the work that the founding director, Dr. Pamela Flash, had previously done with departments to fulfill their Writing Intensive course requirements. During her time working with departments, Pamela noticed that there were many factors that kept writing from being integrated into the curriculum. For example, faculty were often not fully engaged with the curriculum development process, deferring expertise on writing instruction within their own disciplines to outside specialists.

There also was no structure in place to support faculty beyond the initial planning stages.

Pamela saw that at North Carolina State University, faculty engaged intensively in the process of incorporating writing into their curricula. Once faculty were asked about what they valued in writing in their disciplines, they started taking initiative in the process. With the hunch that faculty needed to be in charge, Pamela developed the WEC model, which has now evolved into a highly organized program here at the University of Minnesota. What started as a grant-funded initiative with two academic units—Political Science and Mechanical Engineering—has now evolved into a full-fledged program within the Office of Undergraduate Education, working with over a hundred majors.

The WEC Program is a multi-year process. First, departments must submit a letter of interest in order to be considered for the Program, which brings in two to five new departments a year. Once

a department is selected for participation, it appoints a faculty liaison, who serves a critical role in the coordination of the WEC process. Next, WEC researchers hold a planning meeting with key stakeholders of the department to determine the direction of the Program and next steps. Often, the WEC team also holds an introductory all-faculty meeting.

At the beginning of the year of creating a writing plan, a survey is sent out to all stakeholders in the department—faculty, undergraduate students, and outside professionals—to gather their opinions on writing within their discipline. Four faculty meetings, which address organizational questions related to the writing plan, are held throughout the year. Faculty discuss what writing looks like in their field, what writing abilities undergraduate students should possess by graduation, how these needs could be met within the curriculum, and what kind of resources they might need in the implementation process. Throughout this process, the WEC researchers are present to facilitate the discussion. They do not run the show but rather guide faculty in thinking critically about their own assumptions—open or hidden—about writing and writing instruction. In this way, researchers are able to shift writing expertise in a particular discipline from outsiders to faculty and professionals within the discipline.

There is also a significant amount of data in the student surveys that help determine the direction of the writing plan. These surveys give departments an opportunity to hear about writing from the students' perspectives, which do not necessarily align with those of faculty. For example, faculty tend to hold less favorable views of students' writing skills than the students themselves; when self-assessing their writing skills, students generally regard their writing more highly than faculty do.

These mismatched expectations often become a catalyst for discussion in early faculty meetings. Students are also very candid about what works and what does not work for them within the department; they talk about assignments that they found to be meaningful, as well as areas where they feel they are not receiving support. Some students also have the sense that grading is idiosyncratic and subjective, with criteria varying widely between different instructors.

Dr. Matthew Luskey, one of the assistant directors of the WEC Program, says, "Many students say, 'I want to write like a historian,' or 'I want to write like an anthropologist,' but they feel like they aren't getting enough support within their department." He notes that there are many valuable pieces of information in the students' open responses that get referred to in faculty meetings, adding, "Faculty lean in because [this student perspective] is what they want to know." These responses help faculty realize why they should make their assignment criteria more specific, or why they should explicitly name and define concepts that they think all students should understand.

Faculty responses to student feedback vary tremendously, from surprised, not-at-all-surprised, and from defensive to overjoyed. But regardless of their reaction, these responses serve as important points of discussion in faculty meetings.

Based on the input received from both faculty and students, a writing plan is created and sent to the Campus Writing Board for approval. Once a plan has been approved, researchers help faculty implement the writing plan and complete ratings of student writing. After the initial baseline rating of student abilities, capstone-level writing within the department is rated every three years by faculty, outside affiliates, and the WEC team. These

ratings are brought back to the faculty for their interpretation and reaction, and the writing plan is adjusted accordingly.

There is no hard end to this process; departments are continually provided support in the cycle of implementation, assessment, and revision—a unique aspect of the WEC model. Even after academic units have gone through the regular WEC process, researchers continue to work with them to reflect on the ongoing relevance of their writing plans, especially in the face of changing technology.

When asked about general trends across the different WEC departments, Dr. Daniel Emery, the other assistant director of the WEC Program, notes a few commonalities. Academic programs tend to pay attention to building assignments and grading criteria that are explicit about expectations of the major. There is also an emphasis on making sure faculty and students have the same ideas in mind when they hear phrases such as “thoughtful analysis” or “effective synthesis.” Additionally, most departments plan professional development activities for instructors, where they learn more about strategies for grading writing assignments or planning writing instruction. Finally, writing plans often focus on capstone writing, a culminating experience for many undergraduate majors.

However, Dan is also quick to note that nothing is universal, and every writing plan is discipline-specific: “For example, the Agronomy department focuses on how they deal with mathematical and statistical responses, but Dental Hygiene [focuses on] how students respond in clinical contexts and engage in thoughtful reflection.”

Researchers have encountered a couple of surprises throughout their endeavors. First, Pamela notes, “I’ve been surprised at the extent to which

faculty have engaged, especially at a large R1 school; there isn’t a lot of incentive for faculty to engage in undergraduate teaching at a research university.”

Another surprise is the funding and support they are receiving from the University of Minnesota. The WEC Program started being funded by the Office of Undergraduate Education in a time of fiscal constriction, and thus far, the University has put more than two million dollars into the program. Of this, Pamela says, “I think this shows this program does what accreditors want all colleges and universities to do, which is to engage faculty in meaningful conversations about their teaching and their curriculum, help them come to some kind of decision about what they’d like to do, implement them, assess them, and then move around the feedback.”

The WEC Program is continually evolving. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is increased interest in online writing instruction. In the past, this has often meant an auto-didactic method of having students learn writing skills from websites or other online resources on their own time, rather than incorporating writing instruction into class time. Faculty are now wondering what asynchronous and synchronous writing instruction might look like in an online environment and they have more of an appetite to learn about new instructional tools and methods.

Although the WEC model began at the University of Minnesota, its reach goes beyond the University campus. Other colleges and universities—such as Colby College, Smith College, and California State University of Monterey Bay—have also adopted the WEC model for their own unique needs. Pamela has had the opportunity to work with institutions abroad in Germany and Hong Kong. Working internationally brings a unique set

of challenges; speaking about her work in Germany, Pamela notes, “Things are structured really differently there, so the idea of getting faculty together to come together and coalesce around [this] approach met some challenges that [the Program] doesn’t meet here.” Universities abroad often do not structure undergraduate courses and majors in the same ways as American universities do; they may not have attendance requirements or prerequisites, and as such, the undergraduate experience is not as controlled.

In Hong Kong, Pamela encountered the challenge of infusing the WEC model with not just different disciplines, but also English language instruction; some of the people that worked in English language instruction worried about what would become of their roles after the implementation of the WEC model. “There are still kinks to be worked out,” Pamela comments.

On the practice of writing, Pamela notes, “Many people have the misconception that writing is mastered, that you learn a basic set of writing abilities and then you deploy them. We know from the research that that’s not true, that writing works with cognition and is continually learned.”

The WEC Program is constantly growing and looking to better serve students in their education at the University of Minnesota. On potential opportunities for undergraduate students in the Program, Pamela remarks, “It would be interesting to have a UROP that looks at all the data we’ve collected over the years.” The WEC team also values students’ perspectives and are eager for students to get involved beyond the surveys; they encourage students to check out the writing plans on the Writing-Enriched Curriculum website (wec.umn.edu) and reach out if they have any questions or comments. Students interested in

being involved can reach out to the administrative coordinator, Heidi Solomonson, at wac@umn.edu.

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Emily Shim is a third-year undergraduate student majoring in Anthropology, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, and Linguistics. She is also a research assistant at the Writing-Enriched Curriculum Program, currently serving as a reviewer for the Minnesota Undergraduate Research & Academic Journal.