
Next Steps: New Directions for/in**Writing about Writing**

edited by Barbara Bird, Doug Downs, I.
Moriah McCracken, and Jan Rieman. Utah
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Geared to instructors, but supported by accounts from students, this edited volume is a practical invitation for composition instructors to embrace some element of writing about writing in their instruction. According to the editors, writing about writing (WAW) is an instructional approach founded on three principles: writing as a subject of study; students being recognized as writers, “not *student* writers;” and instructors advancing “writing knowledge *with* students” (4, emphasis in original). This volume is a multivoice update to the WAW approach initially presented by Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle in 2007. The chapters demonstrate the variety of instructional contexts in which WAW is being used, such as traditional first-year writing, community colleges, classrooms with multilingual students, multimodal assignments, and writing-in-the-disciplines. This volume may prove useful to two-year college writing instructors who need a single, accessible source for an overview of WAW theory and practical suggestions for its implementation.

The editors group chapters by three outcomes of WAW: writerly identities, extended writing processes, and student engagement. Each chapter helpfully begins with an abstract and a box containing information about the case study presented in the chapter (i.e., size of institution, type of academic program, and the employment status of the instructor—adjunct or tenure-track, or

other). Most chapters also contain suggested assignments and course readings. The chapters are upbeat and personal, which may be in response to what Wardle and Downs acknowledged in 2013 as valid criticisms of stridency and territorialism that occurred when they initially presented their WAW approach. In their own reevaluation of WAW, Wardle and Downs admit that their original stance may have scared off or excluded qualified instructors from using WAW. Wardle and Downs acknowledge that they initially implied that only instructors with a theoretical composition background would be qualified to teach WAW. An obvious goal of this volume is to demonstrate that WAW is an appropriate approach for many types of instructors and students.

To help instructors new to WAW, which may include some two-year college instructors, the volume offers examples of how to get started and a primer on recent WAW-related theory. In “Developing a Writing about Writing Curriculum,” Cat Mahaffey and Jan Rieman discuss the process of transitioning a large department-wide first-year writing program from a “formalist approach” (123) to a WAW approach. Additionally, through chapters by such scholars as Elizabeth Wardle and Linda Adler-Kassner and Rebecca S. Nowacek, the volume explains theory around threshold concepts and writing transfer that complements the WAW approach. The theoretical grounding helps instructors know that the pedagogies recommended in the chapters are based on research.

The inclusion of two-year college settings is one of several ways the volume demonstrates the variety of

contexts in which a WAW approach can be used. Speaking from his experience as a two-year college instructor, Shawn Casey debunks the notion that writing studies concepts are too complicated for students like his. Rather, he argues, “problems with literacy can themselves become the subject of study” (140). Likewise, two-year college instructors Olga Aksakalova and Dominique Zino note that reading about professional authors’ struggles with writing process can help students become more accepting of their own writing struggles and more willing to work through them.

A significant portion of the section focused on writerly identities discusses using the WAW approach with multilingual students, a group of students common to two-year college classrooms. In the chapter “I Am Seen; I Am My Culture; and I Can Write,” Christina Grant posits that the use of WAW has allowed her multilingual students to more actively participate in their university education and to feel valued as learners and individuals. In “Latinx Writing about Writing,” Nancy Wilson, Rebecca Jackson, and Valerie Vera assert that WAW has helped their Latinx students move beyond seeing writing as a set of skills to be learned and to engage with writing and language as a complex, cross-cultural experience. In another place, Gwen Hart discusses a single assignment that encourages students to compare their experience of writing to something else they are familiar with, such as cooking. Hart makes the valuable point that the WAW approach can be used for just a portion of a course, especially for instructors who are new to the approach, or for those who have little control over their curriculum.

Additionally, multilingual voices are among the student voices present in the volume. Student Hiroki Sugimoto writes about his new understanding of the connection between culture and writing gained in his WAW class. Other student voices are present in chapters coauthored by dual enrollment students, student podcasters, and round-table student panelists. As important as demonstrating the impact that the WAW approach has on student learning, the inclusion of student voices models the WAW principle that students are full-fledged writers with as much to contribute as their instructors. The inclusion of student voices also models for instructors the possibility of including student-centered experiences and narratives in the assignments they create.

Some two-year college instructors who have limited control over their curriculum may also relate to the challenge of not being able to fully implement WAW if it is not included in the official curriculum. In the chapter “Play the Game but Refocus the Aim: Teaching WAW within Alternative Pedagogies,” Katie Jo LaRiviere shares how she has managed to squeeze WAW into a curriculum focused on the argumentative essay that allows little room for instructor choice. LaRiviere argues that the learning outcomes for her required curriculum evaluate skills rather than a student’s evolving writerly mindset. As one way of introducing WAW concepts, LaRiviere seems to essentially critique the curriculum with her students. She points out to them that though they will focus on an argument essay in class, that genre is only one type of writing. Additionally, she includes WAW topics in class discussions, course readings, and

student reflections, all while working within the confines of a prescribed curriculum. Thus, LaRiviere can include WAW in a curriculum over which she has little control.

Overall, the most significant way that this volume enables instructors to implement WAW is through the specific assignments and variety of case studies presented in the chapters. As the editors note in the final chapter, the variety of examples shows that there is more than one way to do WAW. Consequently, many instructors—including those who teach in two-year colleges—will find something in one of these chapters that resonates with their context.

Works Cited

Downs, Douglas, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re) Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication* (2007): 552–84.

Wardle, Elizabeth, and Doug Downs. "Reflecting Back and Looking Forward: Revisiting 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions' Five Years On." *Composition Forum*, vol. 27, Spring 2013.

Moirá Connelly
Pellissippi State Community College
