Writing Across the Curriculum: A Literary Review

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**Introduction**

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is a movement within composition studies that emphasizes the use of writing in classes other than English and literature classes. The movement explores the importance of writing in education as well as its effectiveness as a tool for learning. Writing Across the Curriculum first appeared in modern composition studies in the late 1970s with the publication of Janet Emig’s groundbreaking article *Writing as a of Learning*. In the years since Emig’s article was published additional research into the use of writing in cross-curricular applications has yielded more evidence to suggest that writing is indispensable as a tool in education. For this reason, the effectiveness of writing across the curriculum relies on the use of writing in assignments and the use of writing-oriented teaching methods.

**The Effectiveness of Writing Across the Curriculum**

Writing is an effective tool in education because of its properties associated with learning. According to Emig (1977), writing as a process and product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies. In comparing talking to writing, Emig notes that talking is an organic, natural function of the human organism, is rich and luxurious, and does not rely on context whereas writing can be viewed as a tool and is a more readily available source of learning. Emig turns to the research of one Jerome Bruner to present the three major ways in which learning is accomplished: active participation, i.e. “by doing” (p. 124); iconic, as in the presentation of images; and representational or symbolic, the restatement of words. Writing is essentially viewed as a combination of all three categories. It infuses the manual action of handwriting with the visual language of letters and symbols and the symbolic meaning of the written words. The effectiveness of writing as an educational tool thus comes from its implementation of the three major ways of learning.

While Emig characterizes writing as a tool, Bartholomae (1986) differs in his perception of writing. Bartholomae stresses the fact that much of the written work students do consists mainly of test-taking, reporting, and summarizing. This is work that, according to Bartholomae, “places [students] outside the working discourse of the academic community.” (Bartholomae, 1986). Such academic behavior is detrimental to integrating students into the discourse because it discourages engaging in the academic community. Bartholomae states that “This is a failure of teachers and curriculum designers who, even if they speak of writing as a mode of learning, all too often represent writing as a ‘tool’ to be used by an (hopefully) educated mind.” (p. 11). Emig’s claim that writing is a mode of learning is challenged by Bartholomae who dismisses her classification as merely viewing writing as a tool. Bartholomae asserts that writing education would be more effective if the writing conventions of an academic community are taken into consideration and taught.

Bartholomae’s concerns with the role of discourse and academic writing convention education is indirectly addressed in the article *Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities* by Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon. When presented with a number of falsehoods and misapprehensions on writing across the curriculum, McLeod and Maimon addressed the myths by examining their issues and presenting explanations of what, in reality, writing across the curriculum entails. From the point of view of teachers, “WAC presents two ways of using writing in the classroom and the curriculum: writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines.” (McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The second of these ways of using writing, learning to write in the disciplines, focuses on teaching students how to write within the conventions of academic discpipelines. McLeod and Maimon explain that learning to write involves faculty in creating assignments which encourage students to study the conventions of a discourse. In this case writing across the curriculum fulfills the aspects of incorporating writing-based assignments as well as writing-oriented methods of teaching.

**Case Studies**

Various studies into the effectiveness of writing across the curriculum have been conducted over the years. The effects of implementing writing across the curriculum is discussed in the article *Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines* by Anne J. Herrington. Educators were invited to seminars and workshops in order to train to use writing across the curriculum in their coursework. Student evaluations of the courses and their writing assignments resulted in 90% of the students reporting that the writing improved their understanding of course material (Herrington, 1981). The effectiveness of writing across the curriculum is measured by the effect it has on students.

Lucille Parkinson McCarthy’s *Stranger in a Strange Land: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum* studied how a particular college student, one Dave Garrison, approached writing for classes during his freshman year. With the intention of examining how students learn to write in school, McCarthy studied Dave in three of his classes. The results of the study indicated that Dave approached writing assignments, which were in many ways similar, as completely different from each other. Furthermore Dave’s success in writing appropriate assignments depended on how the class was taught as well as his ability to learn from mistakes and write “what the teachers wanted”. The significance of this research study is that writing across the curriculum relies on the style of teaching.

**Conclusion**

Since its inception in the 1970s, writing across the curriculum has proved itself in modern teaching practices as an effective method of learning. Through writing’s abilities as a learning tool and proof of concept in case studies, there is ample evidence to suggest that writing is indispensable. With the use of writing in assignments and writing-oriented teaching methods, writing across the curriculum succeeds in cementing writing as an essential and effective method of learning.

References

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