

Episode 44: Chris Thaiss

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Chris Thaiss about key moments in the history and development of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), issues and questions facing WAC programs, the importance of WAC work, and future directions in WAC.

Chris Thaiss is Professor Emeritus of Writing Studies at the University of California, Davis, where he served as first permanent director of the independent University Writing Program and chair of the PhD designated emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition Studies. He has also directed the Davis Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and coordinated the cross-disciplinary First-Year Seminar Program. Thaiss's undergraduate teaching has focused on writing in STEM, while doctoral courses include writing pedagogy, research history and methods, and program administration.

Active in developing WAC in colleges and universities since 1978, Thaiss coordinated the International Network of WAC Programs from 2005 to 2015. He is a member of the International Collaborations committee of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum and serves on the editorial boards of the WAC Clearinghouse and *Writing Spaces*. Until 2006, he taught at George Mason University, where he directed the composition and WAC programs and the university writing center. He also served as chair of the English Department. In 2005, Thaiss received the University's David King Award for career contributions to teaching excellence. Thaiss has written, co-written, or edited fourteen books.

Chris, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: How did you get into Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)?

CT: Well, It's a good story. I remember it very vividly because it was back in 1978, which is not long after I started at George Mason, which was in '76. I was an assistant professor at that...in '78, I turned 30, that long ago. We had a situation at the school where we were being criticized in the English Department for not being able to teach our students how to write. We had this cross-curriculum committee from the faculty senate that was saying, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" It was coincidental at that time that we were setting up the Northern Virginia Writing Project, the site of the National Writing Project. We were doing a tremendous amount of reading and working with teachers in terms of the new research on which a lot of it was on Writing Across the Curriculum.

What we decided to do was that we would set up a program that we called the Faculty Writing Program, which was actually student-centered, but it was also faculty-centered. We brought in Janet Emig, who had recently written her groundbreaking article on "Writing as a Means of Learning," and Donald Murray and a whole bunch of other people. The next year, we brought in

Elaine Maimon and her folks from Beaver College who were doing great work on that. What we really decided to do was use a WAC approach to this question of preparing students to write. It was great because we got a lot of faculty from different disciplines involved in this. They could see how they could contribute to helping students develop as writers rather than just pointing fingers at the English department.

That's really how we got started. We were working as well with writing groups for the faculty. They were working on their own writing. It was just a sort of a great sort of combination of things at that time. One thing I want to really stress there is that a lot of WAC in the '70s came about as a result of a collaborative effort between the National Writing Project and universities. Almost all the people that you could name who were really getting into WAC at that time in the US were also involved with the K through 12 schools. I have to say, I would love to see that come again because it was a great collaboration. It was wonderful actually to see the kinds of cross-fertilization that would go on from environment to environment. That's really how I got started in WAC. Then two years later, because we were working through the writing project, which was already a national organization, I was able to start the WAC network for 4Cs (Conference on College Composition and Communication) and NCTE.

SW: I think many of us look at you as one of the key leaders and figures in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement (WAC). What would you identify as critical moments in WAC history, and what issues or questions were most pressing or most significant to its development?

CT: A lot of the questions that were significant then are still significant. Just sort of on the ground when you're working with faculty and trying to develop policies and programs in schools, faculty are always...if they're interested in student writing and student learning through writing, they always have the questions about how do I find the time to do this? How can I add this to my curriculum? Those are still questions that are sort of make or break questions for whether WAC is going to work in a particular environment and whether there's going to be enough support for it as well. Those kinds of questions, those kinds of issues were really important then. They're really important now.

Of course the difference then between then and now is that virtually everybody, regardless of faculty has heard of this thing called Writing Across the Curriculum. A lot of people that have had experience with it in graduate school or in universities that they might've been a part of. Then it was brand new. It was a slightly different situation and still some of the same things. Looking at landmarks and important things, I think the research that was going on early in that time, in the '70s and then into the '80s was really important in providing a kind of a foundation or framework. Also, a lot of different models for how you could do WAC at institutions. The British Schools Council Research from the '60s into the '70s with James Britton, Nancy Martin, a lot of other folks, was really important in creating a kind of theoretical framework that when you talk about Writing Across the Curriculum, you're largely talking about learning. You're talking about writing as a tool of learning.

I think sometimes we miss that in setting up WAC programs because too often, what will happen is that a WAC program will develop as more or less sort of a continuation of a first-year writing course. That's not what it means. It means something very different from that. It is really focused in disciplines and focused in courses and teachers. I'm going to come back to that a little bit later. Some other landmarks, things that were really important at the time. I've already mentioned the collaboration between the National Writing Project and the sort of nascent WAC movement in universities.

Also, writing and publication by certain people who were associated with both of those things are really important in creating that framework. I mentioned Janet Emig before. I mentioned Elaine Maimon. Barbara Walvoord was extremely important person early on and continues to be. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young, who at that time were both at Michigan Tech. Susan McLeod and Margot Soven and the kinds of works and edited publications that they've done over the years. Certainly the books by David Russell, the histories, the two volumes of the history of Writing in the Academic Disciplines. Those are very important things in creating a substance for the movement.

The WAC conferences that started in 1993 in South Carolina with Art Young and a number of other people in that region that then became this bi-yearly event that brought people together. Then in 2005, it became an International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference. I've got a couple others I want to mention. Certainly we mentioned Mike Palmquist earlier in our conversation, starting the WAC Clearinghouse. The WAC Clearinghouse has been extremely important and that's been over 20 years ago now. I'll also mention, just sort of bringing it up closer to the present. In the past 15 years, there has been a lot of emergence of international and transnational and translingual research in the past 15 years and going up to the present now. That's going to become more and more important as time goes on. Then the last thing I want to mention as sort of a landmark is the founding of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC) two years ago. I think that's going to be really important moving forward.

SW: I think about issues and questions that continue to come up in WAC work, for example, resource allocation, program visibility, faculty development, and even the spatial organization and relationships associated with WAC programs. Where's funding coming from? Who's supporting the infrastructure and the program's initiatives and mission? Is the WAC program associated with the English department? The provost's office? The center for learning? The writing center? There's so much there to talk about and address. Is there a WAC model that stands out to you?

CT: Really hard for me to identify one or two things that stand out more than others. You were just mentioning some things, for example, the connection between a WAC program and a writing center. Those things are very, very...that is very, very important. To try to identify these models, that's one of the reasons why I started the International WAC/WID Mapping Project back in 2006-2007 because a lot of that basic research about how programs are set up, what are the different emphases, what are the different models, that work had not been done. Getting into that

was extremely illuminating to see the very different ways in which different campuses would try to embody WAC in their environment.

Some of the ideas that sort of stand out. I've already mentioned the connection between WAC and a writing center. I think it's extremely important for there to be support systems for students within institutions, not only what's going on in individual classes, but also to support the work of those faculty who are trying to do that work in their classes. The writing center WAC connection's really important. Another thing that we were actually sort of surprised to find was the prevalence of the notion of a writing intensive performance. 30 years ago, I wrote this article called "The Future of Writing Across the Curriculum." One of the things that I worried about at that time was that institutions were going to have these top down models and a president or something, or a Dean would say from now on, we're going to have Writing Across the Curriculum.

You can't do it that way. It has to be a grassroots movement. If there is some kind of a pronouncement that you're going to have this program, you've got to do the groundwork. It's going to take time to develop a sense of a culture of writing within an institution that's actually going to support and help something like those requirements endure. One of the things I realized is that over the years there's actually has been a kind of a symbiotic relationship between requirements of something like writing intensive courses and the grassroots work that people are doing with faculty across the curriculum because both of those things, if they work together, they can help to create, what I like to call, a culture of writing within an institution. That's one model, not necessarily writing intensive, but sort of a combination of administrative support, administrative recognition of the importance of these things, and then the kind of grassroots work that always has to go on because if you don't have both those things, you're not going to have any kind of sustainable program.

SW: So I'm thinking about the emergence of centers for faculty development and learning or centers for teaching and excellence. I'm seeing universities allocate resources to these spaces – and they do great work and I think it's an important relationship WAC programs can develop moving forward. It's like WAC/WID but not really because they aren't explicitly focused on writing. I'm curious, based on your observations and experiences, how these centers have impacted the movement of Writing Across the Curriculum.

CT: No, I think that's an excellent question because I think one of the things...since I've been a WAC director and also director of the Teaching and Learning Center, one of the things I've seen is that with anything else, that there's always the possibility that things are going to get siloed. That you're going to have this one entity over here and this other entity over there. They won't communicate with one another. There's the possibility that the work of one, it might even be redundant from one area to another or conflicting from one area to another. They might be broadcasting different messages. I think one of the key things in all institutions is that you need to have some kind of structure that allows those entities to communicate on a regular basis.

Now, when someone like me is running a Teaching and Learning Center, you know that there's going to be emphasis to some extent on writing because of my background. If there's not, one of the things that you have to do is you've got to really work to build those communication, those communication links. Otherwise, it's too easy for things to go off on separate tracks. There has been no bigger boon or benefit to Writing Across the Curriculum than the development of digital tools that allow people to communicate in many different ways that all of them are to some extent writing based. Even systems that are audio based can be turned into writing as well.

We know that that link between speaking and writing is becoming more profound. You can't do online teaching unless there is a lot of written communication, either from a teacher to students or students back to the teacher or students to students. Those kinds of things are really, really important. That's been very important to help WAC develop. Who is in charge in most institutions of helping teachers to become fluent in using online tools? In many cases, it's that teaching center. One of the things I've noticed in the last couple of weeks is that teaching centers at my institution and others, they are become incredibly proactive in helping teachers make this transition. It's a perfect opportunity for a link between writing and teaching more broadly defined to really work together.

SW: There are obvious advantages to WAC work, such as helping teachers and students understand how writing works or how writing can be used effectively in different contexts, or how knowledge can be transferred to new tasks. WAC is inherently collaborative which is enriching, seeing teachers come together, work together, talk about course outcomes, goals, assessments. What would you say to someone, maybe someone unfamiliar with WAC, who might ask, "Why is Writing Across the Curriculum important?"

CT: This is a kind of question that actually, I have been answering for more than 40 years. At George Mason, it was a question that arose all the time. At Davis it's a question that arises. I think that what happens is that sometimes one of the reasons why people will ask that question is because in some way, they've gotten the wrong idea of what Writing Across the Curriculum is. Sort of a natural assumption by academics who are not within writing studies or in English departments to think that Writing Across the Curriculum, what we mean by that is that a teacher in chemistry or a teacher in political science or whatever it might be, actually has to become a writing teacher or an English teacher. Well, that's never been what it means.

If someone asks me the question, "Why is Writing Across the Curriculum important?" My attitude has been over the years actually to treat my role as not as a sort of a messianic person getting out there saying, oh, here are the wonders of writing, but actually...I learned this from Barbara Walvoord, one of my mentors in this. It was actually, she said many years ago is that when you do work in WAC, that what you really are doing is doing research. That when you have conversations with people and they will ask you a question, like why is Writing Across the Curriculum important? What I'd like to do is I like to shift the burden not from my answering their question, which I can do, but I want to learn from them. I want to ask them, I say, "Well,

okay, as a teacher, what are the things that you do as a teacher that you think work? What are the things that you do that helps students to learn?"

I've had many, many conversations like that over the years. In almost every case, the answer that I get from those folks, writing will be involved in it in some way because teachers will not answer that question by saying, "Oh, I write good tests or I give good lectures." That's not how they answer the question. They'll say, "I can tell if students are learning by the degree to which they're engaged in their learning." How can I get them responsive and engaged? If things are working, what are the things that are working well?

They usually involve some kind of enthusiasm by the students, some kind of sense of engagement. When I asked them to talk about, well, what is it that you do to get them engaged? What are the processes that you have in your teaching that really gets students engaged? They always involve some kind of dialogue, some kind of conversation, some type of opportunity for students actually to demonstrate their curiosity, their interest in learning. That's really how I've gotten my sense over the years in those dialogues with people so that actually the question tends to answer itself.

SW: So your answer sort of makes me think about how people perceive Writing Across the Curriculum or the assumptions individuals might have about WAC work. Through your experiences, where does WAC meet resistance?

CT: A good friend of mine a number of years ago, Bernadette Glaze, who was a high school history teacher and very involved in the Northern Virginia Writing Project, she and I collaborated on an article that we wrote for the collection that came out of 1994, edited by Art Young and Pam Childers and Anne Gere that was about Writing Across the Curriculum in secondary schools. It's the only collection that's ever been written on that topic. I would say that the reason that is, is because in the late '90s, K-12 education got overwhelmed by standardized testing and so much of the writing that was going on before that time disappeared because of the focus is on those tests. That's a separate question.

In that collection, we wrote an article called "Resistances to Writing Across the Curriculum." What we focused on there was a series of things that come out of teachers experiences and also administrators experiences. A couple of the resistances are just what we've already been talking about is this sort of built in sense that teachers have is, I've got so much that I need to cover in my classes, where am I going to find the time to add this? Other resistances. If you're going to do a really good job of Writing Across the Curriculum, you've got to at least take into consideration the notion of class size. It's not easy to do a really good job of WAC, if you've got huge classes. Administrators tend not to like to hear that they've got to reduce class sizes. It's expensive, very expensive to do that. Those are some of the resistances that go along with this from teachers and also from administrators.

What WAC has done over the years is to try to propose...I've done a lot of workshops on this, for example. How do you bring writing into a large class in some meaningful way that is going to have some impact on student learning? Well, this is a question that right now at this moment, every institution is having to answer because you're not going to be able to just recapitulate the model of a single teacher, standing up talking to a whole bunch of people in a big auditorium when you have to try to do effective instruction online. How are you going to do that?

SW: In 1988, you wrote an article called "The Future of Writing Across the Curriculum." You mentioned it earlier. And here we are thirty years later. What's the future of Writing Across the Curriculum? What recent WAC/WID projects have you been working on?

CT: I think that's a great question. We have to think about it all the time. It's not like we actually can come up with the answers because we don't know. I think this immediate situation that we're in right now is something that we were going to reach sooner or later. We know that online education keeps growing and growing. There are certain aspects of traditional education that are just frankly obsolete. I mentioned before the notion of a huge class of people getting together, all in a room to listen to one person talk. That has been obsolete now for, I would say, a good 300 years, but we still do it. Why did it come about? It came about because people didn't have access to textbooks. People have had access to textbooks for many, many years. Now, how many years has it been that we have so much access to online tools that can actually teach at least as well as a person in a large lecture class doing that kind of work and a lot cheaper as well?

That's one aspect of the future that we're actually having to confront now, but it's going to be... It's inevitable. I think in a lot of ways, we're really well prepared for that because we have such a plethora of tools now that we can use. The fact that you and I are able to have this conversation across 2000 miles, that would not have been possible before and then to record it, to broadcast it, to archive it. Those things are amazing. They've only been in existence for a short time. They're going to become more and more, which we say just common and just expected within education. That's something I think that's going to be part of the future of Writing Across the Curriculum, regardless of the discipline that we're talking about.

A lot of the work that I've been doing recently has been in writing in science. When I moved to Davis, one of the reasons I moved there was because of the heavy emphasis of that university on writing in the sciences and particularly in environmental science and agriculture and those kinds of fields. One of the things that I could see and that I followed up on over the years, is working with students. My favorite course at Davis is writing in science. I've worked with students from all different kinds of majors. That kind of thing it just teaches you that if you look at what is being published in science now, it covers such a range of tools, such a range of modes, media, that you can't talk about Writing Across the Curriculum as exemplified by writing in science, without talking about a huge range of platforms, technologies, and ways that people communicate with each other.

Styles. Styles in writing and science are just everywhere. We've got magazines like National Geographic and Scientific American that are bringing science to audiences that have never been reached before. Meanwhile, journals, scientific journals are more and more coming online. Access, open access to scientific knowledge in that way. If you think about the students who are in our classes now, those students love having the opportunities to work within those different modes, those different media. You can't talk about Writing Across the Curriculum in some kind of traditional way that just limits it in terms of genres or terms of audiences. It's just exploded.

SW: We briefly talked about the K-12 connection and history with Writing Across the Curriculum. Do you feel like that's one opportunity for growth and direction for future work?

CT: I think that's absolutely critical. I would love to see that kind of connection be reestablished. Assessment has taken over in such a narrow way in so many fields. It's a perfect example of putting the cart before the horse. The idea of if you're really interested in learning, you have to really be interested in how people learn and how they develop engagement and excitement with learning. Believe me, they're not going to do it through preparing for a standardized test. In so many K-12 situations, that is what is overemphasized in those situations, not only in terms of individual student performance, but in terms of school performance, district performance, how funding is given out.

It's just sad to have seen how that's developed. I'm not sure what it would take to try and really to develop once again, a real strong connection between K-12 education and university education. I don't know. I would hope that it would be possible to reestablish those connections between K-12 and the universities. I'm not really hopeful about it, but I hope that this is a moment where in going online, we might be able to use different modes, we might be able to use different tools to try to develop some kind of commonality of enthusiasm and experience that can carry over from one environment to another.

SW: Thanks, Chris. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.