Pedagogue Bonus: WAC at a Small Liberal Arts College (w/Allison Carr)
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, Allison Carr talks about Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at a Small Liberal Arts College (SLAC).

Allison Carr is an associate professor of rhetoric and director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Coe College, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, theory, composition, and creative non-fiction writing. Her research engages the emotional and affective dimensions of failure, and her writing on this subject has appeared most recently in the introduction to her collection with Laura Micciche, *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What it Means To Fail*. She has also published creative non-fiction in The Rumpus, CRAFT Literary, and other venues.

Allison, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You serve as the director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Coe College. How does your institutional context, so being at a small, private liberal arts college in Iowa, inform your administrative philosophy, your mission, and the kinds of initiatives you do as a WAC director?

AC: Yeah, yeah. I've been in this role since 2014. I was a junior WAC person. It was a day one responsibility for me. Like you said, it's a small college. We have about a hundred full-time faculty, and we've had WAC here since the mid to late 80s. So, there's a really long history, and there's a strong history of participation. It's been a little bit since I've done a count, but just . . . I think over a quarter or a third of our courses every term are writing emphasis. It's a really large portion of the curriculum. And of course that's all across the college. Before I was hired there had only ever been one WAC director. So, when I was hired, there was a real sense that I needed to honor the history of that program and the work that had been done, but also that the program was due for a refresher.

So, the mission of WAC here is that we understand writing as integral to teaching and learning. That's the most brief way I can say it, and I think that's probably true anywhere you go across this college faculty. Because of this history . . . have really extensive knowledge about what this mission looks like in their fields. And so, something I learned early on was that it would be really important to me that that knowledge was respected as the resource that it is. At the same time, a majority of my colleagues are not writing teachers, and they would be the first to tell you that. So, my mission then as a WAC director is really to bridge the gap there between the field of writing studies and writing pedagogy and my colleagues practical and experiential knowledge that is local to their classrooms and to their fields.

In terms of the initiative, probably one of the most prominent ways that . . . all this institutional context and mission come to bear are, this sounds like very basic, but it, it's actually so central

for me, it's just understanding the rhythms of the year and finding out, knowing when do my colleagues have capacity for me to come knock on the door and when don't they?

This is whether we're talking about curricular revision or whether we're talking about having a faculty development lunch. When in the term might something be welcome and what might the subject of that thing be? So, we have this kind of philosophy of just in time workshops.
So that's a big piece of it to just know when my smiling face is welcome and when I need to just lay off and focus on my own courses. Another piece is, like I said, drawing on everyone's knowledge. When I was working on figuring out how to refresh this program without losing participation, I realized I really needed to leverage what people were already doing and figure out what the common threads were and then build that up into a more explicit, we have this thing we call a philosophy of writing across the curriculum at co, and we spent a long time writing that and trying to reflect what was already going on and then pump it up a little. I suppose I'll give you just the briefest little overview of what this has looked like for me. Like I said, I was hired with the idea that I would do something somewhat large or visible anyway.

I have a writing committee that changes every year, but it's got representation from all three divisions of the college, and that group has been totally clutch. So, we started this probably in like 2016 or so with various iterations of this committee. We did a lot of research on our own. We designed a pilot to run with a couple of the larger departments on campus figuring if we could make something work in these programs that serve tons of students, then it could scale down. We sent out a lot of FAQs. We did faculty forum. We did a lot of revision. It was very stressful. I had a committee, but it's my job. So, it felt like there was a lot on the line for me, and the final version was in some ways not what I was hoping we would land on, but here's the stuff that that's great and that all that stuff, all that context, all that, just learning about the culture of the college comes into fruition. And in this big thing we designed, which is not too burdensome, it totally is working. It's something that we can support in large and small ways. It's something we can assess. It's in better alignment with disciplinary knowledge about writing.

And most importantly, we built something that people feel that they have some ownership over and have made some contribution to. And that's been most important to me when it comes to longevity and whether people have an appetite for change in the future. I've got two or three ideas of what I'd like to do next with this program, and I need that to feel collaborative. I'm not a dictator. I'm just one person in a group of a hundred people. I just happen to have some specialized knowledge in some portion of my job description.