

**Rev. of *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*
By David Russell**

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Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History, 2nd edition
David Russell
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David Russell's *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History* is more than ever the indispensable survey of American academic history, as seen through the sharply- focused lens of the historian of cross-curricular rhetoric. The reader of the first edition (1991) will find that Russell has left virtually unchanged the first nine chapters of the book, which cover in varying detail the roughly two centuries up to 1990. New is Chapter Ten, "The Writing- Across-the- Curriculum Movement, 1990-2000," the author's summary and analysis of, as most would argue, the richest decade in WAC history. To a historian who, as teacher, program leader (Iowa State), and scholar is immersed daily in the subject of his investigation, capturing so "varied and dispersed" (308)—not to mention elusive and dynamic—a phenomenon as academic writing calls for remarkable discernment and creative judgment. Fortunately, Russell is the best person to have undertaken an analysis of the dynamic relationships among rhetoric, writing, and composition, given the many years of his study and the international breadth and importance of his recent scholarship on writing and rhetoric in disciplines.

Unlike the valuable histories that we have of the development of English composition in U.S. higher education, which center on trends in society and education as they are manifest in that sector of higher education usually called the English department, Russell looks consistently across the span of the institution. Historically central to his study is the radical shift in the nineteenth century from the small, homogeneous college community, its curriculum based on the rhetorical needs—mainly oral—of its lawyers, ministers, and politicians in training, to the college/university, an aggregate of relatively autonomous disciplines, built with the tools of written communication to meet the needs of burgeoning industries for specialists in sciences, engineering, agriculture, and commerce. What, he asks, did this evermore diverse array of "professionals" assume about the rhetorical demands on themselves and students? How did curricula across these disciplines reflect those basic beliefs?

Russell settles on two persistent assumptions that he calls "myths." One is "transience," a term that Russell borrows from Mike Rose: the notion that writing is a single set of skills that, once learned, will make the writer competent in all situations. As a prime example, he cites the longevity of the belief that the required first-year college composition course (first taught in the 1870s) will "take care" of student writing needs ever after; indeed, that the first-year course itself merely "remediates" students, who, had they been smarter or more assiduous, would have learned the skill set much earlier. The second, closely-related "myth" is the "transparency" of rhetoric, an idea for which he credits Susan Miller: language as merely the unaffecting medium through which ideas, or "content," are conveyed. This myth follows the Platonic ideal that ideas can exist apart from language. It rejects the Aristotelian inescapability and situatedness of

rhetoric. Russell argues persuasively that the new scientific disciplines of the late-nineteenth century, as well as the humanistic fields that became more and more specialized under the influence of Germanic scholarship, were kept by these myths from two basic recognitions: first, that language and rhetoric had become exponentially more complex and differentiated as a result of specialization (i.e., not “transparent” at all), and, second, that students needed to be explicitly taught the new and diverse rhetorical conventions as they advanced in fields (i.e., rhetorical training was developmental and incremental through years of schooling, by no means “transient”). As a result of the persistence of the myths, educational bureaucracies at all levels have tended to keep rhetorical curricula, to a greater or lesser extent, conveniently separate from all other courses and to care comparatively little about the relationship of these courses to the rest of the curriculum.

Keeping a careful eye on political and cultural trends, Russell catalogues and analyzes in chapters two through eight the major examples of educational philosophy and policy that bear on how student writing was regarded—or more frequently ignored—in American education before what he terms the writing-across-the-curriculum “movement” that begins about 1970. Always he puts the concept or approach in the context of its relationship to the myths of transience and transparency. To cite one of many examples, he devotes twelve pages to a study of how writing was taught at MIT, a standard-bearer of the new technical university education, from 1887 to roughly 1920. With special focus on the extraordinary teacher Robert Grosvenor Valentine (later the inventor of the field of industrial relations counseling), Russell describes the writing-intensive, rhetorically sophisticated curriculum of “utilitarian” writing instruction that was carried out cooperatively among technical faculty and the English department. With the technical faculty commenting on “content,” the English faculty regarding “expression,” and students learning how to critique one another’s work, the program gave students extensive and ongoing practice in writing about diverse topics, mainly technical, for a range of readers and from differing points of view. Russell cites Valentine’s faith that such a curriculum would prepare the class of new “professional” leaders of the industrial world, who could mediate between capitalist owners and socialist workers and found the society solidly on scientific principles. But Russell goes on to show how by 1915, after Valentine had left for industry, the cooperative vision faded: fewer and fewer technical faculty participated and, except for a few separate technical writing courses, the English department reverted to its conventional curricular emphasis on literary culture rather than “utility.”

Russell skillfully uses his critical lens on such other well-known innovations as the rise of technical and business writing curricula; the competing progressive theories of Dewey, Snedden, and Thorndike (a highlight is Russell’s essay on the rise and demise of the essay examination in the face of “efficient” itemized testing); the “Great Books” phenomenon at the University of Chicago; the post World War II Prose Improvement Committee at Berkeley. Throughout he observes how nascent efforts in colleges and public schooling systems to create unified curricula that meld language and learning splintered on the rocks of bureaucratic compartmentalizing and disciplinary exclusivity. In his assessment, for example, of the failure of Deweyan progressivism he states, “Writing was thus not a pressing issue for any single department, and the curriculum was of course organized by departments. When complaints about poor student writing became loud enough to produce action, administrators simply added more ‘remedial’ writing courses.

When complaints subsided, disciplines reasserted themselves and successfully reclaimed that curricular space” (157).

Into this pessimistic scenario came, in the 1960s, the unified language-and-learning theories of Jerome Bruner and of the British cognitive researchers led by James Britton, their work helping to produce “what is surely the most widespread and sustained reform movement in cross-curricular writing instruction” (272). Chapter Nine, “The Writing-Across-the Curriculum Movement, 1970-1990,” is an exemplary summary and catalog of the documents, institutional developments, and key players that made writing instruction a cross-curricular phenomenon in the U.S. (anyone looking to read or recommend a brief history of the field could not do better than this chapter). Nevertheless, curbing Russell’s enthusiasm is the lurking specter of the myths, always ready to reassert their power: “But without structural changes to integrate writing into the disciplinary fiber of institutions, without a permanent change in the way academia values writing in pedagogy, WAC programs will always work against the grain” (304).

Because Russell has not fully revised the book, Chapter Nine still comes across as the logical and emotional conclusion of the book (indeed, much of the chapter is written in the present tense, as if the history ended in 1990), with the new Chapter Ten as an addendum, albeit a necessary one. The new chapter continues the cautious, even somber tone of the earlier ones: “In the ten years since the first edition of this book appeared, the myth of transience remains very much alive, and writing is still transparent to the great majority of teachers and students” (308). Still, belying this tone and contrasting with even the rich Chapter Nine, in which the author is challenged to document the wide array of initiatives, the new chapter, covering merely a decade, can only present short summaries of the many forms and venues that manifest WAC and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) action. A partial list: writing-intensive courses, freshman seminars, writing centers, WAC in community colleges, WAC in secondary and elementary schools, computers and WAC, WAC and assessment. While the cataloguing is impressive, one effect of this richness is that the author can’t devote the same analytical, contextualizing scrutiny to the innovations that he had given to the earlier history. For example, whereas one theme he had traced earlier in the book had been the consequences of the shift from oral to written rhetoric, there is only passing mention of the potentially revolutionary impact that digital technology is having and will have on writing, writing instruction, and WAC/WID in particular. With even small children online, IMing, downloading, and mixing media in their composing, the challenge for curriculum planners in every discipline will not be whether or not to include writing—the major question throughout most of the history Russell traces—but how to understand the flow of communication and perhaps manage small streams of it.

That the new chapter cannot do justice to this technological revolution in rhetoric makes this reviewer appreciate all the more what Russell has achieved. After all, we have books such as the NCTE collection *WAC for the New Millennium* to go to greater depth in some of the topics Russell summarizes in the new chapter (that text includes Russell’s own excellent chapter on naturalistic research on writing in the disciplines), and we have many other scholars attempting to make sense of the technological revolution—or at least to celebrate and describe it. But *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History* remains the definitive analytical summary of how and why American education reached the plateau of cross-curricular rhetoric from which we view the fireworks.

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