
The history of writing instruction in the American classroom is the focus of David Russell’s *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*. Russell’s history is not, however, bound to a consideration of the English classroom alone. Instead, the institutional history Russell considers takes as its starting point the development of the various disciplines – as one section heading defines it, the “triumph of specialization.” Russell then uses the development of specialization to chart the contemporaneous rise of writing instruction in American secondary and higher education. While the historical content of Russell’s study will be familiar to readers of recent book-length studies of the English department by Robert Scholes, Gerald Graff, or James Berlin, the reach of the book extends beyond a particular field to examine how writing instruction is configured across curricula and disciplines. Accordingly, Russell’s work should interest specialists in fields other than English or composition studies – Russell’s particular interest is *Writing Across the Curriculum* (WAC), a topic he returns to in a lengthy section at the end of the book.

Russell suggests that one consequence of the initial acceptance of writing instruction in the late 19th century was the idea that writing instruction existed simply to enable the specialist to speak in the clear language of a discipline. Technological innovations in print and industry
produced professional fields that required less mastery of oral rhetoric and more advanced written communication; Russell therefore examines at length the terms of the transition from the “old” curriculum to the curriculum of schools experiencing rapid increases in enrollment. Russell’s history examines the influence of Dewey, the Great Books movement, and the increasingly educated (and mediated) general populace of the information-rich postwar period. At each point, Russell notes, writing becomes more crucial as a skill to newly-minted grads; yet, at each point, writing is also a hurdle to get past, the echo of ostensibly natural communication grounded in speech. The “myth of transience” that Russell tags even the earliest modern writing instruction remains intact as a pedagogical motivator throughout – an ideal of transparent writing that is desirable only insofar as it minimizes the possibilities for misunderstandings between specialists in disciplines that are never acknowledged in writing instruction.

The second edition adds an extensive discussion of the WAC movement in the 1990s. Suffering from the same decentralized approach as previous reforms of compositions, WAC encountered competition for grant dollars and curricular emphasis from new reforms – reforms that, as Russell emphasizes, often developed within the scope of WAC to emerge as distinct models for reform. Russell sketches the emergence of new reforms such as Writing in the Disciplines, and distinctions between WAC and First-Year Composition, as particular threats to WAC implementation. Although the “tensions” observed by Russell did not change the fact that “the vast majority of WAC programs, theorists, and researchers have seen composition courses [. . .] as an important component of writing development in higher education” (314), Russell suggests that “WAC programs must find a ways [sic] to work with other education reform initiatives in order to prosper” (319). The prosperity Russell envisions, of course, is always mitigated by the question posed by the book itself: do curricular reforms work to acknowledge
the presence of learning communities and disciplinary genres, or do they continue to take for
granted the “objective rendering of reality” that “good academic writing” (11) entails?

The great challenge, as Russell seems to understand, is establishing “a curricular balance
between the interests in the learner and the demands of the disciplines” (332) as higher education
in the United States once again faces the challenge of swift-moving innovation in media. Where
Russell began his curricular history by noting the effect of innovations in print technology on the
traditional curriculum, he ends, also, at a turning point in the technology of communication.
While writing continues to be a concern for the development of content in all fields, writing has
become the structuring element in many of the documents Americans create and read daily – the
new markup languages and scripts that mediate between content and the software that displays
the content are the stuff of professional developers and everyday users. Russell’s history
provokes the reader to question what the history of writing will look like at the end of the next
century; it seems fair to ask, in light of the connection Russell draws between 19th century print
technologies and curricular change, if a new edition might have focused on the implications of a
writing instruction determined by the “electronic links among us” (332) instead of a thumbnail
sketch of WAC in the 20th century’s final decade. Russell’s almost polemic insistence on the
importance of WAC is understandable in the context he establishes – a history of writing
instruction that emphasizes origins across the disciplines themselves – but only four years
beyond the publication of the second edition, the electronic links are begging for consideration in
a full history of American writing instruction.