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Can Youssef Write?

MAUREEN O’DAY NICOLAS

Introduction

*Why Johnny Can’t Write* written by Merrill Sheils was published in *Newsweek* Magazine in 1975. It is fair to say that the essay created a tsunami in higher education, igniting a stormy controversy proclaiming America had a writing crisis. The essay claimed that students in university at that time had little chance of graduating with enough skill in communicative English to write with any structure or eloquence. The damning allegation continued by saying that students currently enrolled in high school would not have good enough writing skills by the time they graduated for clerical or secretarial work much less university level work. The essay reports the steady decline in reading ability, the inability of young people to organize their thoughts in writing, and asserts that the “new illiteracy” even involves the most educated segment of society.

The *Newsweek* essay was not a solitary clarion call for reform but rather it brought to the public’s attention the downward spiral in the teaching of basic literacy skills in that native-speaker context and possible repercussions should the trend not be reversed. Awareness in other quarters in the mid-1970s of the imminent literacy crisis gave rise to the National Writing Project (NWP), which was started in 1974 in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. The NWP was an initiative that aimed to offer professional development for teachers to improve the teaching of writing and train

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teachers in the use of writing as a learning tool in their classrooms. The creation of the NWP was a result of a perceived crisis in written literacy in the US. Today, the NWP has about 200 sites in all 50 states and is funded by the U.S. Department of Education (www.nwp.org).

The early 1970s also saw a grassroots initiative gain momentum, whose aim was to improve educational processes through the use of writing as a learning tool and writing in disciplines. The movement became known as WAC, or writing across the curriculum, and its later incarnation WID, writing in the disciplines. The mission of WAC programs is collegial, stretching at least across departments and usually across colleges (Faculty in UOB nomenclature), with reporting lines going to top administration, certainly reporting to units larger than a department (Thaiiss & Porter, 2010). Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquettet, and Garufis (2005) define WAC as “the pedagogical and curricular attention to writing occurring in university subject matter classes other than those offered by composition or writing programs” (p. 9). And the 2014 Statement of WAC Principles and Practices reiterates that definition saying that “writing should be an integral part of the learning process throughout a student’s education, not merely in required writing courses but across the entire curriculum” (p. 1).

While a large number of US universities have formal WAC programs, some have programs defined as writing intensive or writing emphasis. The Why Johnny Can’t Write controversy also fueled an explosion in remedial language courses at universities in an effort to address the deficit. The proliferation of writing integration in US universities since that time, either as a formalized WAC program or as some other type of writing intensive strategy, is a strategy to both combat the decline in students’ ability to communicate in written English and also to promote the connection between writing and thinking.

The multifaceted nature of WAC programs makes it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness (Fulwiler, 1988). Fulwiler was writing at the infancy of WAC but he presents some obstacles to effective evaluation that remain relevant. Particularly, WAC, by its nature, is result oriented and not research oriented, in addition to looking different in different contexts. The fundamental point of WAC is to incorporate writing deliberately and systematically into the learning environment as both
a way of improving the writing skill through practice, of course, but also to stimulate thinking through the act of writing, using the writing skill as a tool to engage students in the learning process. One important observation Fulwiler (1988) presents is that “successful writing across the curriculum programs run deep into the center of the curriculum” (p. 64). Writing that is located deep in the curriculum could take the form of note-taking, for example. Boch and Piolat (2005) argue the importance of teaching this complex, functional skill at the tertiary level in order to facilitate the learning process.

Locating writing deeply integrated into the curriculum could be extremely beneficial for students where English is a second or even third language such as in Lebanon, and at the University of Balamand (UOB) in particular, where this argument is situated. Lebanon, and by extension UOB, can be classified as an English as a Foreign Language, or EFL, environment. Kachru (1992) offers a model that illustrates the many different environments where the English language is used. The model includes the inner circle that represents native speaker contexts, the outer circle which would include contexts where English is used as a second language, likely because of colonization, and the expanding circle which represents countries and contexts that use English for science, technology and education. In the expanding circle, English would be a foreign language since it is likely not used in every day circumstances but rather only for particular purposes. Lebanon can be placed in the expanding circle giving English a foreign language status (see Nicolas & Annous, 2013 for a thorough discussion of this model).

The Department of English Language and Literature at UOB is the academic unit that runs the Composition and Rhetoric Sequence, which includes the two composition courses required of all UOB students in English track majors. In 2006 the English department began comprehensive curriculum reform under the leadership of this author. First, I met with all deans to find out from them what they thought students needed from the two required English courses. Armed with that information, the entire Composition and Rhetoric Sequence underwent a complete transformation, essentially moving to an English for Academic Purposes curriculum model (EAP). EAP is a model of language learning that is based on learners’ needs for
the language (Sharndama, Samaila, & Tsojon, 2014). The department worked together to create a curriculum map of the Composition and Rhetoric Sequence that identified academic gaps, redundancies, and misalignments throughout the Sequence, thereby improving the overall coherency of the Sequence from the intensive English levels through to the final required course.

In an EAP methodology, writing requires critical skills such as topic selection, organization of ideas at the sentence and paragraph levels and adhering to conventions of specific genres, with a strong emphasis on process writing. Sharndama, Samaila, and Tsojon (2014) claim that the goal of EAP is to improve students’ English in order to help them pursue their course of study. To sustain the reform undertaken by the Department of English, academic systems and procedures to support the reform were identified and established. One such system is a process to normalize grades across sections to enable a consistent writing standard across teachers and sections of a course level. The “norming” strategy is still practiced for every major assessment in all multi-section courses; an internal audit system was also initiated, which continues to be practiced, with the intention of improving the syllabi and assessed activities each semester.

The 2006 reform initiative had a long-term vision, as all sustainable reform should have. Lasting systemic change requires a clear vision or direction and also a commitment to seeing the direction through from all involved parties (Hiatt-Michaels, 2001). The vision initially included expanding the writing-intensive component of the final required English course to courses in other Faculties and to train instructors from other Faculties in the approach to the teaching of writing being used by the Department of English before moving to a widespread WAC strategy. This vision was experimented with in the fall of 2010 when a faculty member from the Faculty of Sciences was assigned to teach the first of the required courses (ENGL203). The vision also included implementing a university wide Writing Center in anticipation of instituting a WAC strategy. Writing Centers are considered a necessary feature of WAC programs to assist students’ efforts to write more effectively (McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The English Language Center (ELC) was founded in 2008 to help and support students achieve the higher exit standards
being established in all courses and then, once the cohort of students was completely integrated into the new curriculum, the idea was for the ELC to expand into a Writing Center.

The commitment to WAC for the benefit of UOB students also included inviting Dr Martha Townsend from the University of Missouri, Columbia, to UOB in the spring of 2011 for an initial investigation into UOB’s readiness for WAC as well as for a learning opportunity for the Department of English. Dr Townsend is known throughout the WAC community as a leading expert in the development of Writing Centers, WAC programs and as a researcher in the field, given her work at the University of Missouri where she began these strategies.

In spite of all the changes in the English curriculum since 2006: the new syllabi, the higher exit standards for each course, the professional systems the department runs on, etc., there is still criticism of Balamand students’ communicative skill in English, particularly their ability to communicate in written English, coming from all quarters of the university. Consequently, it can be inferred that the development of the writing skill requires support across Faculties and across disciplines, which is what a WAC strategy promotes and which, in turn, creates a different kind of institutional paradigm, one utilizing interdisciplinary strategies versus one that enforces isolated silos of knowledge. Given the extraordinary measures taken to avert the perceived literacy crisis in US institutions where English is the native language spoken at home and at school, education specialists in Lebanon, and particularly those at the University of Balamand, need to ask ‘Why can’t Youssef write?’ or can he?

**Writing to Learn**

The link between writing and thinking is strongly asserted in writing theory, which promotes the precept that writing enhances learning as well as facilitates teachers’ awareness of students’ comprehension of material (Thomas, 2009; Todd & Hudson, 2008; Langer & Applebee, 2007; Peritz, 2006; Pobywajlo, 2001; Russell, 2001). Writing is rooted in the cognitive domain. The ability to
communicate well through writing involves comprehension of content as well as synthesis of the acquired knowledge. Writing also encompasses creativity, inspiration and reflection on an idea (Defazio, Jones, Tennant, & Hook, 2010). Consequently, writing is an integral tool in the learning process as well as in the assessment strategies central to the teaching-learning environment.

The writing process employs higher-order processes, including decision-making and judgments about quality and precision. Hobson and Schafermeyer (1994) suggest that “the potential benefits writing offers be used in classes with higher-order critical thinking skills as a learning outcome” (p. 423). Furthermore, a fundamental assumption of a liberal arts model of education is that disciplines are linked through some shared epistemological tenets, notably critical thinking. At the tertiary level, developing critical thinking should be an educational objective of all courses in all disciplines. Carter, Ferzli and Wiebe (2007) report on several research studies that elucidate the perceptions of students regarding the benefits that writing had on their learning process. The consensus of the opinion of those students is that writing-in-the-discipline specific courses enabled them to synthesize course content, reflect on the course content and engage multiple sources of knowledge. The general consensus from several studies in several contexts is that students felt more engaged with the subject matter through the writing assignments and that through the writing, students were encouraged to engage with resources, synthesize material and make connections they otherwise might not have made (Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe, 2007; Hunter, 2013).

Writing across the curriculum strategies aid in instructing students on how to write within their discipline, how to become familiar with the conventions and writing formats of their major course of study. Another assumption of the liberal arts model of education is that each discipline, while having some shared ways of knowing, has its own epistemology, its own techniques and types of questions to be asked. Disciplines are not just declarative bodies of knowledge but rather have conventions and standards to uniquely express that knowledge. Students need to learn discipline-specific vocabulary and ways of expressing discipline-specific language standards and conventions. Hyland (2009)
identifies specific language features in different domains, illustrating them in terms of verb frequency: “Engineers show, philosophers argue, biologists find, and linguists suggest” (p. 11). Ultimately, information is more deeply stored through writing and writing helps students connect their current course knowledge with new course knowledge (Todd & Hudson, 2008).

In addition to the explicit language features in every discipline, language transfer theory contends that explicit instruction in a discipline-specific writing genre helps to shift students’ rhetorical knowledge from the language classroom to the subject classroom (Brent, 2011). The cross pollination of skills and knowledge is necessary for all students in all contexts but students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment can also benefit from the additional support for their language acquisition outside of the language classroom (Bacha, 2012). EFL environments, such as UOB, inherently have limited opportunities for practice in the target language; that is the definition of an EFL environment. Consequently, students’ language acquisition is stymied by the environment and, in essence, crippled by the lack of language support in their major courses. Rationally, such an environment should be advancing and promoting opportunities to use the target language and to provide feedback and guidance in the use of the target language.

In a context where the language of instruction is not the first language of the majority of the population, students as well as instructors, another barrier manifests. Often instructors in such a context lack confidence in their own language skill to address deficiencies in others and/or they feel that they lack expertise in teaching composition and rhetoric to address students’ communicative weaknesses. Research conducted by Lavelle (2006) revealed that teachers’ belief in their own language efficacy influenced their ability to deal with the task of nurturing students’ language development. And Hunter (2013) revealed, in research conducted in Australia, that subject teachers, who would be native speakers of English in that context, lacked confidence to embed process-writing strategies in their courses. Research conducted at UOB made known that this context encompasses similar points of view (Nicolas & Annous, 2013; Annous & Nicolas, 2014; Nicolas & Annous, in progress).
Some research reveals that instructors do realize that writing involves disciplinary thought as well as specialized vocabulary (Zhu, 2004). Such awareness strongly suggests that the instructors responsible for course content need to be the ones to utilize writing in class sessions and for assessment purposes and to guide students in their written communication. However, research conducted, both in UOB and other contexts, strongly asserts that tertiary-level instructors place on content coverage above any other skill development in importance, no matter how important they may agree that skill to be (Annous & Nicolas, 2014; Nicolas & Annous, in progress; Clughen & Connell, 2012; Zhu, 2004). Instructors stress that developing students’ communicative skill is simply not their responsibility (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Annous & Nicolas, 2014).

Universities, as the name implies, are concerned with every field of knowledge, the nature of that knowledge, and the multiple ways of thinking. In other words, they are rooted in the liberal arts tradition that dates back to the Greek civilization. The inherent assumptions that model contains, as mentioned above, is argument enough for writing across the curriculum at the tertiary level, but the vocational aspect that has infiltrated tertiary educational institutions in recent decades offers another compelling argument for WAC. Almost exclusively, current university students view their bachelor degree as a necessary qualification for a future job. Students increasingly approach their tertiary-level education as a means to that end. As the global economy has moved more and more toward a knowledge economy, the importance of being able to communicate knowledge through written media has become mandatory. The ubiquity of email correspondence alone makes written communication a critical skill. The preponderance of using the *curriculum vitae* as a first screening for potential employment requires that students write that document in the most convincing way—no language errors, good and appropriate word choice, etc. At every stage of a career the ability to write well is a key asset. Convincingly, according to the Job Outlook Survey 2016, employers look for strong written communication skills as one of the most desirable attributes in recent college graduates they are considering to hire. In a model of education that intends to uphold liberal arts values and prepare students
for their future careers, “writing would be understood as the critical link between doing and knowing in the disciplines” (Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe, 2007 p. 299).

Social factors are also cited in the literature as importantly affecting second language acquisition (Ellis, 2002). When learning a second language in a society where that language is either the first language or a dominant language, learners are more likely to feel the necessity to use it. The target language takes on a kind of capital in that type of environment. On the other hand, in a social environment where the target language is marginalized or not given clear status, learners will be less likely to embrace the effort needed to attain higher levels of acquisition.

At the University of Balamand, English does not enjoy an elite status which could have a negative impact on students’ perceptions of its importance in this academic community. As one walks around campus one is more likely to hear Arabic spoken than English, for example. Memos that come out of major offices are more likely than not written in Arabic. Arabic is the language of choice for many of the rituals that give the institution its identity, including and importantly the annual graduation ceremony. The choice of elevating Arabic over English is a natural one given its prominence in this Lebanese society and its link to personal identity; the choice is very well understood. However, for the sake of this argument, the value system concerning language and identity and belief in the English as the medium of instruction (EMI) model of education, and the reasons for the adoption of the EMI model at the University of Balamand, need consideration and a well-thought-out plan for implementation.

Conclusion

There is no question that Lebanon is situated smack in the middle of a contentious debate permeating the world, especially the world of education. The debate is between decolonization on the one hand and globalization on the other (see Canagarajah, 2005 for a thorough discussion of this idea). These two historical movements are causing a dilemma of seismic proportions for many institutions and possibly even for UOB. Lebanon’s educational sector has obviously recognized
the dominance of the English language on the world stage and has responded through a proliferation of educational institutions that have adopted English as the medium of instruction (EMI) (Minkara, 2013). In fact, the Arab world has come to view English as a symbol of prestige and modernity (Joseph, 2013). However, deciding to operate an educational institution on an EMI model, for whatever reasons, is inadequate for successful language acquisition and literacy skills in the target language without the appropriate accompanying policies and efficient ways of working that would promote successful student outcomes in that language. Promoting *writing across the curriculum* is one policy and educational strategy that would sponsor and nurture the success of an EMI education in Lebanon.

The goal of tertiary education is to support and promote knowledge and skill acquisition and ultimately provide the necessary skill set for students to be contributing members of society and perhaps in contemporary times, of a given profession. Consequently, what disciplines at this level should teach or nurture is a serious issue to consider. With the globalization of education, and specifically the advent of more and more EMI educational institutions in the world, and in Lebanon specifically, as well as the interconnectivity of the job market, English has become the lingua franca of both business of all kinds and universities in non-English speaking countries. The Bologna Process (a European higher-education reform process) has prompted non-English speaking European countries to offer degree programs in English. By 2006, 30% of European universities had at least one program in English and in some countries 100% of programs were being taught in English (Coleman, 2006). Phillipson (2009) even argues that “internationalization means English-medium higher education” (p. 37). English medium means that not only is the content of a university level course being dispensed in English but, importantly, the students participating in the course are producing in English.

There are many writing strategies that any discipline can integrate that would result in the production of written English. The strategy of note-taking advocated by Boch and Piolat (2005) and discussed above is one example but other ideas include: journal writing, brief summaries of lectures, responses to readings, answers to guiding questions pertaining to something read, responses to discussion groups, to name
just a few ideas promoted in the literature (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004). Ochsner and Fowler (2004) offer an important distinction between the two incarnations of the WAC strategy. Essentially, they explain that WAC strategies are generally found in the first two years of tertiary education, or in the courses that provide foundational knowledge, general education courses that traditionally enhance how to learn and increase general knowledge. The WID strategies should appear in the last two years of a degree program when students are working on refining discipline-specific knowledge and how to convey and communicate that knowledge in discipline-specific conventions.

Writing mirrors thinking; one cannot write without thinking. One cannot write in English without thinking in English. While Ochsner and Fowler (2004) argue that the literature on active learning does not promote active learning through writing alone but rather through more cooperative practices and teachers' pedagogy, writing is distinctively effective for reflection and other complex activities that support active learning. In an EFL environment, such as UOB, the act of writing in the target language has the additional benefit of practicing the target language and making judgments and decisions about communicative precision and accuracy in the target language. Ensuring that students develop effectual skills in English when English is not their mother tongue will require that traditional divisions of labor at a tertiary-level educational institution be revised. The conventional university model, which leads to each discipline having well-defined borders and clear divisions of labor and responsibility, is not effective in producing the model graduate from UOB. To best nurture a graduate that is ready to compete in English on the international level, UOB must define the literacy needs of its students. The educators and policymakers at this institution need a common vision as to what the literacy needs of UOB graduates are and how best to ensure that the needs are met. Writing is the gateway to success in academia and importantly, given the new global economy, the gateway to success in the workplace. Both imperatives demand that tertiary institutions in EFL environments, specifically in Lebanon and particularly UOB, have a vision that will give university students the skill-set to be successful and competitive on the international stage and that vision may include a 'writing across the curriculum' or WAC program.
References


(in progress). The Realities of English Medium Instruction in Lebanon: Teachers’ and Students’ Perceptions of English Skills Development in a Cultural Studies Program.


Abstract

On the heels of research in the 1970s by Briton and others at the University of London, where they discovered that classrooms were disturbingly teacher-centered, the article Why Johnny Can't Write?, appeared in Newsweek in 1975 and set the academic world on a path of reform. Briton is credited with labeling the subsequent pedagogical movement that promoted writing as a means to engage students in the process of knowledge formation as ‘writing across the curriculum’ (WAC). The literary crisis the Newsweek article generated resulted in WAC programs being implemented in more than 50% of institutions of higher education in the US by the late 1980s (Kemper, 2013). The assumption that writing is not just a means of expressing what was learned but is, in fact, an integral part of the learning process is the central thesis of this essay. The essay explores how writing has played a major role in the learning process in tertiary programs in the Western world and how WAC is beginning to inform learning at the tertiary level internationally. The paper argues that if such extraordinary measures were taken in a native-speaker context to avert a perceived literacy crisis, then a context, such as the University of Balamand, where English is a second or even third language, should also put equally extraordinary measures into practice for the benefit of students.

ملخص

في أعقاب بحث قام به بريتون وآخرون في جامعة لندن، في سبعينيات القرن الماضي، خلص إلى أن الأستاذ هو محور الدروس الجامعية، نشرت مقالة في مجلة نيوزويك بعنوان “لماذا لا يستطيع جوني الكتابة؟”. شكلت هذه المقالة اللبنة الأولى على طريق الإصلاح التعليمي الأكاديمي، إذ شددت هذه الكتابات بأجمعها على أن الكتابة هي وسيلة لإشراك الطالب في عملية تشكيل المعرفة، أو ما يعرف بالكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسيّة، تزعمت في الوقت عينه عن أزمة تعليمية في تطبيق برامج “الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية” في أكثر من 50% من مؤسسات التعليم العالي في الولايات المتحدة حتى أواخر ثمانينيات القرن الماضي.

تفترض هذه المقالة أن الكتابة ليست مجرد وسيلة لتعتبر عمّا تعلّمه الطالب، بل إنها جزء لا يتجزأ من عملية التعلم. وهي تستكشف كيف أن الكتابة لعبت دورًا رئيسًا
في عملية التعليم في برامج التعليم العالي في الغرب، وكيف بدأت برامج "الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية" تؤثر على التعليم الجامعي العالمي. وتشير كذلك إلى أنه إذا تم تطبيق برامج "الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية" في إطار تعلم اللغة الأم، يجدر بالتربيتين أيضاً اللجوء إلى وسائل تعليمية أخرى في تعلم اللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية كما هو الحال في جامعة البلمند، حيث اللغة الإنجليزية هي اللغة الثانية أو اللغة الأجنبية.