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Writing Subjects: How Composing Shapes What We Know

Anne Ruggles Gere

One of the assignments I give my students is what I call the "unsent letter." It can be a letter written in response to a character in a novel—"Write to Huck Finn about the way he and Tom treat Jim when they are all at the Phelps in the final chapters of the book," or "Write to Geraldine, Junior's mother in *The Bluest Eye*, the woman who threw Pecola out of her house, reflecting on the course Pecola's life has taken by the end of the book." It can be a letter to the author or editor of a textbook—"Write to the editor of the *Norton Introduction to Literature* about your perceptions of the representation of people of color in this anthology," or "Choose one of the political issues raised in *Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science* and write to author Denny Taylor about how English teachers might participate in addressing this issue." It can be a letter to a theorist or someone who helps to shape our culture—"Select a passage from Nancy Fraser's *Justice Interrupts: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* that you find particularly difficult, and write a letter to the author explaining what you take to be the implications of this selection." "Watch an episode of 'Oprah's Book Club' and write Oprah a letter explaining the view of reading that her show represents."

I've been asking my students to do assignments like these for years, but I didn't always do them myself. Today I'm making up for it. I am going to share with you an unsent letter prompted by the invitation to speak here today. When Lois Rosen asked me to participate in this conference, I assumed that her request was prompted by my contributions to *Roots in the Sawdust*, a book subtitled "Writing to Learn Across the Disciplines." That book was published in 1985, and since medical science tells us that all our cells change completely every few years, it seemed reasonable to assume that the Anne Gere who edited that collection might be different from the one who stands here before you today. When I went back to *Roots in the Sawdust*, I discovered that I had some serious disagreements with the 1985 Anne Gere, and I've written her an unsent letter. I invite you to listen in.

Dear Anne,

I recently had occasion to reread your *Roots in the Sawdust*, and my return to this text raised a number of issues and questions that I would like to share with you. My rereading was prompted by an invitation to speak at a conference titled *WAC Conversations: The High School-College Connection* on the topic of "Writing Subjects: How Composing Shapes What We Know." I'll say more about that title and topic later, but I'd like to begin by dealing with some of the things that caught my attention immediately. I know that *Roots* was written when WAC was first taking shape. The body then known as the English Composition Board and now known as the Sweetland Writing Center at the University of Michigan had taken a leadership role in developing the theories and practices that shaped Writing Across the Curriculum. One could even say that ECB helped to create WAC, and since you were a graduate student at Michigan when ECB was taking shape, I suspect that you carried some of its influence with you when you migrated to the Pacific Northwest.

My favorite selection in *Roots* appears on page one where you describe the interview with Terry, the student who failed junior social studies and was repeating it in a WAC version. You write, "I asked whether he liked to write, and he shook his head, but when I asked about his journal, Terry's face brightened, and he said that he liked this daily writing. When I asked why, he responded, 'Writing makes more thoughts in my head.'" I think that Terry captures an essential part of WAC with these words. Writing about social studies or any other discipline helps students develop new insights, ask better questions, and think more systematically about what they are studying. It makes more thoughts in their minds.

When I look at the table of contents, I notice that it contains articles written by high school teachers of art, German, social studies, science, math, philosophy, English, history, and special education. I like this variety because it suggested that WAC had the potential to make inroads in many fields,

something that the past fourteen years have confirmed. The books in the *Roots* bibliography certainly look dated from today's perspective. Vygotsky seemed much newer and more innovative fourteen years ago, and Toby Fulwiler and Art Young had just recently published their collection *Language Connection*, but Chris Farria and Barbara Walvoord had not yet been heard from. David Russell's *Writing in the Academic Disciplines 1870-1990: A Curricular History* demonstrates that WAC has a history, and the last time I checked indexes there were 117 articles on WAC since 1985, which suggests as well that it has a future. I must tell you, though, that a few of the articles that appeared in the WAC index had titles like "Our Daughters the Soldiers: Women in the Military in World War II."

I believe that *Roots* has been helpful to teachers interested in WAC, but there are several places where I disagree with it. The first appears on page 5 where you distinguish between writing to learn and writing across the curriculum. You write, "Although writing to learn, like writing across the curriculum, emphasizes writing in all disciplines, its goal is different. Writing across the curriculum aims to improve the quality of writing, while writing to learn focuses on better thinking and learning." This distinction seems both too easy and too reductive. It seems counter-productive to focus so much on elaborating such differences. How can you really say that writing to learn can be separated from WAC? Sure, it might be claimed that writing to learn is different from writing to show learning, writing in one's own journal is different from completing a writing assessment for the MEAP. But there are commonalities between the two also.

This leads me back to my title, "Writing Subjects." One of the reasons your distinction strikes me as reductive is because it doesn't take into account the great variety of scribal activities that fall under the category of "writing." The title "Writing Subjects" suggests the difficulty of seeing writing in singular terms. It speaks in two ways, depending upon whether you read "writing" as an adjective or a verb. Let's look first at "writing" as an adjective modifying the noun subjects. In this case, we describe students (or subjects) as persons who write. Researchers like Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer show that school writing includes freewriting, study sheets, journals, note-taking, impromptu essays, reaction papers, letters, unit essays, learning logs, lab reports, and summaries. Do you really want to claim that each of these has the same effect on student learning? I don't think so.

Now let's think about "writing" as a verb. In this version we have an unnamed agent (again probably a student) who writes about a variety of school subjects or disciplines. I don't think that you can

separate this activity from the one described above. When students write about various subjects they are also learning; the learning is not limited to the occasions when they write for themselves in journals and other more private forms.

I disagree with another statement in *Roots in the Sawdust*. It's the claim on page 6 that WAC does not mean changing or adding to course content. You hedge a bit by acknowledging that WAC teachers may find that they cover less material than they had before they made writing central in their classes, but you also claim that increased quality of learning compensates for a decrease in quantity. My recent experience with WAC in a literature class convinces me that WAC *does* change course content. In order to explain this, I need to back up and look again at that word "subject." In its school subject sense it means, in the most reductive sense, that which is taught and learned in school. But behind the school subject lurks the academic discipline, and the way we think about the relationship between the two has everything to do with WAC.

Actually there are several ways to think about the relationship between school subject and academic discipline. We can think of them as continuous, discontinuous, different but related with the school subject preceding, different but related with the academic discipline preceding, or different but dialectically related. The relationship I find most promising sees the school subject as dialectically related to the academic discipline. This dialectical view portrays the student as working through active mental experiences. As you might have guessed, I am attracted to this dialectical relationship between school subject and academic discipline because it seems most hospitable to WAC.

Regardless of how we see the relationship between school subject and discipline, we have to acknowledge that school subjects are shaped in a variety of ways that have little to do with the academic discipline. The books available in the book depository; and the contents of local curriculum guides shape the school subject. The availability or lack of availability of works such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* determine how students will think about the school subject called American literature, just as book lists included in curriculum guides will. Community groups that bring censorship cases against school boards or lobby for a creationist approach to science likewise help to form school subjects. Teachers shape school subjects with the instructional choices they make. One of the most compelling examples I know centers on a literature anthology used in many American literature classes. Through a very complicated set of political and financial decisions, this text was

revised to include Native American literature prior to the section on the Puritans. The book was adopted by the Farmington School District, and I was delighted at the thought that my son would have an opportunity to read Native American literature. His teacher, however, flipped past this section on the first day, explaining that these poems and tales weren't really literature.

This is a long way of saying, my dear Anne of 1985, that the title "Writing Subjects" assumes that writing does change what we teach. Academic disciplines cannot be described as fixed and unchanging bodies, and school subjects, regardless of how we see them in relation to disciplines, are likewise constantly changing. WAC contributes to this process. My illustration of this comes from my own experience of working on a project titled "Making American Literatures." Sarah Robbins of Atlanta and Don McQuade of Berkeley joined me in a collaboration with the National Writing Project to develop three sites-in Georgia, California and Michigan where university and secondary school teachers worked collaboratively to interrogate the three terms "making," "American," and "literatures." The term "making" led us to look at many of the forces that shape the teaching canon. Changing critical tastes lead us to set aside the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and take up that of Adrienne Rich. Reviewers and editors shape Nathaniel Hawthorne into an author of note while Sarah Orne Jewett fades into obscurity. Anthologies offer us the Faulkner of "A Rose for Emily" and limit Henry James to a "mention" in a discussion of the Gilded Age. Publishers allow Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to drop out of print between the late thirties and the late sixties while multiple paperback editions of *Black Boy* keep Richard Wright available to teachers. In addition to the shaping influences of critical taste, reviewers, editors, anthologizers, and publishers, we also considered the role of teachers and students in making the school subject we call American Literature. The student who resists by writing "Puritans have nothing to do with my life" can lead a teacher, like one I know in Southfield, to rethink her whole approach to the course.

The term "American" also made us think about the various forces that shape the school subject. The post-revolution desire of former colonies to establish a nation with a cultural as well as military independence shaped many discussions of the distinctiveness or exceptionalism of America in the 19th century. Early in this century, World War I strengthened the importance of teaching American literature because it was suddenly seen as a way of enhancing national identity and loyalty. Even after tracing such broad directions, we were left with

many questions. Who counts as an American? Does George Lamming, a writer from the Caribbean? What about Michael Ondaatje, who was born in Sri Lanka and lives in Canada but has written about the American West in books like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*? How do we treat writers like Henry James and T.S. Eliot, native sons whose lives and topics took them away from American shores? Does one have to write in English to be considered an American writer? For example, how do we categorize early Spanish writers like Ruiz de Burton or more recent ones like Rudolfo Anaya? What about Marise Conde, a Francophone writer from the Caribbean who wrote a book about the Salem Witch trials called *I, Tituba*? Do we include writers from Canada and Mexico under the rubric of American? What about South America?

Literature proved an equally difficult term to define. Even though our project title added an "s" to literature in an effort to signal recognition of the multiplicity of texts that could fall into the category of literature, we still found a great deal to explore. Do we count as literature unpublished diaries found in local historical society collections? Does creative non-fiction fit under the category of literature? What about journals like those of Lewis and Clark? Does literature mean something different to people from different social classes or racial/religious backgrounds? I think of Dorothy Richardson's account of her late 19th century conversation with women factory workers. The women workers described the authors who were canonical for them—Laura Jean Libbey, Charlotte Braeme and Effie Rowlands—praising their romantic tales. Richardson responds: "I spoke enthusiastically of *Little Women*, telling them how I read it four times, and that I meant to read it again some day." She goes on to give a summary of the novel: "When I finished, Phoebe stopped her cornering, and Mrs. Smith looked up from her label pasting. 'Why that's no story at all,' the latter declared. 'Why no,' echoed Phoebe. 'That's no story—that's just like everyday happenings. I don't see what's the use of putting things like that in books But I suppose farmer folks like them kind of stories,' Phoebe suggested generously. 'They ain't used to the same styles of anything that us city folks are.'" For Dorothy and for Phoebe literature means very different things. In my study of women's clubs, I found that Jewish clubwomen regularly included Emma Lazarus; African American women, Frances Harper; and Mormon women, Emily Woodmansee in their literary discussions alongside Shakespeare or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Each had a view of literature that included authors from their own racial/ethnic group. And speaking of Emerson, why do essays from some historical periods get categorized as lit-

erature while others don't? Why, for example, does "Self Reliance" get anthologized in American Literature texts but essays by writers like Annie Dillard or John McPhee don't? How does technology shape literature? What's the significance of giving the Booker Prize to an electronic text? Then, of course, there are a whole set of questions that circulate around student writing. How do we talk about the literary qualities in student writing? If we believe that students contribute to the making of American literatures, how do we foster those contributions?

Since all of the participants in "Making American Literatures" are alumni of a writing project, it will not surprise you to learn that writing played a significant role in our learning as teachers, and it also enjoys prominence in our classrooms. Both my own teaching experiences and my observation of the teaching of others through continuity meetings, reunions at national conventions, classroom visits, and electronic conversations convince me that the writing across the curriculum we all employ is helping to shape the school subject we call "American Literature." It's not just that we have brought new texts like Art Spiegelman's *Maus I and II* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* into our classrooms—although we have expanded the teaching canon of American literature by doing that. It's not just that we have brought new questions like "What happens to *The Great Gatsby* when we read it next to Nella Larson's *Passing*? or How does our reading of Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" change when we put it beside Langston Hughes's "That Word Black"? We have brought such questions into our teaching, but the most profound changes have had to do with writing, the writing we are doing to explain our project to ourselves and others, and the writing our students are doing. This form of writing across the curriculum convinces me that we are making changes that will shape the school subject "American Literature."

My conviction is best illustrated by some of the assignments we gave. One of the things I want to say to the 1985 Anne is that *Roots in the Sawdust* didn't give sufficient attention to the assignments, the invitations as Ann Berthoff would say, to writing. Sure, there were many useful exercises and suggestions for writing such as biopoems, exit slips, questions of the day, and, even, unsent letters, but the book really didn't give much attention to the importance of writing engaging assignments for students. One of the things "Making American Literatures" has convinced me of is that writing an assignment is a complex process to which I hadn't been paying enough attention. When writing across the curriculum is thoroughly embedded in a given

subject, assignments will reflect issues, values, and important questions in the field. Here, for example, is an assignment I gave to my first-year university students in a course titled "Making American Literatures" after they had read Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: "One way to describe Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid* is to say that he uses words and photographic images to express the inadequacy of trying to capture a historical subject that is continually moving and changing. He shows us how visual and verbal texts can distort and even lie about their subjects, and he invites us to explore the relationship between history and imagination. This assignment invites you to do some imagining—even lying—of your own. We will spend the next class at the Bentley Historical Library, where you will find a name or an image of a nineteenth century UM student, and your task is to write a "history" of this student. Feel free to employ strategies such as including and distorting historical texts, manipulating artifacts, playing with various genres, changing/creating images, or introducing marginal/silent voices."

The students in my class responded very enthusiastically to this assignment. One student, Hal, chose a 19th century student who was interested in architecture because he, Hal, was planning to major in architecture. He wrote about how the 19th century student responded to the buildings that were on campus in the 1890s and for the rest of the semester served as our resident expert on every campus location. Rob, a student who was interested in joining the Men's Glee Club, began with a photograph of the club, selected an individual named in that photograph, and using newspaper articles, glee club programs, and other texts from the period, created a vertical file for the young man in the photograph. Sarah, a student who lived in Stockwell dorm, selected Madelon Stockwell, the first woman to graduate from UM, as her subject. Drawing on a variety of materials from the period, Sarah created a set of letters from Stockwell to family members about her daily life as a student. Sarah also included artifacts such as an embroidered handkerchief that Stockwell gave her mother for Christmas and wrote about in one of her "letters." This assignment not only gave students an opportunity to experience some of Ondaatje's strategies for creating an invented history, it also rearranged all of our thinking about American literature. It shows how archives contribute to the making of literature; how historical and literary texts intersect; how our understanding of "American" combines both regional and national references; and, especially, how student writing takes on literary qualities.

Let you think that this kind of assignment would only work with older students, let me tell you

about my friend Laura Schiller who was teaching a sixth-grade class in Southfield at the same time I was teaching my first-year university students. During the previous year Laura had used writing to help her students understand and appreciate one another's cultural heritages. In a project called "Coming to America," she invited students to interview family members about how they emigrated to the United States. The Russian and Chaldean students whose families had emigrated relatively recently and the African American and Caucasian students whose families had lived in this country for a longer time learned about the difficulties and dangers each had faced in coming to a new land as they read one another's accounts. The next year, after her involvement with "Making American Literatures," Laura modified this assignment to engage her students in learning about the various migrations into Southfield. Working with materials from the Southfield Historical Society, her students conducted interviews, wrote narratives, and deposited their accounts in the Historical Society, thereby adding to community knowledge while establishing themselves as local authors.

For both university and sixth-grade students, this writing across the curriculum caused them to see both the subject of American literature and themselves differently. My student Hal began to think about how architecture figures in American literature, and he started to see himself as an expert in local geography. Rob, the would-be glee club member, made new connections between music and American literature and began to see himself as an expert on popular culture of the 1890s in Ann Arbor. Sarah learned to see literary qualities in letters and, on the anniversary of Stockwell's birthday, when every dorm resident had to answer a series of questions about Madelon in order to enter the dining room, she was in high demand among her peers. The sixth graders in Laura Schiller's class likewise came to understand how local and regional sources shape what we call literature, and they also saw themselves as contributing directly to the literature by composing texts that were read at a local bookshop before being deposited at the Historical Society.

This experience convinces me that you, the 1985 Anne, were wrong to insist that writing across the curriculum doesn't mean changing course content. "The Making American Literatures" project demonstrates how teachers and students alike reshape familiar courses like American Literature when they engage in intensive writing within the field. The subject, in turn, helps to shape them and their writing. This seems to be true across the curriculum. Thomas Kelly, a professor of music at Harvard, explains how writing about music helps

his students translate a complex listening experience into words. It's not just a matter of mastering a new vocabulary, although that's part of the task. Students also need to construct an argument about a new verbal art form that extends over time. The subject, in this case a course about musical performances, becomes transformed with an on-line interactive glossary of musical terms that features examples of sounds demonstrating specific structural elements of music. Writing about music transforms students who feel uncomfortable with an unfamiliar and daunting subject. Composing does indeed shape what we know. As you, the earlier Anne, claim, writing across the curriculum is more than mere writing, it is writing directed toward specific purposes, and implementing it causes teachers as well as students to behave differently.

Much that has been published since 1985 has focused on strategies for implementing writing across the curriculum and on developing administrative structures to support it. I think of work like Barbara Walvoord's *In the Long Run: A study of Faculty in Three WAC Programs* or Toby Fulwiler and Art Young's *Programs that Work: Models and Methods for WAC*, or *Practices and Programs*, the collection Pam Farrell, Art Young, and I edited. Such work has value, but I think that the field of WAC needs something more. It needs to expand its boundaries to consider WAC in broader contexts. One of the things we still know too little about is writing in subjects across time. That is, we don't know enough about how many and what kinds of writing assignments students are being asked to do as they move from social studies to math to science to English classes. This is true for both high school and college students. We know that self-reporting by teachers gives us some information, but we also need to follow individual students across four years of education to learn how they experience writing in a variety of school subjects.

My friend Nancy Sommers is undertaking a study of this at Harvard. She and her colleagues will follow 25% or 422 students from the class of 2001 through their college years in an attempt to draw a portrait of the undergraduate writing experience. Through a combination of surveys, interviews, and analyses of student writing, this study will provide a rich description of the range of writing experiences students have in a Harvard career as well as the courses and instructors that influence student writing. In addition, the study should provide information about how students learn to write within their fields of concentration and how they connect personal and academic interests. I think we will learn a great deal from this study, but I want to introduce a note of caution.

Just a little over a century ago another re-

port issued from Harvard. Actually it was a series of three reports that extended over several years. A committee of Harvard alumni had been charged with investigating the quality of writing demonstrated by first-year students at the University. The three reports described the writing in terms of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, urging that such remedial issues be addressed in high school. High school teachers expressed frustration with the Harvard approach. One wrote that his best students received no exemplary marks, "but about the tenth or fifteenth boy of the class, who never in the world showed a spark of originality, who wrote only passably, and always so, never by any accident wrote anything of positive excellence, received a mark of distinction." Fred Newton Scott, then a professor of rhetoric at the University of Michigan, examined some of the Harvard writing samples from a rhetorical perspective, attending to issues of audience, purpose, and topic. Not surprisingly, Scott came to different conclusions about the nature of the writing and what might be done to improve it. Despite Scott's objections, the Harvardization of freshman English resulted from the Harvard reports of the 1890s. Although the rhetorical dimensions of writing have received more attention in recent years (during the same period when the work of Fred Newton Scott has been recovered), the Harvard model of focusing on surface features of writing has dominated composition instruction for many years.

I describe the Harvardization of freshman English as a cautionary tale. Despite the merits of the current Harvard study—and I think they are many—I hope that we do not allow Harvard to undertake the only major research on writing across the curriculum at the turn of this century. The undergraduate experience varies with location, institutional type, and a variety of other factors. A study at one institution cannot stand for all undergraduate writing. College students do not belong to a single type. They come to college with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and even a carefully selected cross section of Harvard students cannot represent them all. And this study tells us very little about WAC in secondary schools.

Furthermore, the Harvard study of writing across the curriculum operates on some assumptions that I find troubling. One of these is that it frames writing in high school and college in terms of differences rather than continuities. Students are asked about the differences between high school and college writing. Not surprisingly, over 75% of those surveyed indicate that college writing requires them to read and think on a deeper level. They also claimed that college expected more of them, that it required them to analyze and interpret texts on a deeper level, and to write papers with more compli-

cated theses and more extensive use of primary and secondary source materials. That may be, but I wonder how students might have responded if they were asked to describe the similarities between high school and college writing. Somewhere in the recesses of my brain there's an echo of the Harvard reports of the 1890s that relegated remediation to high schools when I read about questions that focus on differences. If you value conversations and connections between high school and college instructors, I imagine you find this troubling also.

From what I've read and heard about the Harvard study of writing across the curriculum, I cannot tell how students are being categorized. I am concerned, however, that there may not be enough attention to differences among them. A recent study that I admire a great deal is Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*. Sternglass followed 53 students at the City University of New York for six years in an effort to understand the development of complex reasoning strategies fostered by writing and the multifaceted social factors in students' lives that affected their academic progress. Her investigation of this urban and multicultural population offers a longitudinal look at the relationship between writing and learning in a variety of fields, and considers the nonacademic factors that influenced academic performance. The case studies of students in this study offer a powerful endorsement of writing across the curriculum. The students themselves, often those who experience second-language or second-dialect interference in their writing, testified that writing promoted the truest method for learning. Writing, they claimed, helped them remember, analyze, and construct new knowledge for themselves.

What I particularly like about Sternglass's study is her careful attention to differences among students, not just race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and ideology—although she attends to all of these—but the other life circumstances that shape their undergraduate experiences. Sternglass acknowledges that experiences such as losing a job, confronting racism, and trying to maintain cultural identity all play a role in writing and learning. Some of the differences she notes are visible, but many remain invisible, and these are the ones I think are particularly important for us to consider as we attempt to learn more about writing across the curriculum. My former student Margaret Marshall has written eloquently about the invisible differences that can marginalize students in classrooms.

And so, Anne of 1985, I thank you for the contributions of *Roots in the Sawdust* and remind you that much remains to be done if writing across

the curriculum is to have a sustained and powerful effect in a variety of fields in high school and college. It will be important to acknowledge that both writing and learning are varied and highly complex activities, that writing across the curriculum does change course content and reshape school subjects, that looking at continuities rather than differences between high school and college can be productive, and that longitudinal studies of students in diverse institutions can inform our thinking and our classroom practices. What I'm suggesting is that we shed more and varied light on writing across the curriculum. The poet Audre Lorde has written: "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has

direct bearing on the product which we live, and upon the change which we hope to bring about through those lives." I hope WAC will receive the light it deserves.

Yours sincerely,

An older-and maybe wiser-Anne

About the Author

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