Writing about Writing at the Two-Year College: Why Composition Instructors Need to Consider "Introduction to Writing Studies" at the Two-Year College

Jessica Ulmer
Midlands Technical College

Section 1: Introduction

In 2007, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, initiators of the writing-about-writing (WAW) movement and pedagogy, proposed a radical revision to the teaching of first-year composition: rather than teach students "how to write in college" composition instructors should draw on the considerable knowledge that the field of composition and rhetoric has generated over the last half century to teach them "about writing" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 553). It was an important, long-needed, somewhat controversial, and from my perspective, obvious proposal of reform: composition should be like other disciplines in that those that teach it should use this introductory course to share with students the ways of knowing, doing, thinking, and being that characterize the field of college composition.

As outlined by Downs and Wardle, the WAW pedagogy teaches potentially transferable conceptions of the activity of writing rather than "basic" writing skills that are in fact highly specialized and contextualized" (("Intro to Writing Studies" 578). This is because no single course can attempt to address the multitude of ways of writing that students might do in all their

college courses, but writing instructors can teach transferable concepts such as ways of thinking, reading, and writing.

Admittedly, their proposal had and still has its problems. No other discipline teaches an introductory course like FYC, a course that is required by all students at the university. Given the institutional history and positioning of FYC, some have wondered, is the WAW approach really appropriate? Further, as several scholars have pointed out, the teaching corps of FYC, drawn from a range of disciplines and bringing to their work diverse backgrounds and training, may not have the knowledge to teach a WAW pedagogy, given their lack of experience with and exposure to the field of composition and rhetoric.

Despite the numbers and the hardships that many of us face at the two-year college level, for Downs and Wardle, though, there is little choice in the matter: either we, as English faculty, work to create institutional and pedagogical structures in which students can learn from the field's knowledge or we allow a course that frequently does not convey accurate and informed perspectives on writing to persist (and assume the consequences). Far from just a proposal to change composition teaching practices, Downs and Wardle's reform agenda asked and asks us to work to change the way Americans in higher education and beyond think about writing.

As I have read Downs and Wardle's article and the follow-ups to it that have appeared since (see, for example, Downs and Wardle, 2013) with enthusiasm and taken to my classrooms to experiment with the principles of WAW, I have sometimes inferred in Downs and Wardle's proposal, perhaps incorrectly, that theirs is an imagined audience of teachers and scholars who work in traditional four-year post-secondary contexts. From March 2013 emails with Downs,

who said that "I think people are often worried about the difficulty of [WAW] at a two-year level…I'm betting that some of the most valuable work to be done there is thinking carefully about specific two-year populations and imagining ways WAW might or might not align well with their starting points and needs." (Downs email), my sense is that when Downs and Wardle talk about WAW, they are, understandably, often envisioning teachers who work at institutions like their own (Montana State University and Miami University of Ohio, respectively). More to the point, my literature review has yielded no evidence that those writing and thinking about WAW have considered the impact or significance of institutional context on the pedagogy.

Specifically, I have been unable to locate any scholarship that considers the question of whether WAW is an appropriate pedagogy for teachers of writing who work in the two-year college context. In this article, I seek to remedy this absence by investigating the factors that most impact or define two-year college teaching and considering the how these factors intersect with the agenda for WAW that Downs and Wardle and others have set out. In doing so, I work to expand and extend the work of Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle and others within the WAW movement.

One argument against using WAW at the two-year college is that two-year college instructors are expected to be generalists who teach five courses a semester and conduct advising with an undetermined number of students. In the field of English, being a generalist means a primary course load of college composition courses, both developmental and transferable, with possible courses in "literature, creative writing, film, general humanities, and other relevant areas" (Task Force 4). Though most English faculty at the large, urban technical college where I

work teach primarily composition courses, some also teach in the elementary education program, the art department, the humanities department, or within career program departments.

Given that the primary factors that most impact or define two-year college teaching are the challenges that community college students face with critically reading, understanding, and writing about challenging college-level texts, the WAW approach attempts to rectify these challenges by guiding them through the reading of articles and chapter excerpts from the field of composition studies. This approach highlights the potential of WAW to help two-year students reframe the ways in which they have come to think about writing, writing instruction, and themselves as writers. By framing English Composition as Introduction to Writing Studies, WAW can address how many two-year college students struggle with critical and analytical reading and how they grapple with challenges regarding the conventions of academic writing by reframing their English Composition experience from how to write in college to why do people read and write in general.

While I may be among the first to investigate the appropriateness of WAW for two-year college composition instruction, I'm not the first to ask where, beyond a first year or first semester composition course, WAW pedagogies might be appropriate. Perhaps of more interest to those who teach in the two-year context, Carter, Charlton, Bird, and Mutnick have all shared visions of WAW as it relates to the basic writing classroom. In fact, the work of these scholars, collected within a 2009/2010 double-issue of the *Basic Writing e-journal*, offers a compelling starting point for those wondering how WAW might be adapted to meet the needs of diverse student populations like those often found in the two-year colleges.

While there are many factors one might consider in assessing the appropriateness of WAW for the two-year college context (i.e. institutional, administrative, and/or pedagogical concerns), I believe the most important factor teachers and scholars of composition should consider when trying to gauge the usefulness of WAW for two-year composition instruction comes down to students. Thus, in this article, I limit my discussion of WAW to consider only the pedagogical appropriateness of WAW for two-year college students.

Section 2: Arguments for Writing about Writing at the Two-Year College

A writing-about-writing approach to the community college context is born out of the research that suggests that two of the greatest challenges community college students face are critically reading/understanding and writing about challenging college-level texts. With its emphasis on assigning articles drawn from the scholarly community of writing studies (see Downs and Wardle 2007, 2012, 2013, 2016), WAW pedagogies provide students opportunities to engage with exactly the kinds of rigorous texts they need to interact with, thus "apprenticing" students to an academic community of practice where the professor can share the conversation with them as an insider. The problem that WAW helps me to solve in this situation is that many community college students have developed dysfunctional ways of thinking about writing and writing instructors must help their students to overcome these ways of thinking.

Some of these students have come to these ways of thinking because they are returning to college after an absence from formal education and therefore have outdated or misguided

understandings of what academic discourse is. Since students at the two-year college especially tend to view their non-major classes in isolation because they are under the misconception that these courses are just part of the core, using WAW in this setting will help students to understand the background behind the writing that they are doing so that they can then transfer their understanding to other courses that they must take. Given that the general curriculum at the two-year college is generally seen by instructors and administrators as a building block for the courses that students will take within their majors either at the two-year or four-year college, students simply don't understand or care about mastering reading and writing skills when they only want to obtain a degree to gain employment. WAW changes this dynamic in that it removes the assumption that students are in a writing course solely so that they can learn how to write in college. A WAW approach, because it asks students to read actual researched articles and, in many cases, conduct primary research, functions as a kind of boot-camp, helping students to re-acclimate to academic discourse and language. The problem that WAW helps me to solve in this situation is that a WAW approach can kick start the thinking process for students who either never "got" academic writing or have been away from it for a while.

Though Downs and Wardle admit that "[their] pedagogy is demanding, confusing to students early on, does not allow for 'perfect' student work, and—most obviously—cannot be taught by someone not trained in writing studies," they don't address the variety of needs that students may have in the two-year college classroom ("Intro to Writing Studies" 575). Teaching students about writing as a discipline aids students in understanding that writing is more than just a basic set of skills that they need to learn to succeed in college. Framing first-year writing as a

course that introduces students to writing as a discipline will reframe students' minds about the field and hopefully lead to their understanding of writing along the same lines as they understand their chosen fields of study such as early childhood education or hospitality management.

Since community college students come to academia from a variety of pathways, many have come *to dislike the things that define academics to them*: namely reading and writing. Many of my former students would do anything within their power to get out of doing assignments because they just don't think they are good at these things. Much of the research on teaching composition at the two-year college supports the argument for providing underprepared and at-risk students with writing courses that engage students in "critical reading, writing from sources, and a wider variety of academic genres and rhetorical purposes" (Hassel and Giordano 131). Though many composition instructors aspire to these goals, the ability levels of many two-year college students limit the complexity of reading and writing tasks in first year composition courses.

Hassel and Giordano argue that many students who attend the two-year college "arrive at college with the potential to become proficient college-level readers and writers, but they aren't yet ready for postsecondary academic reading and writing in their first semester" (120). Similarly, Tinberg recounts his experience when he first began teaching at the college level:

> "when I arrived at the college, I had students read and write from strictly academic texts - drawn from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*. Taking my cue from the editors of that textbook, I encouraged the notion that reading difficult texts can be good for you. I saw quickly that no matter how hard I tried I could not get students

to inhabit these texts" (7).

This is reality of teaching at the two-year college; though the students desire some higher education so that they can move up in the world, they are not prepared for the reality of what college requires. Thusly, "for most instructors, working with underprepared college students is the daily reality of teaching college composition" (Hassel and Giordano 120).

Therefore, instead of having students read about modes of discourse or a common reader that is assigned by the college, Downs and Wardle suggest that the content of a first-year writing course should be focused primarily on "reading and writing" by having students focus on the questions "How does writing work? How do people use writing? What are problems related to writing and reading and how can they be solved?" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 558). Many students at the two-year college have difficulty with critical and analytical reading and WAW builds in the practice of reading scholarly articles in the field of composition and renders writing "study-able."

The authors pose that the "material in readings is centered on issues with which students have first-hand experience" because it is important to relate to students that writing problems they face aren't unique to students, "from conceptual questions of purpose, to procedural questions of drafting and revision, to issues surrounding critical reading" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 560). One aspect of this pedagogy that does make it much more appealing to the two-year college instructor is that the "data-driven, research-focused readings" are much "more readable and more concrete, making them more accessible and relevant to students" "Intro to Writing Studies" 560). Students at the two year college struggle with reading and writing, and

many instructors balk at the idea of assignment these types of reading to their students, but by engaging students in a scholarly conversation and modeling what good readers do while reading and discussing the articles, instructors can engage two year college students in the types of conversations they might have once they enter their chosen field of employment.

A writing-about-writing approach to the community college context is born out of its potential to help two-year students reframe the ways in which they have come to think about writing, writing instruction, and themselves as writers. As Tinberg and Nadeau learned via their research with community college writers, in terms of their attitudes and orientations towards writing, such students face many challenges. About the *past*, only about half of the students these scholars surveyed felt that high school had prepared them to succeed as college-level writers. About the *present*, only one-third of survey respondents considered themselves to be strong writers, just one-fifth reported that they sought out courses that would require writing, and only a one-quarter reported that they welcomed challenging writing instruction and/or assignments. (Further, one-third mistakenly assumed that the writing they would be asked to produce in college would be mostly similar to the writing they had learned in high school.) About the *future*, less than half of Tinberg and Nadeau's survey respondents believed that writing would be important to their chosen careers (59-62). The problems that WAW helps me to solve in this situation are that it can help students who fail to understand how a writing course is useful to their professional goals and that community college students typically see writing as separate from their own lives and experiences.

Students at the two-year college will be exposed to a wide variety of writing throughout their education and future careers, but teaching them to reflect on their own histories with reading and writing will give them a broad foundation on which to base those future writing tasks because most students come to FYC has "had previous experiences as writers although … few brought … many successful experiences as writers in academic contexts (Carter 4). Again, two-year college students come to their composition courses with preconceived notions of their own writing no matter how long it's been since their last experience with academic writing. Many two-year college students have not had much success with writing in their past academic experiences; most of my younger students reported that they are taught five-paragraph essays and other scripted graphic organizer-type compositions. These students have rarely been taught to think about their writing in a way that encourages deep cognitive processes; all their writing experiences have been timed and scripted, mainly for standardized testing situations. Even the older students shared that they don't remember doing much writing in secondary school beyond responding to readings that were assigned. Many of my two-year college student come to me without much love for reading and writing, and many have reported that they haven't had a positive reading or writing experience in their many years of schooling.

By teaching these students about writing as it relates to their own experiences with literacy that can hopefully translate to the types of literacy that they need for future courses, instructors can reframe the conversation that students have in the composition classroom. Engaging students in academic conversations about their own writing not only helps them to feel at ease with the classroom environment but also with their own abilities in the academic setting.

WAW offers transferable knowledge about writing that will be useful to the considerable proportion of community college students who will not go on to further higher education. The problem that WAW helps me to solve in this situation is that the reading and assignments are not scripted in a WAW approach can be tailored for community college students who are mostly going to work after two years. This also solves the problem about teaching them writing in school that will be of use to them in the workplace.

Arguably, some students at the two-year college aren't interested in the degrees that the school offers so much as the workforce training and job skills that they need for gainful employment; it is important that two-year colleges make it clear why students have to take the core set of courses. As opposed to focusing on basic skills and modes of discourse, WAW pedagogy teaches "potentially transferable conceptions of the activity of writing rather than "basic" writing skills that are in fact highly specialized and contextualized" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 578). Writing in the sciences differs greatly from writing in hospitality or criminal justice and students in first-year composition at the two-year college require more than just an understanding of academic writing. These students need to understand the how and the why behind the field of composition so that they can easily adapt to writing in other fields and situations.

For me, some of the most striking findings from Tinberg and Nadeau's research have to do with community college students' past experiences with literacy and literacy instruction. Only a third felt themselves to be strong writers, only a fifth sought out courses that would require writing, and only a quarter welcomed challenging writing assignments. Clearly, many

community college writers carry with them negative self-conceptions about writing which inevitably impact their orientation towards future writing instruction. My sense, from these numbers, is that such students could benefit from a significant re-orientation of their views in regard to themselves as writers and as regards writing and I feel that a WAW approach is uniquely well-suited to this exigency. My understanding is that for many community college students, past writing instruction has perhaps functioned to alienate them from the role of literacy in their lives, emphasizing such familiar and well-worn tropes as an over-emphasis on formal correctness, an obsession form over content (i.e. five-paragraph essay), and the too-frequent deployment of literature as content to teach writing. Some might argue that with its challenging and dense readings drawn from the field of Writing Studies, WAW is a pedagogical approach that is not appropriate for these more "basic writers." I would say just the opposite. In the Introduction to their *Writing About Writing* textbook, Downs and Wardle introduce students to two terms to help them think this through, *conceptions* (and misconceptions) and *constructs*. "Many of the things I believe about writing are constructs," Downs and Wardle write, "I hope that this book can [...] help you see writing constructs as constructs rather than believing that they are *inevitably* true or real" (*Writing about Writing* 5). They position WAW as offering an antidote of sorts to the most misguided literacy instructional strategies that I would argue community college students are the most likely to have experienced.

A number of studies of writing classrooms indicate that students' attitudes can impact their perceptions about writing, their learning environment, and their ability to transfer writing knowledge. In a review of 16 studies on self-efficacy and motivation in secondary education,

Klassen argues that self-efficacy, among other beliefs, plays an important role in students' ability to learn to write. In fact, many of the studies summarized by Klassen argue that instructors who work with students on writing need to be more aware of the impact that student belief systems have on writing success (188-190). Students' awareness of learning on a meta-level and attempts to self-regulate their learning are also shown to have substantial impact on writing success (Graham & Harris 3). Over half of the students in his study reported that writing was a difficult and unrewarding task and reported writing difficulties. Their difficulties included misunderstanding of audience awareness, lack of rhetorical and argumentative knowledge, lack of awareness about the writing process, and difficulty in making their own meaning from others' words and ideas (Gambell 424-430). Students' own beliefs about themselves and their writing impacted how they performed as writers.

A writing-about-writing approach at the two-year college level could address how many two-year college students struggle with critical and analytical reading and how they grapple with challenges regarding the conventions of academic writing. Even though Tinberg and Nadeau found that 90% of their respondents expected to write regularly, only 33% considered themselves to be strong writers (59). Given these parameters, many two-year college students enter the writing classroom having solely been taught to write short responses and five-paragraph essays which leaves them at a disadvantage when they are asked to write multi-paragraph, multi-page essays in the composition course and beyond. This is assisted by many students' misconception that college writing will be similar to high school writing. WAW offers

instructors an opportunity to reframe the ways in which many community college students have come to think about writing and to give students more helpful, transferable, and accurate ways to think about writing. The problems that WAW helps me to solve in this situation is that many community college students have developed dysfunctional ways of thinking about writing and writing instructors must help their students to overcome these ways of thinking and that a WAW approach can help provide a context for academic writing for students for whom English is maybe not their first language and who have no metacognition about the role of language-struggle and how it impacts their academic performance.

About a third of students at many two-year colleges come from families who immigrated to the United States (AACC). As supported by Blake et al, many college ESL students fall into the group that, "having been educated in this country, are fluent in spoken English but not proficient in written English." These students can speak and read English with some limitations but struggle to express themselves in writing. Even those students who were born and raised in the United States have spent much of their lives serving as translator for their foreign-born parents, which can interfere with their comprehension of English. Learning grammar rules isn't going to increase fluency in writing in English since there are so many exceptions to the rules. Lack of English fluency becomes a large concern for two-year colleges because a two-year degree program can quickly balloon into a three or four-year program because students must take courses to learn English before they can enroll in the courses for their majors.

At some two-year colleges, students are placed in writing courses solely using a multiple-choice placement exam which doesn't indicate students' abilities in writing or using a computer-

scored writing sample which only scores based on the inclusion of certain markers in the sample. Unfortunately, Bedfield and Crosta, from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, found that "association between a placement test and performance in college is endogenous" (1) in that the two most common placement tests, the ACCUPLACER and the COMPASS, simply succeed in diverting most students "to a longer academic path rather than simply diagnosing the student's genuine needs" (Bedfield and Crosta 3). When it comes to students for whom English is not their native language, this becomes increasingly problematic because many continue to struggle with writing in English long after they are deemed proficient enough in speaking to mainstream in regular college composition courses. For students like this, who have spent so much time just getting by in their English courses, WAW can provide a context that bridges the language gap since these students can usually write in their first language. Even though some students will argue that English is their first language, their writing will show that they still think in another language and therefore struggle to compose academic texts. WAW is appropriate for these students because it forces them to examine their own literacy experiences, regardless of language, and build their academic writing out of their own experiences.

Likewise, instructors at the community college can no longer assume that the students they meet in their classrooms are experienced readers especially not when the numbers of students at the two-year college for whom English is not a first language are rising dramatically. If students struggle with reading or conversing in English, then teaching them to write in English becomes an even more pronounced problem because both these are skills for which many are

either poorly prepared or not prepared at all. Many of these students would be the first to argue that he can speak and read English with little to no problems, but his reading comprehension and written expression in English has caused issues in his courses that require academic literacy skills.

Teaching students about writing as a discipline helps students to understand that writing is more than just a basic set of skills that they need to learn to succeed in college. Framing first-year writing as a course that introduces students to writing as a discipline will reframe students' minds about the field and hopefully lead to their understanding of writing along the same lines as they understand their chosen fields of study such as early childhood education or hospitality management.

Since community college students come to academia from a variety of pathways, many have come *to dislike the things that define academics to them*: namely reading and writing. Many of my former students would do anything within their power to get out of doing assignments because they just don't think they are good at these things.

Given that the general curriculum at the two-year college is generally seen by instructors and administrators as a building block for the courses that students will take within their majors either at the two-year or four-year college, students simply don't understand or care about mastering reading and writing skills when they only want to obtain a degree to gain employment. WAW changes this dynamic in that it removes the assumption that students are in a writing course solely so that they can learn how to write in college.

Even when students are learning to write in a composition classroom, they are composing

for various purposes in other courses, even if it is simply writing answers to questions or writing lab reports. Downs and Wardle propose that "students write for various communities within the university, each of which uses writing in specialized ways that mediate the activities of the people involved" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 556). This makes the problem of how to teach first-year writing for transfer even more difficult because no single course can address the specialized ways of writing that can be done in various disciplines. No single composition instructor can address the multitude of ways that students will write in the two-year college, and neither should they have to. Even though composition classes have consistently been framed as the place where students should learn to write in academia, no instructor can be an expert in all the different types of writing done in all the fields done at the college level.

Downs and Wardle provide a very good analogy to the Matrix films to get students to understand how concepts about writing are constructed and their textbook is the "'red pill' to help [students] see writing constructs as constructs rather than believing that they are inevitably true or real" (*Writing about Writing* 5). This approach to teaching composition is supposed to break down the walls between students and professional writers so that they eventually become one and the same.

Section 3: Recommendations for implementing Writing about Writing at the Two-Year College

Due to their work at the university level and the prevalent use of their pedagogy at the four-year college or university, Downs and Wardle only provide suggestions for using their

textbook in a one semester course during which students would engage in three to four projects at an accelerated pace, much like the syllabi I have seen for other first-year writing courses at this level. Given the concerns and needs of the students at the two-year college and the fact that most two-year colleges still require students to take a two-semester sequence to complete the composition requirement, I have envisioned my "Intro to Writing Studies" course as a two-semester sequence. In this course sequence, one semester will focus on student investigation of their literate pasts and writing practices while the second semester will focus on student investigation of rhetoric and the role of writing in communities.

Instead of focusing on students using secondary sources to support their arguments, the writing assignments in this semester engage students in collecting their own data "on issues of interest to both themselves and the field of writing studies" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 562). Though this practice is limited to one assignment in a semester-long course in the proposed course schedule, this is a significant change from how I and many other composition instructors have taught first-year writing. Typically, when I teach the research project, I have students look for secondary sources that they then analyze to support their argument; in *Writing About Writing*, there are a few different suggestions for having students gather their own data based on observations and interviews, which they must then discuss in a report as a writing assignment. This may be overwhelming for students at the two-year college, however, which is why I would make time for the students to analyze their data and draft their assignments in class.

One aspect of this pedagogy that does make it much more appealing to the two-year college instructor is that the "data-driven, research-focused readings" are much "more readable

and more concrete, making them more accessible and relevant to students" ("Intro to Writing Studies" 560). I noticed over the past year that many of my students read significantly below where one would expect at the college level, and therefore, it has been difficult to employ the use of traditional college texts since students have difficulty comprehending the material. Instead, using the engaging and approachable readings in the *Writing about Writing* text will allow students to understand the texts both as readings for discussion and as exemplar texts for their own writing.

Section 4: Conclusion

As explained in the previous three sections, since this approach has been successful at the university level, faculty at two-year colleges need to explore this pedagogy with their own students.

Though this aspect of my research is still in progress, I have envisioned my "Intro to Writing Studies" course for the two-year college as a two-semester sequence. In this course sequence, one semester will focus on Rhetoric and engage students in analyzing various texts while the second semester will focus on Processes and gear students toward conducting research. Though some of the classroom activities and assignments in this proposed sequence are drawn from the suggestions that Downs and Wardle provide in the instructor's manual portion of their textbook, I will adapt the way that these activities and assignments are used so that there is much more scaffolding within the classroom so that students can be guided through the process of learning about writing and investigating their own understanding of the field of composition.

It must be cautioned that the *Writing about Writing* textbook is a means to an end and instructors must focus on the students and how the pedagogy meets their needs. Downs and Wardle envisioned their work as a means for composition instructors to assist students in transferring writing skills beyond first-year writing, and never intended for instructors to treat their textbook as the be-all, end-all guide to teaching for transfer. The textbook was intended to be a pretty "general set of outcomes and practices, not a specific curriculum or a specific subset of knowledge" which Downs and Wardle clarified in their 2013 article. Instead of focusing on their pedagogical suggestions and their textbook as a very specific curriculum around which to base a first-year writing course, composition instructors are free to approach their courses with the very basic outline that Downs and Wardle provide in their research.

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