Writing Across Communities: Deliberation and the Discursive Possibilities of WAC

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This article argues that traditional models of WAC too narrowly privilege academic discourse over other discourses and communities shaping the worlds in which our students live and work. Writing Across Communities represents a shift in paradigm informed by Ecocomposition, New Literacy Studies, and Sociolinguistics. A Writing Across Communities approach to writing program reform foregrounds dimensions of ethnolinguistic diversity and civic engagement in contrast to other models of WAC currently institutionalized across the nation. Writing Across Communities, as a resistance discourse, calls for transdisciplinary dialogue that demystifies the ways we make and use knowledge across communities of practice.

> This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write,
> unless paper were the sacrament of the sky, and ink the broken line of
> wild horses staggering the horizon several miles away. Even then,
> does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind, and sky?
>
> — Joy Harjo

In the ecology of human experience, writing matters. For Composition Studies, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), service learning, and professional and technical communication, writing matters because it authorizes writers and readers to take action.[1] Dynamic, changing, and endlessly creative, language contours our spheres of belonging. As Anis Bawarshi argues in "The Ecology of Genre," writing reflects "the habits and the habitats for acting in language" (71). Moreover, writing connects us to a world of relationships (Cooper; Dobrin and Weisser; Owens; Syverson; Weisser). We write to sustain our connections with the people, living spaces, and work

processes shaping our local and global communities. Literacy educators play critical roles as cultural mediators helping students contend with the imperfect world of human communication, offering them choices about how to use language. In this role, teachers must continually negotiate between two challenges: finding out how writing matters to students and helping students find out how writing matters in the university, in the work place, and in their diverse communities of belonging. Whether our students become professional writers or professionals who write, they will operate in interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international spaces where the resolution of competing goals and interests is situational and often elusive.

College students of the new millennium face a future of increasing regional and global economic disparity, declining natural resources, international political tensions, off shore labor outsourcing, rapidly shifting job markets, and transnational migration patterns. The uneven distribution of wealth, services, and resources across social groups is among the enduring problems our students confront as future leaders. With these changes, the demands for rhetorically efficacious writers will continue to grow. By promoting opportunities for context-based writing, WAC programs can facilitate students' civic, academic, and professional engagement with diverse discourse communities.

Cultural change and the challenges of scarcity are ancient realities in the Southwest United States where I live and teach, and where many students at the University of New Mexico are descendents of indigenous tribes, the earliest inhabitants of the Americas. First peoples have been adapting to climate and socio-political shifts for thousands of years, and lessons from the past are very present here. As University of New Mexico anthropologist David Stuart suggests in *Anasazi America:*

> As America matures it must work at the arts of survival if it is to be the model of prosperity, democracy, and stability a century from now that it is today. The model of prehistoric Pueblo society—efficient, egalitarian, homogenous, and self-sufficient—is not one we can or should mimic in detail. The United States is far too large, heterogeneous, polyglot, and growth-oriented to justify such mimicry. We probably cannot achieve their level of efficiency or egalitarianism....But the means of Pueblo success at survival points the way toward some essential improvements. (199)

The erosion of natural resources and the inequitable distribution of wealth represent the primary factors leading to the decline of the once highly adaptive, culturally

and technologically developed Chacoan prehistoric culture. As Stuart notes, these are the same issues facing the U.S. and our future national leaders—the students we are teaching in our classrooms today. Stuart recommends, "We can start by accepting the lesson left to all of us by the Anasazi of Chaco Canyon and their adaptable descendants—that survival means establishing a durable community. A durable community is one that balances growth with efficiency and refuses to be seduced by greed and power." I argue that literacy education programs that foreground the values of community and sustainability enhance students' initiation into a complex ecology of human relationships.

Writing Across Communities: WAC with a Difference

When I joined the faculty at the University of New Mexico in 2004, the chair of the Department of English asked me to start a conversation about WAC. Over the next two years, we launched the Writing Across Communities initiative based on a series of inter-disciplinary discussions about cultural diversity and academic, professional, and civic literacies. In this article, I examine how the process of seeding a WAC initiative within the social and environmental context of the Southwest extends and enhances current approaches to WAC. I focus on the two-year coalition-building process of the UNM Writing Across Communities initiative that has incorporated as key elements identifying stakeholders, assessing needs, and theorizing WAC for ethnolinguistically diverse student populations. For us at the University of New Mexico, WAC is more than teaching writing across the curriculum; it is an advocacy initiative promoting conditions in our educational system that encourage learning, authorship, and connections to multiple contexts. The distinguishing feature of the Writing Across Communities model is our integrated focus on student diversity and the overall cultural ecology of our regional environment.

We began with the recognition that to be successful, WAC program development would need to be organic (community-based), systemic (institutionally-distributed), and sustainable (flexible and responsive). We understood that the writing lives of ours students will not be limited to academic and workplace environments but will also be exercised in pueblos, villages, and other communities in and beyond the university. In an environmental context ever-concerned about the protection and use of scarce resources (land, water, and energy), we live in a delicate ecology shaped by the political histories of sovereign Indian nations, Spanish land grants, federal appropriations for military and land management projects, and the growing encroachment of outside developers. The legacy of colonization conditions not only the collective memory, but

the material and social realities of our region. In an educational context where nearly half of the high school graduates require remedial education upon entering college and live in communities ranked the poorest in the nation, issues of scarcity and social justice are central. Implementing WAC from a cultural ecology approach can help to frame new conversations about the dimensions of communicative competence or what Bawarshi calls "rhetorical ecosystems." A Writing Across Communities approach to WAC foregrounds the dimensions of cultural and sociolinguistic diversity in university-wide writing instruction.

The exigencies for WAC at the University of New Mexico are many. Reflective of students in other ethnolinguistically-diverse, economically-challenged regions in the country, post-secondary students in New Mexico are not equally and effectively acquiring the literacy practices they need to successfully negotiate the pathways to civic, academic, and professional leadership. The progressive educational legislation of Governor Bill Richardson instituted the Lottery Scholarship in New Mexico, making access to higher education tuition-free for every high school graduate with a GPA 2.5 or higher. However, the absence of support mechanisms across the curriculum for emerging college writers exacerbates students' lack of preparation for the demands of college-level writing. Entry-level college students often struggle to acquire academic discourse conventions in first-year college composition courses and other disciplines. Shifting retention and graduation rates suggest that more than a third of our first-year college students fail to finish their degrees and graduate. UNM also holds the distinction of being the only R1 Hispanic-serving, open-admissions institution that also serves one of the largest Native American student populations in the nation.

Thus, the complex cultural ecology of this institution is shaped not only by the broad ethnolinguistic heterogeneity and economic challenges of the region, but historical class, cultural, political, and environmental divisions. New Mexico remains one of the poorest states in the nation. Seeking ways to connect students' home communities to college literacy education calls for a reconceptualization of WAC through a deliberative process that engages diversity and the discursive possibilities of representation. It is a process that must directly involve students themselves. Moreover, it is a process that should include consideration of the range of rhetorical resources influencing students' lives in and beyond the academy.

Additionally, we realize that conversations about writing instruction and student diversity demand not only sustained consideration of writing practices across

academic, civic, and professional contexts, but require systematic assessment of how we teach writing within the Department of English. As such, establishing the UNM WAC initiative along side the programmatic revision of our first-year composition sequence appears to be a mutually beneficial enterprise. In "Reinventing WAC (Again): The First-Year Seminar and Academic Literacy," Doug Brent's examination of the relationship of WAC to the first-year writing sequence suggests that the strategic alignment of the two "can only be to the advantage of students" (274). We reason that if the first-year composition sequence is a critical point of entry into academic discourse and writing across the disciplines, then a WAC-enhanced first-year sequence should be a central feature of our new WAC initiative.

Determining the shape of such a WAC-enhanced first-year sequence has been an exercise in negotiating dissent. Critical self-reflection about how we teach writing (and how we think we teach writing) has begun in our own backyard in the Department of English and the Rhetoric and Writing Program, where attitudes and assumptions about student literacy are as disparate and sometimes divisive as in any other department. What I have learned as initiator and program chair for the 2005-2006 Writing Across Communities colloquia series at UNM is that WAC is not a single conversation.

WAC is a ganglion of conversations that links to an ever-expanding range of practices and intellectual pursuits: computer-mediated writing instruction, service learning, writing-intensive courses, first-year writing seminar, technical and professional writing, interdisciplinary learning communities, writing centers, ESL and bilingual education, and many more.

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Amidst this complexity, we ask: what is the unifying exigence for WAC? Elaine Maimon muses about the future of WAC and suggests, "As the new century moves along, we might even say that writing across the curriculum occurs at the point where chaos meets common sense" (x). As a newcomer to the WAC conversation, I would argue that the chaos instigated by implementing any WAC program—and a

"Writing Across Communities" model in particular—emerges whenever we transgress the ethnocentric biases that permeate every field and discourse community, including Composition Studies, itself. The greatest resistance I have encountered in conversations about ethnolinguistic and textual (or genre) diversity seems to come from compositionists intent on protecting the primacy of essayist literacies in the academy. Recognizing that students need to write for and to audiences other than insider experts in English Studies not only destabilizes how we teach first-year college students but challenges how we teach graduate teaching assistants charged with introducing novice writers to academic discourse. The prospects of both endeavors are daunting for any WAC program, but are especially problematic for an initiative that seeks to interrogate what Christopher Thaiss identifies as the first principles of WAC.

Thaiss maps the future of WAC by reflectively weaving the threads of the past thirty years of WAC scholarship to define both "a core of consistent WAC principles over the span, and the theoretical influences that have worked changes on the concept" (299). Central to his analysis are the key terms, or first principles of WAC: "writing" "across" and "curriculum." Noting that both "curriculum" and "writing" are ambiguous and highly contested terms, Thaiss observes that "'the curriculum' is subject to the same destabilizing forces that make the definition of 'writing' so volatile" (314). And, the term "disciplines" is no less problematic. Thaiss concludes that we cannot assume "fixity" in the concept of either "writing across the disciplines" or "writing across the curriculum."

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Victor Villanueva further questions traditional WAC models, arguing that "WAC...has tended to be assimilationist, assimilation being a political state of mind more repressive than mere accommodation" (166). For Villanueva, even the concept of "writing to learn" does not "go far enough, doesn't historicize our conceptions of language and knowledge, keeps us tied to a Platonic mind-set" (166). How might we move beyond traditional WAC perspectives toward a "Writing Across Communities" perspective that is first and foremost a context-based WAC initiative serving ethnolinguistically-diverse student populations, a model that is not assimilationist in intent?

Like Villanueva, I contend that traditional models of WAC too narrowly privilege academic discourse over other discourses and communities shaping the worlds in which our students live and work. Although WAC seeks to make visible the codes, genres, media, and purposes of the knowledge-making systems of the university to novice writers, historically WAC has not been called upon to interrogate the additional knowledge-making systems and discourses students seek to acquire. Traditional WAC approaches replicate and reaffirm dominant discourses by socializing new writers into established systems. By contrast, Writing Across Communities as a cultural ecology approach seeks to cultivate critical awareness of the ways that literacy practices are shaped by ever-shifting sets of economic, political, social, cultural, and linguistic factors.

"Attending to the Margins:" Texts and Contexts

In *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines*, Valerie Balester, Victor Villanueva and I argue that "we need to de-marginalize (or re-center) our thinking about educationally underserved students—the social, linguistic, cultural (racialized and genderized)" individuals who fill our classroom (Kells and Balester xix). The "marginal" or non-traditionally prepared (or what Villanueva calls "historically excluded") students are increasingly becoming the "core" of U.S. higher education demographics (Villanueva "Edge City" 1). Assumptions about who our students are and what they need should change with these demographic shifts. We need to be teaching students across contexts how to pay attention to texts—critically, reflectively, and ethically. Equally important, we need to be listening to our students concerning the consequences of texts on their lives and spheres of belonging. For historically underserved student populations such as Latino and Native American groups in the Southwest United States, exercising authorship across genres and contexts is central to representing the interests of their communities. "The discursive practices, spoken and written, of traditionally excluded writers, situated in diverse sites, demand to be heard" (Kells, Balester, and Villanueva 3). A culturally-sensitive approach to writing instruction accepts that genres are more than just forms, but represent social practices that have consequences—social, political, cognitive, moral, and material consequences and effects.

Examining the linkages between WAC, Composition Studies, and service learning, David Jolliffe argues that an understanding of genre "holds great potential for explaining how students learn to 'behave' as functioning, intellectual adults in the discourse communities they encounter in college and beyond" (96). Similarly, Norman Fairclough contends, "It is vital to understand these consequences and effects [of

genre] if we are to raise moral and political questions about contemporary societies" (14). Those of us doing the work of text production and exegesis too often shortchange our students, especially those students who belong to historically disempowered groups, when we fail to call attention to the role text and genre play in growing, sustaining, and dismantling communities as well as the role that texts play in the circulation of such social goods as knowledge, wealth, resources, power, and prestige. As Bawarshi asserts, "Genres do not simply help us define and organize kinds of texts; they also help us define and organize kinds of social actions, social actions that these texts rhetorically make possible" ("Genre Function" 335).

The genres of academic research and discourse tend to mystify social hierarchy and to distance, or even efface, the means by which we produce and reproduce knowledge and power. Writing Across Communities, as a resistance discourse, can function as a mechanism for transdisciplinary dialogue to demystify the ways we make and use knowledge across communities of practice. The act of writing is more than a skill, it is also an occasion for agency, or in some cases, a loss of agency. It is important to recognize the rhetorical resources students bring to the classroom and affirm the tacit knowledge they already have about the way the world works for them. Consistent with the historical aims of WAC, we need to help students bridge the knowledge they have with the knowledge they need for success in college and beyond. But we need to do more, especially when we are mediating academic discourses for historically-excluded students.

Ronald Scollon and Suzanne Scollon's study of Native American students (Athabaskans of Canada and the U.S.) indicates that academic discourse practices, particularly essay writing, can stir considerable conflicts of identity as well as transgress boundaries of belonging for indigenous student writers. The authorial stance and structure of the thesis-driven essay as genre demands a measure of self-display inconsistent with Athabaskan cultural practice. The students in Scollon and Scollon's study describe themselves as stuck in an ethical and social dilemma inside the academic setting. This challenge is very real at the University of New Mexico, where we serve students from Laguna, Acoma, Zuni, Navajo, and fifteen other pueblos from around the region. Students coming to UNM from these pueblos describe memories and cautionary tales that echo Luci Tapahonso's reflections on the legacy of "formal education" in New Mexico boarding schools and the enduring impact on her family and Navajo (Diné) community:

> My childhood is intertwined with memories of various relatives "talking" to
> me and sharing by the implication the value of silence, listening, and ob-
> servation. We spoke Diné from birth, but because of our parents' negative
> experiences in school, they taught us basic English concepts like the alpha-
> bet, our American names (which we didn't use at home), our birth dates,
> and census numbers before we entered public school….My first memory of
> speaking English in school consists of three words—"what," "yes," and "no."
> When a white adult spoke to me, I would say, "What!" not as question but
> as a loud and emphatic answer. Since speaking Diné was forbidden, many
> of us did not talk at school or in the presence of whites….It became clear
> that the two settings, school and home, were distinctly different places
> and incompatible. (343-44)

The consequences of engaging in academic genre practice such as essayist literacy need
to be acknowledged and addressed by university writing programs. To write a suc-
cessful ENGL 101 essay can represent an affront to the tribal authority structures to
which these students belong. And yet, to fail to engage in rhetorical self-promotion in
the classroom represents failure in ENGL 101 essay writing. James Paul Gee points to
this difficulty when he argues that in essayist prose both the audience and the author
are fictionalized and "the text is decontextualized from specific social networks and
relationships" (25). The social artificiality of essayist literacy as a genre practice can
reinforce social distance rather than mitigate alienation for culturally diverse students.
Moreover, the dialogue and deliberation of the academic classroom can pose a real
dilemma to our students whose primary communities of belonging privilege silence
and listening over rhetorical self-display and verbal engagement. For example, in my
upper-division honors course, Rhetorics of Place and Belonging, a young woman from
the Acoma pueblo thoughtfully educated me about this constraint in a recent email:

> My apologies for missing class today. I just received your e-mail class
> agenda, so I decided to write you back to let why I missed class. We
> (Acoma people) have just begun our Indian Lent which is a time when we
> are supposed to put all of our drums and storytelling away for at least a
> month before Easter. For us it is a time of reflection upon our religion. The
> Yellow Woman story that we read in class talks about a pueblo figure which
> right now I am not allowed to hear about or read about. I hope this is no
> problem for you.

There would have been no way for me to know how this student was negotiating the conflicts imposed by my lesson plan unless she took the risk to tell me directly. Scollon and Scollon point out that students from many different groups encounter similar forms of cultural alienation in the academic classroom. If we cannot produce a one-size-fits-all model of teaching writing across the disciplines, what can we realistically and productively do to address the heterogeneity in our classrooms?

WAC and the Possibilities of Ecocomposition: Aligning Advocacy and Engagement

The challenge for the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM is enhancing opportunities to build identification with the cultures of the academy as well as to cultivate appreciation across the university for the cultures and epistemologies our students bring with them. By taking an advocacy role in the university for ethnolinguistically-diverse students, WAC can help to mediate and educate faculty and administrators about the constraints and concerns facing college writers. Communicative competence depends upon complex strategies of shuttling between ideas and audiences, a challenging, culturally-dependent process.

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To date, however, WAC leaders have primarily charted the course and described the shape of WAC in university contexts. For example, in "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities," Susan McLeod and Eileen Maimon articulate the principles and practices of WAC from the points of view of teachers and administrators in established curriculum-centered WAC programs. Absent from their discussions, however, are the perspectives of undergraduate students themselves, the beneficiaries of WAC programs. Similarly, David Russell's *Writing in Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History* attends to trends and developments in the practices of disciplinary writing through the evolutionary history of university education between 1870 and 1980, focusing inquiry primarily on institutional sites of power and prestige. In *WAC for the New Millennium: Strategies for Continuing Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs,* the editors celebrate the staying-power of WAC and, at the same time, acknowledge the gap in WAC literature focusing on the issues and needs of historically-excluded student populations. We know very little about how WAC shapes and responds to local conditions in institutions serving historically-excluded student populations.

What might WAC look like if we concerned ourselves with not only the discourses our students acquire in the classroom, but the rhetorical resources they bring to the university? What might WAC look like if we open the conceptual umbrella to include engagement with a broad range of cultural, civic, and professional discourses? How can we map the challenges students confront in the university? Even more importantly, how do we include students in the meta-discursive process of inventing WAC?

In their article "Writing beyond the Curriculum: Fostering New Collaborations in Literacy," Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt call for an expanded conception of WAC that includes more than disciplinary and academic literacy practices. They propose a model of WAC that is capacious enough to include not only writing in the disciplines but service and experiential learning, community literacy projects, business and professional writing, as well as public school outreach. Parks and Goldblatt prefigure a "Writing Across Communities" model by challenging WAC theorists and administrators to look beyond academic discourse communities as generative sites for student engagement. What is still missing even from this model is a vision of WAC from the point of view of students as citizens of multiple spheres. Models that fail to connect the dimensions of human interaction with local and global environments obscure the interdependence and interrelationships integral to community development and survival. In our twenty-first century globalized, hyper-cyber-mediated communicative context, rhetoric is more than the art of persuasion; it is an art of survival.

If community and sustainability are the central values for literacy education, ecocomposition offers a productive framework from which to reconsider and situate WAC within a broader cultural ecology of human communication. In a conference paper connecting WAC to ecocomposition theory and practice, graduate student and charter member of the University of New Mexico WAC project Carson Bennett asserts, "Indeed ecocomposition is designed to enable students to use critical thinking and writing to breach boundaries of place, community, politics, and academic subjects." Putting ecocomposition ideas into practice through the Writing Across Communities initiative, Bennett describes the range of communities, issues and discourses his first-year composition students have engaged. Bennett describes how one Native American student in his course wrote a letter, published in the local newspaper, opposing a proposed road extension through the Petroglyph National Monument, sacred lands to his pueblo. Bennett concludes, "The project I have described was a success, not because a few letters were published and few heads were turned, but because students learned that writing matters. Through writing,

they can breach the boundaries between discourse communities, and they can make a difference."

Ecocomposition anticipated nearly two decades ago the need for culturally-sensitive approaches to engaging students in the recursive process of inquiry and document production (Cooper; Dobrin and Weisser; Owens; Syverson; Weisser and Dobrin). Marylin Cooper's early proposal suggests that an ecological model of writing offers a way to conceptualize composition as a social practice of "dynamic interlocking systems that structure the social activity of writing" ("The Ecology of Writing" 7). Similarly, Syverson suggests that writers, readers, and texts operate as a kind of ecological system capable of becoming self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic (4). Rassool defines literacy practice as an organic "cultural activity that involves people in conscious and reflective action within a variety of situations and everyday life" (25). Owens expands on this notion of cultural interdependence and calls attention to students as a "threatened generation," arguing for a pedagogy of sustainability that foregrounds the relationship between culture, survival, body, and place in the teaching of writing (23). Elaborating further on the ecology metaphor of writing, Cooper observes that "it is through an ecological understanding of writing that the field aligns itself with the dominant paradigm of the last century" ("Forward" xi). Extending this claim, I argue that it is through an ecological understanding of culture and communication that WAC specifically, and English Studies generally, can help to realign communicative dynamics in the twenty-first century university. Ecocomposition can inform WAC and service learning programs, moving us toward an interdisciplinary vision of sustainability.

In "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition," Dobrin and Weisser articulate two models gaining attention in Composition Studies. The first model, "an ecological literacy approach," stresses the natural world and role of human beings in the environment. The second model, a "discursive ecology approach," recognizes that words and writing are integral to sustaining human systems. Synthesizing these two approaches, I propose that a cultural ecology approach to WAC can help to foreground context as a way to understand and use the genres of academic, professional, and civic/community literacies. Cultural ecology resists a culture-blind mode of document production and seeks to guide students to critically respond to the cultural and symbolic systems within diverse contexts. Practicing cultural ecology in the classroom challenges writers to recognize that every rhetorical situation represents complex social configurations and interdependent relationships.

The circulation of discourse is to a cultural ecology what energy flow is to environmental ecology. The communication life cycle sustains community, initiating, maintaining, and regulating relationships. Cultural health, like environmental conservation, emerges from a "capacity for self-renewal" (Leopold 221). An ethic of sustainability, therefore, evolves out of an ecological conscience of human interaction, or as Aldo Leopold charges, an "effort to understand and preserve that capacity" for renewal (221). The metaphor of a cultural ecology of communicative action offers us and our students a productive way to conceptualize the contexts in which we work and live. Citizenship (belonging and allegiance), environment (the physical and social biota), ethics (values and behavior), and communicative action (rhetoric and symbol-making) become intricately linked in the practice of writing. To teach writing removed from this complex web of relationship is to risk replicating exploitation and misinformation. As Denise Tillery argues, "We need to teach our students that ethical writing entails a delicate negotiation between the demands of the workplace and the demands of the greater society, and no writing task, no matter how seemingly trivial, is immune from the pressures of the power structure" (113).

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Under the rubric of Writing Across Communities, the scope of WAC enlarges to engage not only ideas across the disciplines, but the dissonance and dissent concomitant to the democratization of academic discourse. Engaging dissonance is precisely the work of civic and academic discourse, of taking on the role of citizen and scholar, of belonging to a human community. Writing is the act of negotiating difference through language.

Making a Paradigm Shift

Building upon the theoretical foundations of ecocomposition, Writing Across Communities represents a shift in paradigm. Informed not only by WAC and Composition Studies, but by the critical perspectives of New Literacy studies and Sociolinguistics articulated by such scholars as Barton, Gee, Fairclough, and Johnstone, a Writing Across Communities approach to literacy education foregrounds dimensions of ethnolinguistic diversity and civic engagement. Coalescing conversations among faculty, administrators, graduate students, and undergraduate students in and beyond the Department of English, we began by hosting a colloquia series over three semesters beginning in spring 2005 and culminating in the fall 2006. The organizing themes

of the colloquia series included: "Knowing Our Students," "Inviting Our Students to Academic Literacies," and "Preparing Pathways to Professional Literacies." Keynote panelists have included Juan Guerra (University of Washington), Susan McLeod (University of California, Santa Barbara), and Barbara Johnstone (Carnegie Mellon) along side local faculty, administrators, and students. We have involved stakeholders at multiple levels of the institution, including the UNM provost, the tutoring center director, the vice president of student affairs, as well as faculty from Spanish, Native American Studies, Linguistics, Earth and Planetary Sciences, Communication, Education, English, Architecture, and Library Sciences. The WAC dialogue has also involved representatives of programs such as Freshman Learning Communities, Service Learning, College Enrichment, and the newly established New Mexico Teacher Exchange initiative.

Shifting from a historically prescriptive stance to a descriptive perspective, we began by asking questions in a series of interdepartmental conversation-builders. We shifted perspectives by asking teachers both inside and beyond the Department of English to describe their students. We posed questions such as: What are the characteristics of the discourse communities (personal, civic, and academic) that our students bring to the university? How diverse are these practices and how does that diversity affect curriculum? Rather than perpetuating a discourse of deficiency, we invited the university into dialogue about the wealth of cultural resources our students possess and the challenges they face in their academic journey. We asked graduate students and first-year writing teachers to engage in the same exercises with their students. We provided focused writing exercises and group process protocols. Finally, we asked undergraduate students themselves to participate in a series of focus group and roundtable discussions about their writing experiences both before and after coming to UNM. We encouraged teachers to write along with their students and to share their own responses to such questions as, Why are you here at UNM? Where are you going? How can writing help you be what you want to be and get you where you want to go? Findings from these classroom-based discussions are available online at the UNM WAC archive (Writing Across Communities).

In April 2005, we hosted the first Writing Across Communities Colloquium, "Knowing Our Students," featuring as keynote speaker Professor Juan Guerra. His address, "Creating Pathways to Academic Literacy and Beyond: Situating the Personal, Professional, and Political," asserts that we must work to dismantle the barriers dividing

the university from local communities. Guerra reinforces the role of the university as an agent of service to the larger community in forms of research, education, and distribution of informational resources. He challenges WAC advocates to engage in a shared and mutually productive critique of public education kindergarten through college. Finally, Guerra offers the concept of "transcultural repositioning" as a way to conceptualize the act of moving across discourse communities with authority and integrity ("Putting Literacy"). He argues that in order to move across cultural boundaries, rhetorically efficacious individuals, especially individuals from histori-cally-excluded groups, cultivate adaptive strategies that help them to negotiate new and different contexts and communicative conventions.

In October 2005, we extended the discussion by launching WAC Week and hosting symposia featuring WAC scholar Susan McLeod and sociolinguist Barbara Johnstone. In the deliberative process of WAC Week, we asked students to name their experiences at UNM. The centerpiece of WAC Week was a serendipitous and celebrative event we called the Write On! Workshop (WOW!), a gathering of over 200 undergradu-ates from across the disciplines who came to workshop papers, dialogue about their writing practices, critique the first-year writing sequence, respond to a student questionnaire, and listen to local spoken word poets. The enthusiastic response from undergraduate students is best summed up in the comments from anonymous participants who wrote the following responses on student questionnaires. One student commented:

> It was an extremely pleasant surprise to realize just how much all of the people from the English Department cared about what students thought. It was nice to feel like I was involved, and I could voice my opinion. I liked the atmosphere of the small table discussions and the opportunity to hear what other students were doing and thinking when it came to their English classes. The experience was a real eye opener.

Another undergraduate reflected on the daily literacy practices affecting students' writing experiences:

> I attended a roundtable discussion where thoughts, ideas, and experiences on English were discussed. I was impressed to see such a great turnout in the number of attendees, so many that people were just sitting there wait-ing for a spot to open up. The discussion gave me ideas of what students in

other English classes were going through. One subject that stayed caught in my mind after leaving the roundtable was our discussion about our communication to one another like email and text messaging. Never did I ever think that these two subjects would be a topic of our discussion. Our communication to one another has a great deal to do with English and I never viewed it that way. The English department did a great job on providing help to all students with English classes. I am glad that I was able to be apart of the writing across communities week.

We have gathered the findings from WAC Week events to inform the current revision of the first-year writing sequence which we will pilot in the fall 2007.

At the close of the 2005-2006 Writing Across Communities Colloquia series, organizers extended the conversation by forming the WAC Alliance as a way to formalize dialogue about writing at UNM. Members drafted a constitution and by-laws. In the spring of 2006, the WAC Alliance grew into a chartered, student-directed organization inviting students and faculty to talk together about what they know, what they need to know, and how we as their teachers can help them. The WAC Alliance is currently governed by a head council of eight elected members representing graduate students, undergraduate students, lecturers, part-time instructors, representatives of other community entities and a non-voting faculty advisor. The mission and purpose of the WAC Alliance is as follows:

> The WAC Alliance is a forum for the conversation regarding writing, a think tank of and for the UNM learning community. We advocate active, engaged writing-to-learn processes across disciplines through innovative teaching in order to cultivate a culture of writing and inquiry. Our goal is to engage the campus in dialogue regarding writing-to- learn and writing-to-communicate while addressing the changing needs of the student body to ensure academic as well as professional success at all levels.

> The three main components of Writing Across Communities include civic, academic, and professional communities. The WAC Alliance seeks to bridge these communities and maintain communication between the various entities on and off campus while cultivating discussion and pedagogical support for diverse literacy practices across UNM discourse communities. (Writing Across Communities)

This student-centered Writing Across Communities infrastructure has branched into various sub-sets or interest groups such as the WAC Peer Tutoring team that is drafting a proposal for a "Writing Center Without Walls." Other WAC interests extend into First-Year Learning Communities, the Undergraduate Creativity and Research Colloquium, and Service Learning. Alliances between WAC, the first year writing sequence, and a new Service Learning program are currently being established. We are also growing alliances with the Spanish Heritage Language program and the Peer Mentoring for Graduates of Color (PMGC) Special Initiatives under the Office of Graduate Studies. For the UNM WAC initiative, the challenges of economic scarcity and the possibilities of democratic leadership have translated into a growing creative and collaborative movement.

Revisioning "First Principles" of WAC

A Writing Across Communities approach to college writing instruction invites students to consider how an understanding of the dimensions of cultural diversity enhances their ability to write and communicate: *Appropriately* (with an awareness of different conventions); Productively (to achieve their desired aims); *Ethically* (to remain attuned to the communities they serve); *Critically* (to learn to engage in inquiry and discovery), and *Responsively* (to negotiate the tensions caused by the exercise of authority in their spheres of belonging). This reconceptualization of WAC from a cultural ecology model helps to frame new conversations about WAC and the dimensions of intercultural communication shaping the writing contexts in which students exercise authority. The underlying assumptions of Writing Across Communities assert that:

- Students arrive already embedded in complex discourse communities;
- Membership in different discourse communities is a dynamic (ever expanding and receding) process, as students shift among the communities to which they already belong and those to which they seek to belong;
- Students bring discursive resources and literacy practices that are variably conditioned by the cultural and intellectual communities of the academy;
- Agency in language does not begin and should not end in the college classroom;
- WAC, writing programs, and writing centers should serve as

advocates of literacy and language awareness for speakers of English as well as members of other ethnolinguistic communities present on and around campus;

- Teachers in WAC programs, writing classrooms, and writing centers serve an important role as cultural mediators between the academy, students, students' homes, and their target academic and professional discourse communities.

The Writing Across Communities project at UNM is first and foremost an advocacy initiative. We are deeply and unabashedly invested in the mythos of education and the belief that greater access to a range of knowledge systems enhances the agency of individual students as well as their communities. Higher education represents more than a personal asset, emblem of entitlement, or marker of prestige. The work of teaching civic and academic literacy across communities represents the democratization of knowing.

Only by knowing the local condition can we and our students contemplate the implications and challenges of global intercultural communication we face. Every human interaction—whether in person, print text, cyberspace, or visual media—is a form of intercultural communication. Region of origin, family position, gender, ethnolinguistic identity, nationality, age, and religion are only a few of the variables that constitute one's culture or systems of belonging. Students cannot begin to reconcile differences in cultural systems beyond their own circles of affiliation if they have not critically reflected on their own. In order to cultivate cross-cultural competence, WAC needs new ways to think about the heterogeneity of the rhetorical situation.

Writing Across Communities as cultural ecology integrates the dynamics of community culture knowledge-making systems, and the environments in which students and teachers together participate in the intellectual life cycle. Writing Across Communities as a cultural ecology of intercultural communication invites writers into a new system of metaphorical thinking that involves the interpretation and negotiation of different sets of expectations. As such, WAC as an approach to intercultural communication and text production involves learning new strategies in conflict resolution and meta-discourses to help communicators mediate and negotiate

inevitable conflict. Students across the disciplines need to cultivate the kind of rhetorical alacrity that emerges from principled participation in deliberative action within and across diverse discourse communities.

"Perhaps the most radical decision that educators can make," argues Owens, "is to remain convinced that they and their students can literally reconstruct their worlds for the better" (19). I would like to expand on Owens' assertion by arguing for the adoption of a cultural ecology model of WAC to help students recognize that culture is not something "out there" that belongs to the "other," but something around and inside of them. A cultural ecology approach invites writers into new systems of metaphorical thinking that make empathy possible.

Finally, writers need "boundary-spanning ability" (Coppola and Karis xiii). Only by knowing the local condition can students contemplate the global nature of intercultural communication. Recognizing, responding to, and accommodating resistance are pivotal concerns if we are to play a role in facilitating an ecology of intercultural communication across communities. Future WAC scholarship needs to address the interests and challenges of historically-excluded student populations where varied literacy practices demand the accommodation of difference. As their teachers and university program directors, we will need to learn the rhetorical arts of community praxis and intercultural communication along side of our students.

Note
1. A version of this article was presented in the panel, "Writing Across Communities: A Cultural Ecology of Language, Learning, and Literacy," featuring Michelle Hall Kells, Juan Guerra, Carson Bennett, Scott Rogers, Beverly Army Gillen, Dana Salvador, and John Bess for the 2006 Conference of College Composition and Communication in Chicago. A special thank you to Carson Bennett for his thoughtful suggestions to earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to extend my appreciation to my colleagues at the University of New Mexico, especially Scott Sanders, Chuck Paine, David Jones and to our graduate student, Leah Sneider, who has faithfully served as our WAC events coordinator for the past two years. Their enthusiastic support and leadership is making the vision possible.

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