

Chapter 2

A Review of Wac

Writing Across the Curriculum is alive and well in the US, as Thaiss and Porter (2010) report in their 2005–2008 survey of WAC programs. This fact is not only reflected by the longevity of these programs but also by the growing and varied research in this area (Thaiss and Porter 2010). This survey, coupled with an earlier one conducted by McLeod and Shirley in 1987, once again shows that WAC is one of the most successful educational movements in the US (Russell 2002).

This chapter reviews the evolution of WAC practice and research, including its integration with other communication modalities and digital technologies, leading to programs and research in CAC (Communication Across the Curriculum) and ECAC (Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum). The four premises of WAC, (a) writing to learn, (b) writing to communicate, (c) writing as social process, and (d) writing as social action, are introduced as interrelated components of WAC. Activity theory, a major theoretical foundation in WAC research, is also reviewed to provide a theoretical foundation for this study's analysis of the subjects, tools, objects, division of labor, community and rules/norms in the activity systems of Chinese university courses and university administration, and of workplaces as reflected by the interviews with professors, administrators, and employers. The introduction and adaptation of WAC outside of North America is also included to show the process of the international dissemination of WAC and to clarify its relationship with the enrollment expansion in higher education that has affected China since the end of the 1990s, a topic more specifically discussed in [Chap. 3](#).

WAC Evolution

WAC, initiated in the US in the 1970s by English faculty in higher education institutions to address the literacy crisis (Russell 1990), is defined by its “intended outcomes—helping students become critical thinkers and problem solvers, as well

as developing their communication skills” (McLeod and Miraglia 2001, p. 5). The emphasis on WAC, which is what makes it unique from general education or other educational reform movements, is on transforming pedagogy from the lecture mode to “a model of active student engagement with the material and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes across the university” (McLeod and Miraglia, p. 5).

This educational movement has evolved to incorporate other modalities of communication such as speaking, listening, and educational technologies, resulting in a series of acronyms coined and used for different formats or different stages of the programs: SAC (Speaking Across the Curriculum), CAC (Communication Across the Curriculum) or CXC, WID (Writing in the Disciplines), and ECAC (Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum) (Reiss et al. 1998). This evolution of WAC pedagogies not only provides various modalities for students to learn to write and to write to learn but also has blurred the lines “between writing and other forms of communication and between classrooms and other spaces” (Walvoord 1996); more importantly, this growth reemphasize the possibilities that WAC has brought and continues to bring into classrooms, curriculum, and institutions at all levels of education in different parts of the world.

WAC was initiated as a grassroots movement (Walvoord 1996) in the mid-1970s when U.S. higher education experienced a significant increase in the number of institutions and in college enrollment. By the end of the 1960s, the number of US higher education institutions had increased by more than one-fourth, and the number of students doubled from 3.6 million in 1960 to 8 million during that decade (Bureau of the Census 1975). Although this increase improved the access to higher education among groups of Americans previously excluded, its impact was broader than that. This expansion made selective institutions even more selective and research-oriented while forcing others to address the needs of those students who had previously been excluded (Smith 1974). This increase of students required reliance on graduate students and adjunct teachers for composition classes and other general education courses (Jenks and Riesman 1968). Faculty began to believe that the enrollment standards had dropped and the students were not prepared for college-level writing, while the students felt intimidated by the specialized discourses introduced by the college training required for new jobs or those that traditionally had not required post-secondary training (Russell 1994).

Writing instruction in this period was primarily focused on elementary and mechanical skills, such as grammar, usage, and spelling. Therefore, writing instruction appeared to be transient remediation (Russell 2002), teaching skills that could be learned once and for all. However, as the professionalization of academic study evolved, literacy was no longer conceived of as a singular form but rather one that should be developed within the different disciplines. Writing professionals such as Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow, influenced by the child-centered progressive tradition, worked to reconfigure the skills model of composition by shifting the focus from the text or the readers to the writer. Although they did not develop a systematic reform for writing pedagogy and discipline-specific discourse communities (Russell 1994), this focus eventually contributed to the process

theory. At the same time, federal funds began to be appropriated for curricular reform, encouraging disciplines including English to focus on pedagogy. However, as Russell chronicles, the traditional pedagogy and disciplinary focus were not changed until 1966 when American English professors met with their British colleagues for the month-long Dartmouth Seminars. This exchange introduced the American English profession to the move in British pedagogy from basic skills and grammar to experience-centered awareness, a change encouraging the personal development of students. This paradigm shift from writing products to writing processes, initially described by Young (1978) and later articulated more fully by Hairston (1982), was realized through the efforts of process theorists such as Emig (1968), Macrorie (1970), Murray (1972) and Elbow (1973).

Changes in higher education and in US society set up the social and institutional foundation for WAC: racial integration, together with the growth in higher education matriculated previously excluded students who were not necessarily as well-prepared for college, meaning that higher education now faced teaching academic discourse to these students. In addition, academic administrators became business-like, adopting industrial management styles to focus on accountability in higher education institutions; they saw WAC as a tool for reforming the curriculum and for faculty development (Russell 2002). Theoretical development in writing and composition studies also contributed to the birth and growth of WAC (Russell 1994). As these changes, referred to as the “fundamental institutional, social, and theoretical shifts” (Russell 1994), began to take effect, WAC made its appearance in different institutions under different formats and emphases but with the same fundamental belief that writing can help students engage in learning in ways that will also improve their writing ability. The first programs appeared at Beaver College under the direction of Elaine Maimon and at Michigan Technological University led by Toby Fulwiler and Art Young. According to a survey conducted by the Modern Language Association in 1985, 46 % of all Ph.D.—granting institutions, 48 % of all B.A./M.A.—granting institutions, and 28 % of all two-year colleges had a WAC program of some sort at this time (Kinneavy 1987). Essentially, WAC had moved from a grassroots movement (Walvoord 1996) to a combination of bottom-up and top-down programs (Holdstein 2001).

This movement, initiated as a response within higher education institutions to the tension between the increased enrollment and the decrease in student preparedness, especially as reflected in reading and writing (Russell 1994), was as also a response to the complaints about the lack of writing skills of students from other stakeholders such as industry and government (Kinneavy 1987). Its far-reaching influences in both secondary and higher education, its contribution to the development of theories in composition studies, and its longevity compared to other reforms or movements have made WAC one of the most successful education movements in the US (Russell 2002).

WAC-related research also developed and diversified due to the growth of the movement (Thaiss and Porter 2010). According to Farrell-Childers et al. (1994), the four premises in WAC development in both theory and practice are (a) writing to learn, (b) writing to communicate, (c) writing as social process, and (d) writing

as social action. The first two emphasize cognitive development, while the last two indicate the movement from cognitive to social development, which later led to Writing In the Disciplines (WID), a very important component of WAC research and of the adoption of socially-oriented activity theory as a tool for rhetorical and empirical analysis. However, these premises are not as separate as they appear; rather they interrelated, informing and responding to one another.

Writing to learn focuses on helping students to use writing to explore and discover new knowledge, usually by using low stakes writing assignments or exercises (Elbow 1997). It is categorized by Britton (1975) as informal/expressive writing in contrast to formal/transactional writing, which is associated with writing to communicate.

The research studies conducted by Britton (1975) and his colleague Martin (1976) on the writing of British secondary school students found a connection between language and thinking, one that suggested the dominant writing assignments in transactional/formal writing limited the chances for children to develop their writing abilities in moving from expressive writing, the personal writing that the writer does for him/herself in the form of a written-down inner speech, to transactional writing, the public writing that the writer does for others.

Their research was in conjunction with that conducted by Emig (1977) initiated the cognitive studies in composition, and Emig's research provided composition researchers a new methodology and a new research agenda that allowed them to enter the mainstream of education research in the 1980s. A similar marginalization in Chinese writing instruction and research has been suggested in recent research by Chinese composition researchers (Lin et al. 2008), although there has been no noticeable trend to introduce new research methods or set up a research agenda to address this issue. The study of writing and composition appears to be in a very early stage, showing possible directions of research (Chen 2010) but no development of a systematic approach.

This cognitive approach is one of the three views found in process theories, with the other two being the expressive and the social (Faigley 1986). The expressive view focuses on personal experience in education and in writing, emphasizing freewriting, originality, and spontaneity (Macrorie 1970; Elbow 1973), while the social nature of language, de-emphasized by the expressive view, was subsequently integrated into the social view of process theory. According to Faigley (1986), it includes four lines of research. The first line, represented by David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell, developed from the poststructuralist theories of language. The second line studies the social processes of writing in academic discourses, with the major researchers being Charles Bazerman from the US and Greg Myers from Britain, both of whom focus on the sociology of science. This second line has produced a significant body of scholarship that has made a substantial contribution to WID research. Based on their research, Bazerman and Myers assert that texts are not reflections of facts but rather "active social tools in the complex interactions of a research community" (Bazerman 1985, p. 3); this line of research, therefore, has found a heuristic in activity theory that provides a way to understand communication by the tools of language in different modalities

in and among activity systems. The other two lines of research originated from ethnography as exemplified by Shirley Brice Heath and the Marxist studies of literacy of Henry Giroux.

Writing to communicate focuses on student use of writing to demonstrate what and how much they have learned, an approach best summarized by Bruffee (1984) in his article “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” The distinction between writing to learn and writing to communication was well-articulated in 1995 in Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae’s public debate in *College Composition and Communication*. Elbow believes that writers have authorship at the beginning of writing and that they should explore different ways of writing without teachers and outside of the classroom. Bartholomae disagrees with Elbow, arguing that students need to prove themselves first to gain authorship and that academic writing can be achieved only through formal, academic training. Their discussion made composition teachers rethink authorship, audience, and power in writing and writing instruction. Even though some researchers such as Knoblauch and Brannon (1983) and Mahala (1991) emphasize the differences between writing to learn and writing to communicate, for most WAC practitioners these two have always been indispensable components and are complementary (McLeod and Maimon 2000).

First-generation WAC programs based their practice on the research in these two premises of writing to learn and writing to communicate, focusing on the “lack of value our society and our educational system seemed to place on written communication” (Farrell-Childers et al. 1994, p. 2). However, by the 1980s and early 1990s, WAC programs became institutionalized (McLeod 1989), its research shifting to focus on program descriptions and developments (Maimon et al. 1981; Fulwiler and Young, 1982, 1986, 1990; McLeod and Soven 1992). This top-down approach to WAC was seen as a potential threat to the grassroots efforts of faculty, one that could intensify resistance among them if “administrators try to decree it by decreeing WAC programs, rather than by assisting the growth of grassroots efforts” (Thaiss 1988, p. 94).

At about this same time, WAC research expanded to explore the social dimensions of writing and the social construction of knowledge (Myers 1985; Herrington 1985; McCarthy 1987) reflected in the third and fourth premises of WAC, writing as social process and writing as social action (Farrell-Childers et al. 1994), both influenced by the social view of process theory that writing takes place in a social context and has an impact on the society. Writing as social process, which refers to the social context in which writing takes place, emphasizes collaboration, audience, and communities of learners. As Maimon (2006) points out, the concept of a learning community originated in WAC practice.

Writing as social action means that writers try to “change their perceptions of the world and to change others’ perceptions of the world” (Farrell-Childers et al. p. 3). Students are, thus, encouraged to write to their professors, classmates, peers, family, friends, people they know, or people they do not know using different means such as essays, emails, reports, letters, Facebook posts, cyber poems, and digital videos to demonstrate what they understand and how they want to be

understood. Michael Wesch, a professor of anthropology at Kansas State University, for example, guided his students in their study of the effects of social media and digital technology on global literacy, creating digital videos such as *A Vision of Students Today* (2007) and *An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube* (2009). These videos are good examples of the integration of the social dimensions of writing and technology into course content.

Writing to communicate later evolved into WID (Writing-in-the-Disciplines) research (Bazerman 1988; Herrington 1985; McCarthy 1987; Myers 1990), a development in WAC that provides discipline-specific writing instructions influenced by Bazerman's study of the sociology of science that investigated the writing of scientists and social scientists. With this new direction in WAC research, researchers began to look at writing not just as a single process but rather as several processes that mediate professional and disciplinary activities. They turned to activity theory (Engeström 1987; Russell 1997a; Russell and Yañez 2003), primarily developed in psychology by Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), and appropriated it as a theoretical tool for writing research (Russell 1997a). (Activity theory will be discussed in the third part of this section.)

Although some researchers tend to make the distinctions between WAC and WID clear and obvious so that these different approaches can be understood better (Bazerman et al. 2005), others do not think there is such a dichotomy between the WAC/WID split that has been discussed by researchers since the 1990s, which is a reflection of the conflict between professional and general education in the study and teaching of writing (Russell 2002). The institutional split between the two suggests writing is a set of skills acquired in composition courses. However, students need to engage in both expressive/personal and transactional/public writing as they advance in writing and learning (Russell 2002), and the classroom should not be considered a place for only either expressive or transactional writing but as a "middle ground" (Reiss and Young 2001), with possible space for poetic writing. This middle ground allows students to practice both expressive and transactional writing with a real audience and prompt feedback so that a dialectic relationship with self, as represented in inner speech, and society, as represented in public speech, can be established to transform both self and society. As this middle ground approach suggests, WAC and WID should not be seen as in conflict with each other but rather as two components that promote student learning and writing (McLeod and Miraglia 2001).

WAC pedagogy has been centered on writing to learn and writing to communicate by incorporating suitable writing practices and activities to engage student in learning. Program models vary in their emphases on workshops (Young and Fulwiler 1986; McLeod 1989), linked courses (Mullin 2001), freshman seminars (Monroe 2003), and writing fellows or peer tutors (Soven 2001). However, the primary pedagogy in WAC programs has been the Writing-Intensive (WI) courses centered on regular and intensive writing practice of both "low-stakes" and "high-stakes" assignments (Elbow 1997, p. 5).

WI courses usually are small (capped at 15–25 students) and incorporate frequent informal (low-stakes) writing-to-learn activities. A significant percentage

of the final grade in these courses is based on the writing components. In some WAC programs, WI courses are required to be taught by faculty rather than teaching assistants. However, the most important characteristic is that WI courses, like WAC programs themselves, are highly local, focusing on and addressing the specific needs of the institution. The page or word count, while important, serves more as basic common sense guidelines for students and faculty than as a requirement. The important and meaningful attributes of writing assignments in a WI course are (a) the emphasis on revisions, usefulness, and efficiency of faculty feedback, (b) the frequency of the writing, and (c) the design of the writing activities that can contribute to the learning outcomes for specific courses (Townsend 2001).

WI courses are different from courses with traditional pedagogies in that the importance of writing in learning is recognized by the instructors. WI course instructors use writing to engage students in the learning process to understand, express, reflect, synthesize, and make contributions to the knowledge system they are entering (Farris and Smith 1992). WI courses incorporate various writing activities that better assist students as learners than traditional pedagogies. While WI courses cannot solve all the problems in teaching and learning, they contribute to curricular reform and improvement in student learning. Although WI courses are often classified as writing to communicate in disciplinary discourse communities, writing to learn assignments and activities are not excluded from these courses (McLeod 2000).

CAC Evolution

At approximately the same time as WAC was being introduced, a similar educational movement in American higher education was begun in communication studies. Speaking-Across-the-Curriculum (SAC, later renamed CAC or CXC) programs with an emphasis on oral communication appeared in the US in the 1970s (Russell 2002). Although CAC is the acronym that often appears in the literature as the “umbrella term” (Dannels and Gaffney 2009) for activities that incorporate speaking and other communication skills into courses, communication researchers tend to use the acronym CXC to refer to this movement. Although connections between CAC and WAC were seen in the 1990s, full collaboration did not begin until the 21st century (Dannels and Gaffney 2009).

WAC and CAC developed in parallel, but WAC initiatives, unlike CAC, were soon institutionalized as they were based on the extensive research in English composition and pedagogy; as CAC researchers such as Steinfatt (1986) have long pointed out, “unless we begin to work in ways parallel to our colleagues in writing across the curriculum programs, we may soon find our mission in academia relegated to others, or simply dismissed as redundant or irrelevant” (p. 469). While a survey conducted by Deanna Dannels in 2001 supported the health of CAC programs at different universities in the US, it also indicated some resistance to

them and problems with program sustainability. Based on the results, she argued that CAC programs needed discipline-specific research, something desired by the faculty in those fields. In a second article in the same year, she called for a CID (Communication-In-the-Disciplines) framework to enhance the future of CAC programs and for research in this area, paralleling WAC research in WID. This CAC research, according to Dannels and Gaffney (2009), began in 1983 and has experienced three distinct eras marked by major publications: cross-curricular proactiveness (1983–1995), cross-curricular skepticism (1996–2000), and cross-curricular curiosity (2001–2008).

Although the first SAC program was initiated in 1974 in the US (Tomlinson 1999), the beginning of the first era was marked by the publication of two frequently cited pieces, “A Report of the Task Force on Career Competencies in Oral Communication Skills for Community College Students Seeking Immediate Entry into the Work Force” by Muchmore and Galvin (1983) and “Speaking and Listening Education Across the Curriculum” by Roberts (1983). This era, 1972–83, is characterized as a period of “establishment and justification” (Dannels and Gaffney, p. 133), in which publications centered on the importance of CAC programs, program descriptions, and instructional guides for CAC pedagogies.

The first era formed a foundation for CAC research, leading the movement into the next, cross-curricular skepticism, which focused on the “expansion and critical reflection” (Dannels and Gaffney, p. 135) of CAC programs. This skepticism, at first, was not as explicitly and openly discussed in research publications as it was in the *NCA* (National Communication Association) *Platform Statement on CAC* (Morreale 1997). This statement clearly emphasized that CAC programs should consult closely with communication faculty and should be a useful supplement to existing communication courses. This emphasis on the role of the communication discipline reflected its potential, foreshadowing the 1999 *NCA* Annual Convention town hall debate on “Communication Across the Curriculum: Friend or Foe?” This debate was later moved to an online forum and was subsequently published as scholarship questioning and arguing for the mission, value, and the role of communication departments in the movement (Morreale 1997, 1999; Olsen 1996; Sheckels et al. 1997). During this time, CAC and WAC researchers saw for the first time the possibility for collaboration between these two movements (George and Trimbur 1999; Reiss 1996). And it was this interdisciplinary realization that moved CAC research enter the third era of “reinvention and empiricism” (Dannels and Gaffney, p. 137).

This third era, cross-curricular curiosity, led to a discipline-specific communication theoretical framework, coined CID (Communication in the Disciplines) by Dannels (2001b), a name reflecting the influence of WID. Empirical studies on communication in the disciplines increased rapidly, including those in collaboration with disciplines such as engineering (Dannels 2002; Darling 2005), design (Morton 2006; Morton and O’Brien 2005; Dannels et al. 2008), and the teaching of communication within professional settings (Dannels et al. 2001; Smith 2005). In addition, an increase in the research in theory was also seen at this time, exploring CAC’s role in developing theory and calling for a discipline-specific (CID)

direction (Dannels 2001b; Garside 2002). CAC researchers also began to explore rhetorical theory, feminist theory, and genre theory (Fleury 2005; Garside 2002; Palmerton 2005).

Many WAC programs today have incorporated both WAC and CAC, responding to changes in technology by moving in the direction of ECAC (Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum) supported by scholars and practitioners interested in computer-supported communication (Reiss et al. 1998). The acronyms reflecting this development such as WAC, WID, CAC/CXC, CID, and ECAC are not about distinctions, boundaries, or limits, but rather about evolution, collaboration, site-specific culture, and progress. A review of the history shows that educational initiatives, such as CAC and WAC, although developed from the same educational roots and with similar emphasis on curricular reforms, might have taken quite different routes of development, largely affected by theoretical foundations, the exchange and collaboration among the programs, and the leadership and concerted efforts within the fields. CAC researchers such as Dannels, realizing the weakness of CAC programs, have focused on these areas, and CAC programs such as the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University have incorporated both writing and speaking across the curriculum (Anson et al. 2003). However, if similar initiatives are to be realized in other countries and cultures, this review of the history of the evolution of CAC and WAC suggests incorporating multiple communication modalities at the very beginning, building on a solid theoretical foundation, incorporating elements from the home disciplines to contribute their development, and collaborating with other initiatives and programs.

Activity Theory and WAC Research

The research trend in both WAC and CAC is increasingly emphasizing an empirical approach, specifically naturalistic research, based on Russell's (2001) contention that quantitative research often yields confusing results. He lists four factors of writing and learning in secondary and higher education: (1) student motives, (2) the identities that students (re)construct, (3) pedagogical tools, (4) the processes used by students in learning to write and writing to learn. These factors can be analyzed using activity theory, based on Lev Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) cultural-historical psychology theory, to see how writing functions as a tool in mediating human activities, especially educational activities (Bazerman and Russell 2003). In fact, from the very beginning of WAC research, Britton's study (1975) was based on Vygotsky's theory, meaning that activity theory has influenced WAC from its inception. There have been many extensions and applications of activity theory in North America, Britain, France, and Scandinavia, with their commonality being that human-produced artifacts should not be viewed only as objects in themselves but within the activities in which they are created, utilized,

and explored and that these artifacts should be studied to determine their mediating functions in these activities.

Activity theory is a heuristic that cannot predict outcomes but only offer tentative explanations (Russell and Yañez 2003). Developed from Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) work in psychology and Leont'ev's (1978, 1981) contributions, the key concept forming its basis is the idea of mediation. In Vygotsky's view of mediation, human beings do not simply follow the transmission model of stimulus–response; rather their responses are made through indirect connections, referred to as mediation that they build through different links. The tools they use in building these links can be material or technical tools, such as a saw or a knife, or psychological tools or signs, such as language (Vygotsky 1978). By using the technical tools, human beings are able to adjust and control their behavior from the outside; and by using the psychological tools, they can regulate their minds from the inside and then communicate their ideas with others. Thus, human beings can regulate both their inside and outside worlds using the tools available to them in the society and the culture in which they live. This mediation then provides them with a dialectical relationship with the society and culture, suggesting the inside world and the outside world are not isolated but rather interact (Cole and Engeström 1993; Engeström 1999). Human beings are the mediators who use the tools to accomplish the objects. For example, human beings can use material tools such as shovels and hammers to build homes for themselves, but they also use languages to think and organize their ideas and then to convey them to others in order to collaborate on building projects.

This mediation explains why WID is an organic component of WAC and why writing to communicate and writing to learn can work together in WAC programs to promote student learning. Elbow's (1973) research and pedagogy is primarily centered on the inner speech of writers and is associated with writing to learn, while Bazerman's (1988) research has focused on the outer world, the social environment of the writers, and on writing to communicate and WID. This dialectical relationship between the inner and outer world explains the connection between writing to learn and writing to communicate.

Engeström and Cole (1993) extended Vygotsky's concept of mediation by situating human mediation within collective activities and adding three other mediators: the social norms/rules, the community, and the division of labor/roles. With their extension, an activity system becomes a three level triangle as seen in Fig. 2.1. This activity system, based on Engeström, begins with the subjects on the left and moves clockwise, with people using culturally constructed tools/signs to accomplish objects and tasks being assigned to them by the division of labor in the community under certain rules and norms. This expanded triangle provides a theoretical tool for analyzing dynamic human social interactions, focusing on their essential aspects (Russell and Yañez 2003), while at the same time indicating that all the mediators and their mediations are related and should be viewed holistically rather than individually.

Writing, one of the tools that human beings use in mediation, has been studied through this lens of activity theory for approximately 20 years. Many qualitative

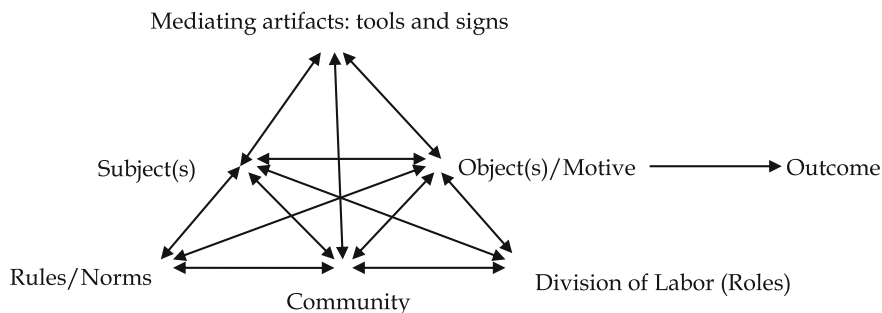


Fig. 2.1 Engeström's Activity System

studies have explored the struggles students have within the activity systems in higher education settings (Chiseri-Strater 1991; Fishman and McCarthy 2000; Greene 1993; Mulvaney 1997; Prior 1998; Russell 1997b; Russell and Yañez 2003; Velez 1995). Specifically, this approach explores writing by situating it in an activity system or systems, studying it not as simple skills or simple processes as was done in the 1970 and 1980s; rather learners are viewed as participants involved in the activity systems, learning to practice the norms of the community by using the culturally constructed tools (including but not limited to writing) to gain access to the community, to become recognized by it so that they are admitted into it, and to accomplish the objectives of their assigned roles.

Using the line of writing research on activity theory that Bazerman and Russell (2003) have outlined, activity theory has been applied in the study of writing, the culturally constructed mediating tool in many fields, disciplines, and especially interdisciplinary studies. Some examples of the disciplines and research areas studied include science (Bazerman 1988), business and professional workplaces (Bazerman and Paradis 1991), philosophy (Geisler 1994), higher education and the workplace (Russell 1997b; Dias et al. 1999), economic policy (Freedman and Smart 1997), engineering (Winsor 1996, 2003), banking and finance (Smart 1993, 2000, 2003), technology (Geisler 2003), and computer engineering and software development (Spinuzzi 2003). Naturalistic empirical studies interpreted through the lens of activity theory have become widely accepted and practiced by WAC researchers and programs since this movement began, studying faculty using writing (Walvoord et al. 1997), student writing at different levels (Walvoord and McCarthy 1990; Faigley and Hansen 1985; Berkenkotter et al. 1991), and workplace writing (Anson and Forsberg 1990).

To writing researchers, an activity system can be a course/classroom, a workplace in an organization, or an academic discipline, and the tools in it include writing in the various venues to mediate the activity. These tools can be extended from writing to other communication modalities, including oral and digital formats. Using this theoretical lens, WAC researchers can explore how these tools are used by human beings to mediate activities and interact with the other mediators. Studying the dialectical relationship between human beings and the society and

culture provides information on how these mediating tools function to further the development of the disciplines, business, society, culture, and the acquisition (knowing), practice (doing), and advancement (making) of knowledge.

However, human beings are involved in not one but several social activity systems (Russell and Yañez 2003) that are synchronically or chronologically associated. For example, students are involved in the activity systems of the different courses they are taking at the same time, in the different courses they take during their years of schooling, and in the activity systems they are about to or already have encountered in the workplace or in their specific academic disciplines. These dynamic activity systems are the places to study the functions of communication tools and how they help students accomplish their objects because they represent where mediators and mediations are situated.

The newly developed digital social media such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, instant messaging, and digital video, all of which are playing an increasingly important role in student learning, have made researchers rethink and redefine familiar terms such as literacy (Hawisher and Selfe 1997, 2000; Brandt 1995), community (Howard 1997), copyright (Lessig 2004), and composition (Selfe 2007). Situated in activity systems, these tools, including writing, are not studied as separate and individual tools for conveying content and meaning, but as mediators that contribute to the construction of content and meaning. As a result, the introduction and application of activity theory in WAC research provides not only a theoretical tool to apply but also the possibility for looking from the micro-level of one activity system into the macro-level of the connections within the network of activity systems.

According to Russell (2002), WAC has been one of the most successful educational movements in American education, and its longevity can be attributed not only to its practices that have addressed the need for improved student learning and faculty teaching but also for the research that has been conducted. The evolution and success of WAC in the US is the motivation for this project investigating the feasibility and adaptation of WAC theory and practice in China. Some of the historical factors that catalyzed the WAC movement should appear recognizable to those familiar with the current issues in Chinese higher education. The critical situation of Chinese higher education with its increasing student population and its fast development and dissemination of technology, both of which will be discussed in the following section, makes WAC an attractive innovation, one that Chinese higher education may have been unknowingly looking for during the past several years.

The International Dissemination of WAC

In the US since the 1970s, WAC scholars have been transforming traditional pedagogies to engage students in course content and to enhance their learning through writing. While the goal of enhancing learning through writing is not

unique to the US, WAC, as a major component of US composition studies, has been in the forefront of these exchanges. WAC programs have flourished and are still developing in the US, while its international dissemination has reached Europe, Australia, and various Asian countries and areas such as Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

In retrospect, the initiation of WAC in the US began from the international research exchange between British and American writing researchers at the 1966 Dartmouth seminars. However, from that time until approximately 2000, WAC scholars in the US had not shared much of their study and practice with those who teach and study writing either in English or their native languages in other parts of the world (Thaiss 2009). The possibilities provided by the Internet and other electronic technologies have significantly influenced not only writing and writing research the US (Reiss et al. 1998) but also the availability and accessibility of WAC theories, practice, and scholarship. The WAC Clearing House (<http://wac.colostate.edu>) is not just a host site for program information, electronic journals such as *Across the Disciplines* and *The WAC Journal*, or electronic versions of some of the volumes of essays published by the International Network of WAC Programs (INWAC). It has become a hub for such research exchange as in-progress project reports with a membership directory of approximately 136 researchers or teachers from the US, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Colombia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Britain, Malaysia, and India, among others (as of February 2010). Without Internet technology, it would have been unimaginable to have such a community of researchers from this wide-range of countries and areas.

Another noticeable change can be observed in the academic conferences. The Conference of College Composition and Communication, although remaining a US national organization, has attracted more and more international participants. The biennial US National Conference on Writing Across the Curriculum, which held its initial conference in 1993, was renamed the International WAC Conference in 2004, with an increasing number of representatives from other parts of the world coming to the US to share their research. This conference has not yet been held outside of the US, but with conferences like EATAW, the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing being initiated in 2001, quite a few US WAC researchers have participated in overseas conferences on writing research or conducted WAC workshops. For example, Art Young and Donna Reiss (Clemson University, US) have collaborated with Magnus Gustafsson (Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden), providing course discussions among their students via the Internet since 2003. These three professors have presented their projects in the US at the 2004 WAC Conference and the 2004 Computers and Writing Conference and in Europe at both EATAW and EARLI (European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction). David Russell presented at the first EATAW Conference in 2001 and has continued collaborating with researchers from different countries. For example, he and David Foster co-edited the 2002 edition of *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective*, which included studies from China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, and South Africa.

The Writing Research Conference sponsored by the University of California, Santa Barbara, began in 2002 but was later expanded from a regional one to a national and then an international conference. In 2008, it was renamed Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) with participants from 33 countries, and in 2010 the conference volume was published under the title of *Traditions of Writing Research*. Recent articles in the journals in composition studies in the US have also reflected this trend of collaborating with international scholars and teachers.

Donahue points out in her 2009 lead article in *College Composition and Communication* that “the fundamental problem of imagining internationalizing composition as export is that this is precisely its source as colonialist activity” (p. 215). She also asserts in the same article that teachers from different countries have different attitudes towards US writing research: some may want to try the US model and practice in their own contexts, while others might not want to seek help from the US as they have already established their own systems of conducting research and teaching writing. However, it cannot be concluded that this international dissemination is a process of colonization of other cultures by speakers of English, as WAC research in other countries has been multilingual from the beginning of its internationalizing process. The best evidence of this are the two books, *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspectives* (Foster and Rusell 2002) and *Traditions of Writing Research* (Bazerman et al. 2010), considered the most representative of the scholarship made possible by international collaboration. Other journal volumes and papers, such as the February 2002 special issue of *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* on WAC in International Contexts, indicate it was not the intent of US scholars to impose their WAC model onto other countries or set their approach as the standard for WAC practice or research. On the contrary, they have carefully studied the contexts and discourses in other countries in their native languages and in English, which in most cases is the required foreign language. For example, Townsend’s (2002) field report, “Writing in/across the Curriculum at a Comprehensive Chinese University,” clearly states the perspectives about writing held by the professors. The design of her interviews was not meant to “sell” the WAC concept but to understand writing in China.

The 2010 IWAC Conference also exemplified this conversational style of research exchange. One of the two keynote speakers, Terry Zawacki, gave a talk entitled “Researching the Local/Writing the International: Developing Culturally Inclusive WAC Programs and Practices.” This awareness and emphasis on “the local” has long been emphasized by WAC researchers in the US as they know very well that writing and writing programs are very local. Although some researchers fear that this international dissemination process may resemble missionaries spreading their religions, it has been done very carefully. It is a new venue for both sides to get a chance to know what has been done and what could be done with the final benefits focusing on improved student learning, not to support any one dominant research school or theory as feared by some researchers.

Regardless of the success of its international dissemination, very limited WAC research can be found in Chinese academic databases, and no such program has been initiated in mainland China. The only WAC programs that can be found in

China are in Taiwan (Hsu 2007) and Hong Kong (Braine 2004), two areas in China governed under different political systems, with residues of colonialism including a more pervasive influence of the English language, especially in Hong Kong. Mainland China was isolated for several decades especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), meaning it will take quite some time for it to catch up with the rest of the world in many aspects, including higher education. However, as discussed in [Chap. 1](#), the lack of WAC practices and research in Mainland China should not be regarded as a refusal but rather a time lag. With reforms, internationalization, and especially the impact of the large-scale enrollment growth, the quality of education has recently become a concern, one raised by many domestic and international scholars in Chinese higher education (Hayhoe 2000; Jiang 2005; Li et al. 2008; Lin 2006; Min 2004; Mok 2005; Postiglione 2005), pushing the need for better teaching and learning to the forefront of higher education reform.

The evolution of WAC in the US and the interest and experimentation in it in other countries in recent years suggest that higher education development, especially its enrollment expansion, has played a very important role. As discussed in [Chap. 1](#), WAC programs were first initiated in the US to deal with the problems resulting from the expansion of higher education; other developed countries began their own WAC initiatives as a result of their increase in higher education enrollments, and now WAC has been introduced to some comparatively industrialized developing areas in Asia such as Hong Kong (Braine 2004) and Taiwan (Hsu 2007). This spread of WAC is a response from within these higher education systems in countries seeking solutions for similar problems found in the US in the 1960s. The third wave of higher education expansion is being experienced by some of the developing countries, including China. Will WAC work for China, a country with a polity very different from those that have already adopted WAC? [Chap. 3](#) is an in-depth analysis of the Chinese higher education system through the lens of political culture to explore why WAC has not been introduced to China and what might be the opportunities or challenges for doing so.

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