VOICING STUDENT ATTITUDES IN WRITING-ABOUT-WRITING COURSES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Daniel Bommarito and Brent Chappelow

In the last decade, writing about writing (WAW) has become a commonplace in composition studies. A central premise—that student learning is enhanced when writing is taught not only as a practice but also as a content area—has had substantial impact on the designs of writing programs (see Wardle, "Intractable") and writing courses, such as, among others, first-year composition (see Ruecker; Sylvia and Michaud), basic writing (see Carter; Charlton; Bird, "Meaning Making"), second language writing (see Adkins and Meyer), and professional writing (see Read and Michaud). An active community surrounding WAW has also grown, establishing sites of professional dialogue through a standing group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a digital community of scholars and teachers participating on the Writing about Writing Network, and a popular textbook now in its third edition (see Wardle and Downs, *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*). Given this popularity, it comes as little surprise that the spirit of WAW animates a now widely accepted view that, as Linda Adler-Kassner writes, "writing classes, especially first year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies" (132).

Such popularity might not have seemed inevitable in 2007 when WAW first appeared (Downs and Wardle, "Teaching"). Early reactions questioned WAW's potential as a pedagogy as well as the evidence upon which the article's claims were made (see Kutney; Miles et al.). For example, Libby Miles et al. write, "The evidence is far too limited in scope to carry the weight of the article's conclusions,"

indicating that as readers they "would expect to hear more voices, see more 'case studies,' and experience thicker descriptions" documenting students' reactions to the curriculum (509). In follow-up responses in *CCC*, Downs and Wardle address this concern directly and ultimately concede that the findings reported in the 2007 article remain limited (Downs, "Response;" Wardle):[1] "only with additional implementation of the pedagogy and longitudinal studies to assess students' later writing experiences will we be able to tell whether our optimism is warranted" ("Teaching" 577; Wardle, "Continuing" 180-81). More recently, Downs acknowledges the need for additional testing of WAW's central hypotheses, believing that "data-driven studies that theorize or assess the effectiveness of WAW curricula are as yet limited by the newness of this approach" ("Writing-about-Writing" 1). What these discussions suggest is that, despite WAW's popularity, basic questions about the effectiveness of WAW remain optimistically speculative.

Our aim in this paper is to contribute to the body of research investigating the effectiveness of WAW pedagogy. Specifically, this paper is an effort to contribute to the ongoing assessment of WAW's effectiveness by investigating foundational claims driving Downs and Wardle's proposed curriculum—namely, that a WAW approach to FYC will increase students' self-awareness and knowledge about writing through the use of disciplinary scholarship as course readings. To pursue this line of inquiry, we report findings from a survey distributed to two groups of students: (1) those who took a WAW-based course and (2) those who took a parallel course with identical learning outcomes and similar assignments but that did not use a WAW approach. The survey findings show statistically significant differences between the two student populations in terms of students' self-reported perceptions of their knowledge about writing, their sense of themselves as writers, and the relevance of assigned course readings.

Below, we describe WAW theory and pedagogies, then provide an overview of our study and a statistical comparison of the survey results. To conclude, we discuss potential implications our analysis might yield for teachers and administrators engaged with WAW.

WAW Theory and Pedagogies

In "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" Downs and Wardle critique contemporary first-year composition instruction and offer in its place "a radically reimagined FYC" that does not purport to teach writing in the traditional sense (558). Instead of focusing only on teaching students *how* to write, they make the case for teaching students *about* writing as a subject of study. In their view, FYC must break from a lingering skills-based axiology and be recast as Introduction to Writing Studies, a content-driven course that introduces students to research on writing, rhetoric, literacy, and discourse. Just as college chemistry and physics have introductory courses that lay bare the most current knowledge, practices, and even conflicts of their respective fields, Downs and Wardle argue that writing studies should likewise introduce students to the body of knowledge unique to the discipline.

To fulfill the promise of this argument, Downs and Wardle propose a first-year writing curriculum that is equal parts information campaign, critical reflection, and guided scholarly inquiry. The information campaign aims to set the record straight about writing, perhaps the most important point being "that writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent and irreducibly complex" (558). Supplanting specious general rules for writing are more realistic narratives that acknowledge the contingent nature of "good" writing. Here, Downs and Wardle describe what this means in the broader context of WAW theory:

> By teaching the more realistic writing narrative *itself*, we have a theoretically greater chance of making students "better writers" than we do by assuming the one or two genres we can teach them will automatically transfer to other writing situations. Instead of teaching situational skills often incorrectly imagined to be generalizable, FYC could teach about the ways writing works in the world and how the "tool" of writing is used to mediate various activities. ("Teaching" 558)

At its core, WAW aims to connect students to concepts and practices of writing directly, rather than obliquely, thus encouraging students to develop a broader framework flexible enough to tackle writing in a variety of contexts.

Many variations on this curriculum have emerged. One approach emphasizes literacy and discourse through ethnography-based writing projects and course readings authored by Deborah Brandt and other literacy scholars (Downs and Wardle, "Reimagining" 141). Another approach emphasizes language and rhetoric by requiring students to read scholarship on rhetorical theory, language performance, literacy autobiography, and other essays on the ethical use of rhetoric, all in an effort to heighten students' rhetorical awareness in a writing-to-learn framework (Downs and Wardle, "Reimagining" 141). A third approach emphasizes writing and writers' practices. Explicitly designed to promote knowledge transfer through metacognition, this approach places discussion and analysis of "writing processes and practices" at the center of the curriculum (Downs and Wardle, "Reimagining" 142).

Despite the variation, a number of common features unite these approaches and mark them as distinctively WAW: (a) course readings that take writing, rhetoric, literacy, language, or discourse as their focus; (b) an "emphasis on metacognition and reflection;" and (c) a concerted effort to teach writing as a scholarly field with its own content (Downs and Wardle, "Reimagining" 138). These features are embedded in Downs and Wardle's succinct summation of WAW's chief aims: "The shared overall goal among WAW variants seems to be to change students' awareness of the nature of writing and literacy in order to shape the way they think about writing, with the expectation that how they write may change in turn" (139).

From these commonalities uniting various WAW curricula, we believe three expectations are reasonable to assume in any WAW course no matter the particular approach. First, we can expect students to gain more accurate knowledge about the habits of writing. Second, given the emphasis on metacognition and reflection, we can expect students to undergo some shift in their conceptions of themselves as writers. Third, because course readings "convey the content studied

in the course," we can expect assigned readings to contribute directly to students' more informed understanding of writing and heightened self-awareness (Downs and Wardle, "Reimagining" 138). It is this set of expectations that the present study aims to test based on students' perceptions of their own learning over the course of a semester.

The Study

This study pursues three questions that reflect central claims and expected outcomes characteristic of WAW and that have implications for the teaching and learning of writing. These questions include:

- Do WAW students report a change in their conceptions of themselves as writers, and how do they describe that change?
- Do WAW students report having a more informed understanding of writing, and about what do they feel more informed?
- Do course readings contribute directly to WAW students' views of writing?

To address these questions, we designed and delivered a WAW curriculum to two sections of FYC and administered an end-of-semester survey to students enrolled in these sections.[2] As a baseline for comparison, we aligned our WAW course with parallel sections of FYC that used a similar set of curricular assignments that were taught by colleagues, but addressed the topic of pop culture through discussions and assigned readings rather than explicitly writing-related topics and readings. We administered the same end-of-semester survey to students enrolled in parallel pop-culture-themed sections and compared survey results from both populations to provide important context for interpreting outcomes of the WAW curriculum.

The WAW Curriculum Used in the Study

The WAW curriculum used in the study emphasizes writers' practices and processes. Through the semester's formal writing projects, students were asked to consider their individual writing

processes, the process of revision, the process of research, and the process of learning over the course of the semester. Along the way, students composed frequent online responses to writing-focused readings, responses that often became the basis for class discussions and invention work for formal writing projects. The formal writing projects, three in total, included (1) an analysis based on primary research, (2) an analysis of a cultural text, or event, using another text as a lens, and (3) an analysis using multiple sources.

In the first writing project—the analysis based on primary research—students conducted an auto-ethnography in which they gathered primary data on their own writing habits and practices and wrote an essay describing insights drawn from their analysis. To support this work, students conducted think-aloud protocols, which were recorded and used as data for the essay. In class discussions and homework reading and writing, students also confront "myths" of writing, which corresponded to selected readings and were intended to provide additional tools for analyzing students' writing habits and assumptions. These myths included the myth of the perfect first draft, the myth that grammatical accuracy equates to good writing, the myth of the five-paragraph essay, and the myth of the inspired writer. Taken together, the myths and the think-aloud protocol served as tools for students to interrogate themselves as primary sources of data and, we hypothesized, to increase their knowledge about themselves as writers and about the enterprise of writing as a whole.

In the second writing project—the analysis of a cultural text or event using another text as a lens—students investigated and theorized the revision practices of other FYC students. Using as a lens the analytical framework developed by Nancy Sommers in "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers," students conducted a case study of student revision practices by examining and coding changes across a series of drafts composed in earlier semesters by first-year writing students.[3] This project encouraged WAW students to reflect on the differences between experienced and inexperienced writers, to conduct primary research while applying a theoretical and analytical lens, and to use findings as a way to analyze critically their own drafting and revision practices.

In the third writing project—the analysis using multiple sources—students conducted a process analysis in which they narrated and analyzed their research process as they investigated an issue of writing studies that they found particularly interesting. Potential topics included professional writing, writing-to-learn, literacy crises, writing in the disciplines, ecocomposition, and visual literacy, among others. The aim of this project was to teach the literacy of conducting database research and marshaling secondary sources to develop and support an argument; furthermore, the assignment had the added benefit of encouraging students to learn more deeply about an area of writing studies they found intriguing and to develop awareness about scholarship as an ongoing conversation. At the end of the semester, students submitted a final course reflection in which they traced their learning across the three writing projects and made a case for their development as writers.

Alignment with Parallel Pop-Culture-Themed Curriculum

The WAW curriculum was aligned with concurrent sections of FYC that focused on pop culture. Both course types—WAW and pop culture courses—shared the same learning outcomes and general structure of assignments. The focal curricular difference was the assigned readings. Although the WAW curriculum drew readings from research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition, the pop culture curriculum assigned readings that addressed a wide array of topics not necessarily related to writing (see Appendix A). Readings in the pop culture curriculum came from *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, on topics such as advertisements, film, groups/spaces/places, music, popular literature, sports and leisure, and television, and were used as the basis for class discussion and invention for formal projects.

Like the WAW curriculum, the pop culture curriculum included three formal essays: (1) an analysis based on primary research, (2) an analysis of a cultural text or event using another text as a lens, and (3) an analysis using multiple sources. The first formal project asked students to choose a local public space and write an observation

that helps readers to see the place differently than they might otherwise see it. The second project asked students to analyze a pop culture text using a reading from the textbook to narrow and frame the analysis. The third project, a variation on the second, asked students to write a thorough analysis of a pop culture text of their choice using the ideas or strategies of multiple research sources to inform and guide the analysis.[3]

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data through an end-of-course survey administered in week 15 of the semester. In all, we gathered responses from 116 participants (42 WAW students and 74 non-WAW students). Study subjects participated voluntarily and remained anonymous throughout. The survey contained primarily "yes/no" and multiple choice, Likert-scale questions related to students' approaches and attitudes to writing and the content of the course in which they were enrolled. The study was reviewed and approved by our local IRB.[4]

The first step of our analysis was a quantitative comparison of the two student groups. For the quantitative analysis, we used the Mann-Whitney U test for nonparametric data and selected a target p-value of 0.05 using a two-sided asymptote test of significance. This analysis allowed us to identify statistically significant differences across the two groups of students surveyed. The second step of our analysis was a qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. Specifically, based on significant differences identified in step 1 of our analysis, we coded responses to open-ended survey questions that corresponded with questions identified as statistically different across student groups. Codes were developed through an inductive, emergent process. This qualitative analysis afforded us insight into the nature of students' responses to "yes/no" and Likert scale questions.

Results

The responses reported here reflect statistically significant differences across the two groups of students, those taking a WAW course and those taking a similarly designed pop culture course (See Figure 1).
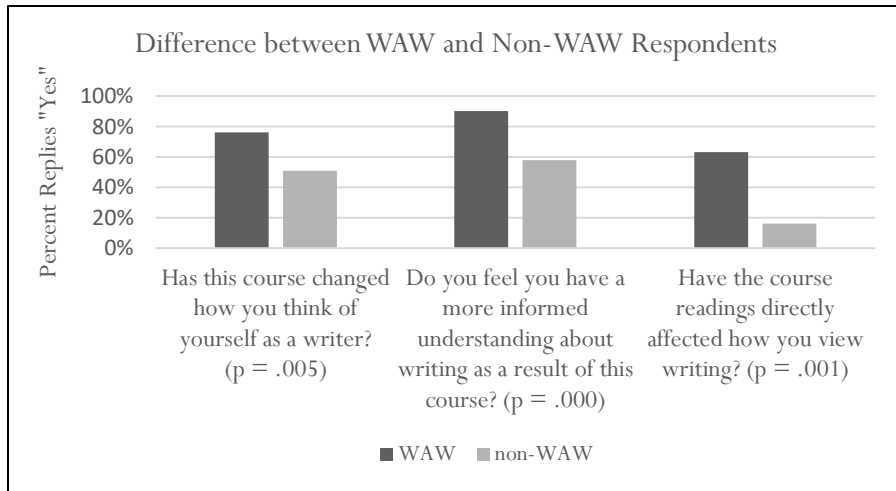
Figure 1: Differences between WAW and Non-WAW Respondents

Overall, the quantitative analysis suggests that WAW students are more likely to change how they think of themselves as writers, to feel they have developed a more informed understanding about writing, and to believe course readings directly affected how they view writing. Results from the qualitative analysis are discussed below to contextualize the nature of those differences across the two student groups.

Research Question #1: Do WAW students report a change in their conceptions of themselves as writers, and how do they describe that change?

One of the outcomes noted by Downs and Wardle and suggested by WAW scholarship is that students will leave a WAW course with increased awareness of themselves as writers, arguing that students became critically aware of their own writing practices and of the myriad perspectives from which they can study writing. To test this claim, we surveyed participants: "Has this course changed how you think of yourself as a writer?" To this question, 76% percent of WAW students responded in the affirmative, compared to 51% of non-WAW students, a difference that was statistically significant ($p = .005$).

Respondents explained the nature of that change in two ways: an increase in self-awareness and an increase in confidence (see Figure 2).

	WAW Students		Non-WAW Students	
Type of Change	**Percentage of total responses (n = 24)***	**Example(s)**	**Percentage of total responses (n = 35)***	**Example(s)**
Increased Confidence	46%	"I feel much more confident writing than I ever had before."	26%	"I think it's made me more confident" "More confident with complex subjects"
Increased Self-Awareness	46%	"I now think about how I'm writing and what I learn while writing." "It has shown me that I am a capable writer but I still have areas to improve on." "I feel like a writer now."	23%	"I am a better writer than I thought I was" "I know I have a long way to go"
Minimal Change or Negative Change	8%	"same person" "I still don't think I'm very good at it"	50%	"I feel the same" "I suck at writing" "It made me dislike English"
* Not all survey respondents answered these questions, so the n-values reflect that difference				

Figure 2: Open-Ended Survey Responses Pursuant to Research Question #1

Survey responses classified as "increased self-awareness" discussed heightened awareness of one's process of writing (e.g., "I now think about how I'm writing and what I learn while writing"), aspects of one's process in need of improvement (e.g., "It has shown me that I am a capable writer but I still have areas to improve on"), and shift in writerly identity or how one feels as a writer (e.g., "I feel like a writer now"). Survey responses classified as "increased confidence"

indicated, straightforwardly, that respondents were "more confident" or "I feel more confident writing then [sic] I ever had before." Eight percent of comments indicated no change (e.g., "same person") or negative emotions associated with writing (e.g., "I still don't think I'm very good at it [writing]." This low number contrasted sharply with the rather large percentage (50%) of respondents in the pop-culture-based courses who indicated no change.

Research Question #2: Do WAW students report having a more informed understanding of writing, and about what do they feel more informed?

We expected that students in WAW courses would feel they have a more informed understanding of writing because the course readings addressed writing-related topics directly. In the survey, we asked, "Do you feel you have a more informed understanding about writing as a result of this course?" Overall, significantly more WAW students reported having a more informed understanding of writing as a result of their FYC course: 90% of WAW students responded positively to this question compared to 58% of non-WAW students, a difference between populations that was statistically significant (p = .000).

Students' comments in an open-ended follow-up survey question help to clarify what aspects of writing about which respondents feel more informed (see Figures 3 and 4). Students indicated that they became more informed about writing and revising as a process, noting that they had a more accurate picture of the processes involved with producing a polished text. They also indicated heightened understanding about their own individual writing habits; about the writing practices of others; about a variety of styles, genres and strategies; and about the demands of critical thinking. In the pop-culture-focused class, students indicated learning about popular culture, while no students in the WAW-based class mentioned pop culture. Likewise, students in the pop-culture-focused class indicated gaining an understanding of critical thinking, while no students in the WAW-based class mentioned critical thinking.

WAW Students		
Aspect of writing about which students feel more informed	**Percentage of total responses (n=24)**	**Examples**
Writing and revising as a process	34%	"I have learned a lot about the writing process." "I understand the process of writing more clearly"
Students' own writing	29%	"I've learned a lot about myself and my writing process" "I am more knowledgeable on specific aspects of my writing"
Writing in general	21%	"I feel more confident on every aspect of writing" "I understand it as a more broad term than I thought before"
How others write	5%	"We have gone over so many of others' writing and myths about writing that I feel like somewhat of a professional" "The differences between experienced and inexperienced writers, the difficulties professional authors have with writing"
No change or negative change	5%	"My understanding of writing hasn't really changed" "It's made certain topics even more unclear"
Different styles, genres, and strategies	3%	"Learned about different ways of writing"
Critical thinking/deeper thinking	-	-
Pop culture	-	-

Figure 3: WAW Student Open-ended Survey Responses Pursuant to Research Question #2

Non-WAW Students		
Aspect of writing about which students feel more informed	**Percentage of total responses (n=24)**	**Examples**
Writing and revising as a process	11%	"I've improved based on draft writing and peer edit" "The teacher has explained writing as a process"
Students' own writing	20%	"I learned what I have to improve on" "I am more aware of how I write"
Writing in general	20%	"[the course] explained a lot" "I think I understand more"
How others write	-	-
No change or negative change	18%	"I feel the same" "I am just confused now"
Different styles, genres, and strategies	11%	"I learned about different styles and ways to form a paper" "I understand different ways how to present information"
Critical thinking/deeper thinking	11%	"I feel I have become better at analyzing concepts" "It got me to think more in depth"
Pop culture	7%	"I know how to write about pop culture" "I feel like I learned about pop culture, but not much of a grammar wise"

Figure 4: Non-WAW Student Open-ended Survey Responses Pursuant to Research Question #2

Research Question #3: Do course readings contribute directly to WAW students' views of writing?

To investigate a potential link between course readings and students' understanding of writing, we asked students about the relationship between their perceptions of writing and the assigned course readings.

Specifically, the survey question asked, "Have the course readings directly affected how you view writing?" In response, 63% of WAW students responded in the affirmative, compared to only 16% of non-WAW students. This difference was statistically significant (p = .001).

Discussion

Two stark contrasts between the two student groups stand out and, we believe, can be interpreted in tandem. First, the two student groups differed greatly in their self-reported change in knowledge about writing—a difference of 32%. Clearly, more WAW students than pop culture students felt they gained understanding about writing as a result of the course. Second, the two student groups differed greatly in their perception of a link between assigned readings and learning about writing—a difference of 47%. Clearly, more WAW students than pop culture students perceived course readings to be contributing to their knowledge about writing.

Read together, these two significant differences (respectively, p=0.005 and p=0.000) suggest that assigned course readings are likely a contributing factor motivating change in students' perceptions of writing. The WAW-based and pop-culture-based courses were identical in design except for the topics of assigned readings. The assigned readings in the WAW-based course addressed writing directly and were drawn from the scholarship of rhetoric and composition. By contrast, the assigned readings in the pop-culture-based course addressed writing indirectly and emphasized topics such as television and movies, which, while engaging, demanded additional pedagogical effort to shift the conversation to writing. If an aim of WAW is to deliver content drawn from the discipline in the hope that students will learn more about writing as a subject of study, then, on that score, we are confident the WAW curriculum in the present study fulfilled its promise.

Based on the study results, WAW students are also more likely to report changes in their conception of themselves as writers—a difference of 25%. A key outcome promised by WAW is that students develop increased self-awareness about writing, that WAW students are given much time to think "a lot about their own writing by the

end of the course," which leads to gaining a deeper awareness of one's own writing practices (Downs and Wardle, "Teaching" 572). The present study bears this out. WAW students do report changing their self-understanding as writers at a higher rate than do students taking a pop-culture-based variation of the course. It is likely that the frequent discussions of writing and emphasis on reflection in the WAW-based course regularly push students to confront their own practices, positioning them to think critically about themselves as writers.

The qualitative survey results shed additional light on the nature of the change reported. Both groups of students indicated an increase in self-awareness as a result of the course. The increase in self-awareness aligns not only with expected outcomes of WAW, but also with readiness indicators cited in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, which describe habits of mind necessary for successful college-level writing. One such habit of mind is metacognition, or "the ability to reflect on one's own thinking" (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al. 5). That both groups of students report increased self-awareness suggests that the curricula are supporting important intellectual habits relevant for college-level writing—and the fact that more WAW students indicate a change in their self-understanding suggests that WAW is an especially productive approach for cultivating this type of thinking.

Metacognition is also important given purported links to transfer. A growing body of writing studies research on transfer offers that self-awareness of one's abilities and goals support writing transfer. Put another way, transfer is not an inevitable outcome of learning. As Dana Driscoll and Roger Powell put it, "transfer of most complex academic tasks, including writing, requires conscious effort on the part of the student" (n.p.). Writing courses that invite students to attend consciously to their own writing practices—to learn about themselves as a subject of study, about how they write, about why they write the way they do, and about how they can improve— would seem to position students for successful long-term development as they enter novel contexts along their academic careers.

In addition to self-awareness, both groups of students indicate changes in confidence. Downs and Wardle cite confidence as an

important finding in their 2007 study, going so far as to suggest that confidence might be a criterion by which the success of WAW is measured ("Teaching" 572). Other studies investigating WAW also find confidence to be a key outcome. For example, Barbara Bird reports that confidence is a key outcome of the WAW course, stating that her students "gain a tremendous amount of confidence" by grappling with and succeeding in understanding difficult disciplinary material ("Writing" 168). Elsewhere, Bird also points to the central role increased confidence has played in her own writing development:

> Only when I began reading articles by writing specialists like Delpit, Bartholomae, Berthoff, Elbow, and Bizzell did the mysterious meaning-making process begin to be de-mystified. My newfound understanding significantly improved both my confidence and my proficiency (but especially my confidence). ("Meaning" 8)

Similarly, Jonikka Charlton and Shannon Carter have cataloged a preponderance of feedback from students, instructors, and their own teaching that indicates WAW leads to increased levels of confidence. Through WAW, notes Charlton, "[students] begin to have confidence in their own abilities to do [rigorous work], not just in our classes, but in their other academic work as well" (6). Confidence is clearly marked as important outcomes of WAW.

Writing studies research suggests positive emotions such as confidence can increase the likelihood of writing transfer. Driscoll and Powell show that confidence is an especially conducive emotion for short-term and long-term writing development and transfer. In a five-year longitudinal study of college writers, they find confidence to be in the top three generative emotions (along with "liking" and "enjoyment") mentioned by students across the five years. They write, "In a nutshell, if students like the writing they are doing, if they take pride in it and feel confident about it, they have a much higher chance of carrying that knowledge with them" (n.p.).

The link between positive emotions and transfer may be rooted in the importance of a more general concept—namely, self-efficacy,

or the collection of beliefs one holds about one's ability to perform a task successfully. In an earlier study of student dispositions and writing transfer, Driscoll and Jennifer Wells make a persuasive case for understanding heightened confidence and self-awareness in relation to self-efficacy. Reviewing studies from education and psychology, Driscoll and Wells write,

> In order for students to do the work that successful transfer requires, they first have to hold developmentally generative beliefs about their ability to do that work and to accomplish their goals. A learner's self-efficacy becomes especially important when faced with a task that at first seems overwhelming or unfamiliar.

The gains in confidence reflected in the present study's findings, when read alongside increased self-awareness, suggest that writers are developing the tools and habits conducive for successful transfer. Given the higher rate of change among WAW students, it is reasonable to assume that WAW-based courses are particularly helpful in achieving such outcomes.

The qualitative data found in open-ended responses reveal interesting differences between the two student groups. It comes as little surprise that WAW students emphasized learning about process in their responses, since the theme of the WAW class was explicitly about practices and processes. By the same token, it should come as little surprise that students in the pop culture class indicate that they are more informed about pop culture. (WAW students did not mention pop culture.) If learning about pop culture is an aim of the writing class, then being more informed about pop culture is a desirable outcome; however, if the class is not aimed to teach about pop culture as the subject matter, then learning about pop culture in order to write may be distracting from other topics that could be addressed in the class. Comments from students in the pop culture section were telling: "I feel like I learned about pop culture, but not much of a grammar wise;" "I know how to write about pop culture;" "I would like to talk less about pop culture and more about writing/English in general."

Students' also noted that the pop-culture-focused readings were "not relevant to writing" or that they were only "good for writing about pop culture." In the present study, we ask if there was a link between the course readings and students' views on writing; the findings show that there is a link, one that should be taken seriously from a pedagogical standpoint—namely, readings *about* writing appear to contribute to students' views of writing more than readings about other topics.

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of our study was to investigate the extent to which central claims of WAW bear out in students' reports of their experiences in composition classes—namely, that a WAW approach to FYC will increase students' self-awareness and knowledge about writing through the use of disciplinary scholarship as course readings. Based on the study results, we make the following claims:

- Students taking WAW-based writing classes report being more informed about writing than do students taking a course in which WAW is not the focus, and likely causes of this change are course readings that address writing directly. WAW is uniquely effective for teaching writing-related content knowledge, and readings drawn from the discipline appear to be particularly supportive in that effort.
- Students taking WAW-based classes are more likely to think of themselves differently as writers than are students who take a similarly designed writing class not based in WAW. More specifically, WAW appears to engender heightened self-awareness and confidence with writing— both of which are linked to self-efficacy and transfer of knowledge. The WAW approach used in the present study appears to be an effective way to shift a writer's self-conceptions and lay groundwork for long-term development.

What do these claims suggest for writing teachers and program administrators?

First, we call back to the exhortation by Adler-Kassner cited in the introduction to argue that writing classes should assign readings that are explicitly *about* writing. Teachers and program administrators would do well to identify high-leverage readings that have the potential to inform first-year audiences about writing. Readings that worked particularly well for us during this study include readings in the open access textbook *Writing Spaces*, such as "The Inspired Writer vs. The Real Writer" by Sarah Allen and "How to Read Like a Writer" by Mike Bunn; the essay "Unteaching the Five-Paragraph Essay" by Marie Foley; and the research article "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" by Nancy Sommers. For topics where no reading existed that was first-year-friendly, we found it useful to compose our own short essays. For example, to inform students about think-aloud protocols, we drew from various sources to compose a short reading that students could use to learn about the research method and could easily apply to their writing projects. Also useful was connecting students with databases and bibliographies that collected disciplinary knowledge in bounded spaces, such as CompPile bibliographies and the CompPile database search.

A second implication is that there appears to be much benefit to assigning tasks in which students investigate their own writing practices or the practices of others. By studying writing empirically, students are positioned to develop heightened sensitivity to the realities of writing. This focus on writing practices was one of the key differences between the pedagogies experienced by the two groups of students in the present study and a likely contributor to WAW students' heightened self-awareness. Grounding discussions of writing in empirical realities serves to break through unfounded beliefs students may carry with them into college.

Heightened self-awareness, though, may not necessarily be beneficial if it is coupled with low degree of confidence, which could lead to stagnancy or blocking. By the same token, it is possible for students to feel confident in their writing abilities yet have little accurate knowledge about writing (and thus be operating with undue confidence). A third implication of the present study, then, is to see self-awareness and

confidence as linked and to seek to cultivate both. Teachers can do this by helping students recognize increased confidence in their practice and to work with them to identify the *origins* of that new confidence. By identifying origins of confidence that are based on specifics of their writing practices, students can strengthen bindings that research suggests are supportive of long-term writing development.

Study Limitations

The qualitative portion of our study is based on an end-of-semester survey. While we initially intended to compare our end-of-semester survey with a pre-test, a lack of participation in the pre-test survey led us to consider alternative delivery formats. The survey was initially delivered online, but, due to a low response rate, we shifted to pen-and-paper surveys, which we handed out to students directly. While this shift increased the response rate, the fact remains that we report only post-test findings.

Second, an important aspect of this research is that we gathered data from our own students. One possible result of this design feature is that students in our classes (the WAW students) may have felt that their participation in the study would bear on their standing in class. To address this possibility, we made sure to emphasize that participation in the study was unrelated to grades for the course; furthermore, we emphasized that the data would not be looked at until after the semester was complete, so we would have no way of knowing who participated or what was said until after grade submission. Because our students were sources of data in the study, it was possible that we as teachers might have unwittingly led students to respond to the survey in ways that would favor the WAW approach. To obviate this problem, we vetted the survey with non-WAW teachers and external readers to ensure that students, regardless of the FYC course in which they are enrolled, would read the questions similarly. We also note that our data collection did not account for the diverse ways in which students engage assigned readings; future studies may benefit from addressing that diversity of engagement in study design and interpretation.

Notes

[1]Downs and Wardle's responses to this and other critiques appear in vol. 60, issue 1 of *College Composition and Communication*.

[2]IRB approval of the study and research materials was acquired prior to the semester.

[3]One of the participating instructors reversed the order of projects one and two; additionally, for the project analyzing a text using a class reading as a critical lens, this instructor required students to analyze themselves as the cultural text using assigned course readings while another instructor required analysis of a visual text. Other than these modifications, this assignment sequence held for all teachers participating in the study who taught the pop culture sections. These courses vary only in their content; they teach students the same strategies and habits of writing.

[4]Due to space consideration, the full survey has not been included. Readers are encouraged to contact the authors directly to access the full survey.

[5]We acquired consent from students in previous semesters to use their writing, final and preliminary drafts, for instructional purposes.

Works Cited

Adkins, Tabetha, and Connie Meyer. "Seoul Searching: Transitioning Basic Writers Within the Global Frontiers Project." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2014, pp. 79-96.

Adler-Kassner, Linda. "The Companies We Keep or the Companies We Would Like to Try to Keep: Strategies and Tactics in Challenging Times." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, pp. 119-40.

Bird, Barbara. "Meaning-Making Concepts: Basic Writers' Access to Verbal Culture." *Basic Writing e-Journal*, vol. 8/9, no. 1, 2009-10, pp. 1-18.

---. "Writing about Writing as the Heart of a Writing Studies Approach to FYC: Response to Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions' and to Libby Miles et al., 'Thinking Vertically.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2008, pp. 165-71.

Carter, Shannon. "Writing about Writing in Basic Writing: A Teacher/ Researcher/Activist Narrative." *Basic Writing e-Journal*, vol. 8/9, no. 1, 2009-10, pp. 1-16.

Charlton, Jonnika. "Seeing Is Believing: Writing Studies with 'Basic Writing' Students." *Basic Writing e-Journal*, vol. 8/9, no. 1, 2009-10, pp. 1-9.

Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project. *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. CWPA, NCTE, and NWP, 2011.

Downs, Douglas. "Response to Miles et al." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2008, pp. 171-75.

---. "Writing-about-Writing Curricula: Origins, Theories, and Initial Field-Tests," *WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies*, no. 12, 2010, comppile.org/wpa/bibliographies/Bib12/Downs.pdf.

Downs, Douglas, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Reimagining the Nature of FYC: Trends in Writing-about-Writing Pedagogies." *Exploring Composition Studies: Sites, Issues, and Perspectives*, edited by Kelly Ritter and Paul Kei Matsuda, University Press of Colorado and Utah State University Press, 2012, pp. 123-44.

---. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)envisioning 'First Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2007, pp. 552-84.

Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Jennifer Wells. "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions." *Composition Forum*, vol. 26, 2012.

Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Roger Powell. "States, Traits, and Dispositions, The Impact of Emotion on Writing Development and Writing Transfer Across College Courses and Beyond." *Composition Forum*, vol. 34, 2016.

Kutney, Joshua P. "Will Writing Awareness Transfer to Writing Performance? Response to Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2007, pp. 276-79.

Miles, Libby, Michael Pennell, Kim Hensley Owens, Jeremiah Dyehouse, Helen O'Grady, Nedra Reynolds, Robert Schwegler, and Linda Shamoon. "Thinking Vertically." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2008, pp. 503-11.

Read, Sarah, and Michael J. Michaud. "Writing about Writing and the Multimajor Professional Writing Course." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2015, pp. 427-457.

Ruecker, Todd. "Reimagining 'English 1311: Expository English Composition' as 'Introduction to Rhetoric and Writing Studies.'" *Composition Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2011, pp. 87-111.

Smith, Allison D., Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins. *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*. Independence: Cengage Learning, 2009.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1980, pp. 378-88.

Sylvia, Cami, and Michael J. Michaud. "Looking into Writing." *Composition Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2015, pp. 186-89.

Wardle, Elizabeth. "Continuing the Dialogue: Follow-Up Comments on 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2008, pp. 175-81.

---. "Creative Repurposing for Expansive Learning: Considering 'Problem-Exploring" and "Answer-Getting' Dispositions in Individuals and Fields." *Composition Forum*, vol. 26, 2012.

---. "'Mutt Genres' and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2009, pp. 765-89.

---. "Intractable Writing Program Problems, Kairos, and Writing about Writing: A Profile of the University of Central Florida's First-Year Composition Program." *Composition Forum*, vol. 27, 2013.

Wardle, Elizabeth, and Doug Downs. "Reflecting Back and Looking Forward: Revisiting 'Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions' Five Years On." *Composition Forum*, vol. 27, 2013.

---. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*, 3rd edition. Bedford, 2017.

Writing about Writing Network. www.writingaboutwriting.net.

APPENDIX A
Comparison of Concurrent Assignment Sequences

Program Requirements	Pop Culture FYC Course Projects and Readings (control group)	Writing-about-Writing Course Projects and Readings (experimental group)
Project One: Analysis based on primary research	Choose a local, public place and write an observation that helps readers to see the place differently than they might otherwise see it. Write an argumentative essay that makes a claim about the values that underlie the space and the relationship between those values and the physical space.	Through a meticulous examination of your own writing practices, write a reflective, analytical essay in which you investigate your knowledge of and assumptions about writing in order to arrive at a new understanding of yourself as a writer.
Selected Assigned Readings	• "Writing about groups, spaces, and places" (Smith, Smith, and Watkins) • "Mallingering" (Kowinski)	• "The Inspired Writer Vs. the Real Writer" (Allen) • "Unteaching the Five-Paragraph Essay" (Foley)

		• "Shitty First Drafts" (Lamott) • "Conducting Think-Aloud Protocol" (Bommarito and Chappelow)
Project Two: Analysis using a text as a critical lens	You will analyze a pop culture text of your choice using one of the readings we have done in class to narrow and frame your analysis. You must make a strong argument about the cultural significance of this pop cultural text and clearly show how the claim of the critical essay relates to your own claim.[5]	Using Nancy Sommers' research on the revision practices of different writers, you will observe how another student has employed different revision techniques through the course of multiple drafts and then write an analysis of these observations to arrive at new knowledge about revision.
Selected Assigned Readings	• "Television Shapes the Soul" (Novak) • "Disney Dolls" (Maio) • "Beavis and Butthead: No Future for Postmodern Youth" (Kellner) • "Merchandising Madness" (Rubin)	• "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" (Sommers) • "How to Read Like a Writer" (Bunn) • "Teach Writing as a Process Not a Product" (Murray)
Project Three: Analysis using multiple sources	Write a thorough analysis of a pop culture text using the ideas or strategies of multiple research sources to inform and guide your analysis.	Write a reflective, analytical essay in which you (1) survey existing research on a particular topic related to writing studies (of your choosing), (2) demonstrate thoughtful engagement with each source through summary and analysis, and (3) show how each source affects your thinking on the topic.
Selected Assigned Readings	• "Review of *Scream*" (Ebert) • "John Hughes Goes Deep: The Unexpected Heaviosity of *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*" (Almond)	Students choose readings on common writing studies topics such as: • ecocomposition • WAC/WID

	• "Love and Sex in Romance Magazines" (Sonenschein) • "Defining Trade Characters and Their Role in American Popular Culture" (Phillips)	• visual literacy • literacy crises • formulaic writing • writing in digital environments

APPENDIX B
Bibliography of Readings from Concurrent Groups

Allen, Sarah. "The Inspired Writer vs. the Real Writer," *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* vol. 1, writingspaces.org/essays/inspired-writer-vs-real-writer.

Almond, Steve. "John Hughes Goes Deep: The Unexpected Heaviosity of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off." The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 212-18.

Bommarito, Daniel V., and Brent D. Chappelow. "Conducting a Think-Aloud Protocol." Arizona State University Writing Programs, bchappelow.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Bommarito_Chappelow_Conducting_TAP.pdf.

Bunn, Mike. "How to Read Like a Writer," *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* vol. 2, writingspaces.org/bunn--how-to-read-like-a-writer.

Ebert, Roger. "Scream." RogerEbert.com, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/scream-1996.

Foley, Marie. "Unteaching the Five-Paragraph Essay." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 231-35.

Kellner, Douglas. "Beavis and Butthead: No Future for Postmodern Youth." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 685-90.

Kowinski, William Severini. "Mallingering." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 283-91.

Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*, edited by Paul Escholz et al., 9th ed., Bedford/St. Martins, 2005, pp. 93-96.

Maio, Kathy. "Disney's Dolls." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 236-40.

Murray, Donald M. "Teach Writing as a Process, Not Product." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, edited by Victor Villanueva, 2nd ed., National Council of Teachers of English, 2003, pp. 3-6

Novak, Michael. "Television Shapes the Soul." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 675-80.

Phillips, Barbara J. "Defining Trade Characters and Their Role in American Popular Culture." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 145-157.

Rubin, Lawrence C. "Merchandising Madness: Pills, Promises, and Better Living through Chemistry." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 158-69.

Smith, Allison D., Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins. "Writing about Groups, Spaces, and Places" *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture.* Independence: Cengage Learning, 2009.

Sonenschein, David. "Love and Sex in Romance Magazines." *The Pop Culture Zone: Writing Critically about Popular Culture*, edited by Allison D. Smith, Trixie G. Smith, and Stacia Watkins, Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 473-80.