Chapter 2: Knowledge Processes and Program Practices: Using the WPA Outcomes Statement and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Curricular Renewal

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CHAPTER 2

KNOWLEDGE PROCESSES AND PROGRAM PRACTICES

Using the WPA Outcomes Statement and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Curricular Renewal

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INTRODUCTION

As this volume attests, the number of composition and library professionals exploring connections between writing studies and information literacy has expanded significantly in recent years. This proliferation of interest related to writing and research as complex, generative, and intertwined practices has resulted in renewed attention to the guiding principles for first-year writing programs. In particular, the serendipitous publication of the 2014 revision of the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (WPA OS version 3.0) and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (finalized in 2015) resulted in what Gwendolynne Reid (2014) has called a “kairotic moment” (p. 4) for reconsidering, reconceptualizing, and ultimately renewing goals for first-year composition.

In order to highlight the potential of this moment, this chapter offers insights into how the Framework document, in its attention to threshold concepts, provides writing program administrators (WPAs) with a powerful tool for revitalizing goals for first-year composition when viewed in tandem with the WPA OS. Such revitalization is especially important in first-year programs where outcomes-based models have led instructors and students alike to envision composition (and hence writing) as a set of rote skills and services within the general education curriculum—or in which one fixed model of the rhetorical situation, the writing process, or the research paper holds sway. Estrem (2015) noted that threshold models (like those offered within the Framework document) can be used to counter the dominance of outcomes-based conceptions of first-year composition (like those in the WPA OS) because they offer “a differently meaningful framework for intervening in commonplace understandings about writing,” enabling “faculty to articulate the content of their courses, identify student learning throughout the course experience, and create shared values for writing in a way that a focus on end products—on outcomes—cannot” (p. 90). Differences across the documents—in language, in emphasis, and, we argue, in their underlying conceptualization of composing processes—therefore offer a fertile ground for curricular negotiation with program renewal in mind.

Within this chapter, we address how writing program administrators can navigate important distinctions inherent in the WPA OS and the Framework document in order to revitalize notions of process in first-year writing curricula. In particular, the chapter calls attention to curriculum development and outreach strategies that both foster program-specific decision-making called for in the WPA OS and answer key questions posed to faculty by the Framework: specifically, how do we, as writing administrators, design curricula to “help students view themselves as information producers” (ACRL, 2016, p. 13)?

WHY PROCESS?

The ACRL’s question regarding student development prompts us to consider student participation in general education; as such, it is clearly related to fundamental questions posed by writing program administrators about how our programs position students as information consumers and producers. Indeed, in describing the revision of the WPA OS in 2014, the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement Revision Task Force
indicated how such questions guided key changes to the document: specifically, participants at a 2012 workshop session preceding the revisions “were concerned that students were becoming consumers and producers of digital media without having much opportunity to reflect critically and capitalize on ‘affordances’ that digital media provide” (Dryer et al., 2014, p. 132).

In their 2014 revision, the Task Force sought to emphasize an expansive vision of purposes and processes for writing, as well as the importance of first-year composition in helping students to “integrate their ideas with those of others’ (version 2.0)” (as cited in Dryer et al., 2014, p. 136). The 2014 updates were, at least in part, driven by composition scholarship highlighting the shortcomings of stage-process models for writing (e.g., Breuch, 2002; DeJoy, 2004; Kent, 1999). These models, dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, often depicted writing as a three-step process (prewriting, drafting, and revising). In many cases, instructors translated such models as a series of discrete, linear steps, ignoring the recursive and dynamic nature of writing processes. In keeping with the Task Force’s observation that, at the time of the revision, “stage-process models had continued their retreat” (Dryer et al., 2014, p. 136), the WPA OS version 3.0 changed the language of the document to invite consideration of multiple, varied composing processes and to eliminate some of the references to stage-process models, as indicated in the excerpts in Box 2.1.

While the revised language places a greater emphasis on student involvement in the composing process (using terms like develop, adapt, experience, and reflect instead of understand, learn, and be aware), the WPA OS still presents writing program administrators with fundamental challenges when used for curricular design. These challenges were anticipated by Beaufort (2012) in her critique of the “Processes” section of the WPA OS (version 2.0): “outcomes in the Processes category seem misplaced . . . or vague (‘understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing process’—how will anyone know either what to teach, or how to assess this outcome?)” (pp. 182–183). While the Task Force clearly attempted to address such concerns through revision, version 3.0’s “Processes” outcomes remain both somewhat vague and rather daunting, in light of constraints that frame first-year composition courses on many campuses. Beaufort’s questions about process outcomes—what to teach and how to measure achievement—therefore loom large for writing program administrators aiming to adapt new approaches and aims for composition.

In revising the nature of our goals for first-year composition, then, it is up to WPAs to deliberately and purposefully reframe process in ways that acknowledge the nature of curricular “uptake” that influences day-to-day practices within our programs. And though composition theory has moved somewhat beyond discussions of process as central to building disciplinary knowledge, questions of writing processes—how they take shape in student writing, how they are facilitated within classrooms and assignments, and, perhaps most importantly, who has ownership over definitions and determinants of such processes—are still of vital importance in the ongoing work of first-year programs.

Yet whether we use the WPA OS to establish process as a distinct set of stages or as a set of flexible, individualized practices writers can adapt, revise, and develop over time, we may not effectively transform the ways in which our programs enact the nature of learning,
participation, or information production we value in first-year composition curricula. Instead, in this chapter we affirm a vision for negotiating curricular renewal shared by DeJoy (2004) in *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies*:

While many revised process-based approaches claim transformative power, . . . I am more interested in creating a transitional approach, one that acknowledges first-phase process model assumptions as the starting point for many teachers and students, and that attempts to create ways for us to move together toward literacy practices that center participation and contribution as possibilities for all members of the writing classes. (p. 12)
Because it emphasizes knowledge practices and metaliteracies, the Framework reminds us that both student learning and professional development are always transitional processes, always grounded in “behavioral, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive engagement with the information ecosystem” (ACRL, 2016, p. 2). Therefore, it offers us ways of reframing the nature, goals, and gaps inherent in the WPA OS’s discussion of process. Negotiating distinctions between the WPA OS and Framework can help us develop curricula that support students in their transition from consumers to producers. This act of negotiation can also facilitate program renewal in moving both teachers and students away from basic process model assumptions and toward more multidimensional frameworks for engaging composing as a generative and collaborative process.

WHY THRESHOLDS?

Meyer and Land (2006) defined a threshold concept as “a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (p. 3). Thresholds, then, offer us ways to think about writing, to think about thinking rather than writing as a set of skills. Yet, too often, outcomes models continue to focus on a set of measurable skills. According to Maid and D’Angelo (2016),

Both ACRL and WPA created their original documents out of the need for assessment and accountability. It appears that the latest revision of the WPA Outcomes Statement is still in that mode. ACRL, on the other hand, has moved to a new framework that stresses threshold concepts—or ways of changing how students think about information. (p. 48)

While outcomes are important to measure student performance, the WPA OS “leaves us entangled in a model that conceives of learning as a straight line . . . when we know learning is much more like scrambling across rocky terrain” (Estrem, 2015, p. 93).

This straight line is embodied in the WPA OS “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing” and the ACRL Framework’s “Research as Inquiry” as illustrated in Box 2.2.

The WPA outcomes establish what students need to accomplish by the end of first-year composition while the ACRL knowledge practices provide the process to reach these outcomes. For example, the last outcome in the WPA OS indicates the student will use a variety of strategies to compose texts integrating the student’s and others’ ideas. The ACRL breaks down this outcome in several ways: developing a research question, organizing information, synthesizing ideas, and drawing conclusions. In tandem, these documents assist instructors in designing assignments and courses to focus on composing and critical thinking processes to reach the desired outcome.

While the ACRL’s knowledge practices “may on the surface appear to be similar to the standards model: a listing of skills or abilities or practices that can be discretely assessed” (Maid and D’Angelo, 2016, p. 48), the inclusion of dispositions in the Framework allows writing program administrators to “articulate the messiness of student learning in a way outcomes alone won’t” (Estrem, 2015, p. 103). The dispositions acknowledge the unending education process, which students may begin to recognize in first-year composition: “value intellectual curiosity,” “maintain an open
Part I  Lenses, Thresholds, and Frameworks

mind,” and “value persistence, adaptability, and flexibility” (ACRL, 2016, p. 7). None of these dispositions can be measured in a final product. Consequently, the Framework, in its articulation of key thresholds centered on reading, research, and composing as generative processes, can be used successfully in tandem with the WPA OS for program renewal.

FOSTERING PROGRAM-SPECIFIC DECISION-MAKING

In the following section, we outline two sets of administrative processes in which the negotiation of outcomes and thresholds can be used to animate process in first-year writing programs: in revising curricular aims and objectives, and in expanding or extending curricular conversations about writing.

Revitalizing Curriculum Design: Revising Curricular Aims and Objectives

Recent research has outlined both threshold concepts in writing studies (see, in particular, Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), as well as practical strategies for incorporating information literacy within the design of first-year composition programs (D’Angelo, Jamieson, Maid, & Walker, 2016; Downs & Robertson,
In this growing body of literature, four prevailing patterns emerge that are most relevant to negotiating the WPA OS and the Framework for the purposes of program administration and renewal:

- **Diversifying and valuing students’ experiences with research processes in first-year composition:** For too long, first-year composition programs have remained reliant on models of “the research paper” as the culmination of first-year composition course work. Yet scholarship on student research practices (Howard & Jamieson 2013; Blythe & Gonzalez, 2016) demonstrates the insufficiency of using this model to teach processes that transfer and apply to the various communicative contexts students encounter over time.

- **Scaffolding writing curricula to incorporate multiple related assignments:** Well-sequence writing tasks call upon students to use research and writing as inquiry-driven activities that wed reading, writing, and information literacy beyond the “final research paper.” Designing and scaffolding curricula around diverse experiences with research simultaneously engages students in both composing and inquiry as interrelated processes—processes that spur students to consciously revise, reconsider, and adapt their roles as writers and participants in response to variations in the selected information context (see, for example, Holliday & Fagerheim, 2006; Blackwell-Starnes, 2016).

- **Using clear language to articulate program goals and practices:** One of the benefits of employing the WPA OS and the Framework in tandem is their tendency to offer terminology that attends to curricular practices (WPA OS), aspirational behaviors (Framework), and shared goals for curricula. This terminology can be used consistently across guidelines and assignments program-wide to prominently frame research and writing processes.

  For example, consider the related elements from the WPA OS and the Framework document shown in Box 2.3.

  Note that the language of the OS indicates that the process of reflection takes place for “students” at a stable point (“by the end of first-year composition”) and, presumably, after written work has been composed and stabilized. The Framework, in contrast, casts both the learner and what is learned in terms of process, noting the learners are “developing.” Additionally, the Framework emphasizes a degree of agency that is not inherent to the OS, indicating that the “creation processes” are “their [learners’] own,” and that their choices have an impact. As such, the language of the latter document positions students more actively within the curriculum, pointing to the importance of the composer’s choices in determining both purpose and effectiveness. This language is necessary if we wish to cast students in the role of information producers within our programs and classrooms.

  Such distinctions point to great potential for revitalizing the language of program outcomes to incorporate active processes and to engage students. Viewed together, the documents point to ways in which process goals can be connected to real, autonomous writers and related to cogent rhetorical situations in which both research and composing play a part.

- **Making metaliteracy visible and attainable:** By revitalizing the description of key processes in our course curricula, we can begin to realign the language of program outcomes to foster metacognitive goals for transfer of learning and to highlight learners’ contributions as composers. As noted by Maid and D’Angelo (2016), both the
WPA OS and the Framework call attention to the importance of metaliteracy and metacognition in curricular design. As noted previously, the ACRL (2015) integrates key "behavioral, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive" forms of "engagement" within the Framework, linking knowledge practices to "dispositions" that define how conscious participation takes shape in research processes (p. 2). The Council of Writing Program Administrators has created a second document, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, to establish central “habits of mind” important to writing development; yet, according to Maid and D’Angelo (2016), the ACRL Framework “presents a more integrated whole in terms of contextualizing student learning” (p. 45).

It then falls to local programs—and, in particular, to writing program administrators—to articulate the ways in which curricular goals call upon students to develop, examine, and refine the ways of learning, thinking, and composing that underlie meaningful participation within writing contexts. This articulation cannot take place without affirming the kinds of processes that take place in the classroom, through which the aims of the program are shaped and reinterpreted. Using the Framework to inform the language of the WPA OS as adapted within particular programs can help foreground the linkages between program practices and program outcomes in ways that speak to Beaufort’s (2012) questions about what to teach, and how to assess it, in first-year composition.

**Revitalizing Collaboration: Developing Relationships With Stakeholders**

The Framework’s (2016) first appendix presents suggestions for librarians, faculty, and administrators on how to use the document (pp. 10–14). Because librarians are the primary audience for the Framework, most of the work is placed in their hands. Yet, writing program administrators are in a unique position for incorporating information literacy frameworks within first-year composition, writing across the curriculum, and writing in the discipline programs. By collaborating on curriculum redesign, WPAs and librarians can create relationships with a variety of

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**BOX 2.3**

**SELECTED COMPARISON OF WPA OUTCOMES AND ACRL “INFORMATION CREATION IS A PROCESS” KNOWLEDGE PRACTICE**

**WPA OS (3.0): “Processes” Section**

*By the end of first-year composition, students should*

- reflect on the development of composing practices and how those practices influence their work.

**ACRL Framework: “Information Creation Is a Process” Section**

*Learners who are developing their information literate abilities*

- develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys.*
stakeholders and develop a common language to talk about writing and information literacy, which is central to revitalization and renewal of composition programs.

- **Creating relationships:** Because first-year composition is typically a required course for all students, a variety of people and programs have a stake in its design and implementation: writing instructors, writing centers, student support services, centers for teaching and learning, general education and curriculum committees, and administrators. Reaching out, formally and informally, to these stakeholders can introduce them to the types of goals and knowledge practices students encounter in these courses.

- **Creating a common language:** Too often, WPAs encounter outside stakeholders who claim students can’t write even though they can’t articulate what makes the writing poor. While the WPA OS may help faculty articulate what desirable qualities are absent in student writing, it can also reinscribe the notion that students should have a clear set of skills they develop (and transfer) “by the end of first-year composition” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014). The language of the Framework’s thresholds can help to counter these perceptions. Hallway conversations, workshops, and meetings explaining thresholds can introduce stakeholders to a process in which students are learning along a continuum rather than meeting defined outcomes at the end of first-year composition.

- **Creating investment:** In addition, this common language could ease the transition for composition instructors such as adjuncts and graduate teaching assistants who may not be composition specialists, are unaware of information literacy concepts, or are teaching at a variety of institutions with differing curricula and research databases. By working together with librarians and all writing instructors to develop a first-year writing curriculum, participants are more likely to have a vested interest in its implementation.

## REVITALIZING PROGRAMS: IMPERATIVES FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

Using the *Framework for Information Literacy* in combination with the WPA OS in order to renew first-year composition curricula can help us to achieve a number of theoretical, pedagogical, and administrative aims. However, to effectively translate these aims within curricular practice, it is important to recall two additional imperatives for shaping first-year composition programs in light of both writing processes and information literacy:

- The WPA Outcomes Statement (version 3.0) must be adapted to reflect the values, attributes, and institutional aims of individual writing programs. The introduction to the revised statement (2014) notes that the document “intentionally defines only ‘outcomes,’ or types of results, and not ‘standards,’ or precise levels of achievement” (p. 144). The Framework document, while not intended to provide a list of standards for programs, does offer distinct language and complementary concepts that can aid in adaptation. As noted previously, collaboration with a range of stakeholders allows for greater inclusion and ownership in the
process and is therefore essential to program revitalization.

- In developing outcomes and curricular revisions, WPAs must understand that a “transitional approach,” to borrow the language of DeJoy (2004), requires building both knowledge and participation among these stakeholders over time. As noted by Dryer et al. (2014), the WPA OS is widely utilized, though “most of those encountering the document are neither the general public nor expert writing teachers” (p. 139). Using the Framework to build upon familiarity with stage-process models (likely among students and instructors) can help writing program administrators extend and collaboratively develop those models with writing for information literacy in mind. Doing so can add depth and complexity to discussions of curricular aims, practices, and standards while fostering greater inclusion.

Revitalizing first-year composition curricula to reflect the changing nature of both writing and inquiry is important as programs grapple with new disciplinary knowledge, new models for learning, and new writing processes suitable to diverse rhetorical situations. Knowableable negotiation of the WPA OS and the Frameworks document offers perhaps the best basis for creating curricular designs that help students navigate dynamic composing processes over time and in various informational contexts.

REFERENCES


