Articulate Bodies: Writing instruction in a performance-based curriculum
PI: Margaret Werry, Associate Professor, Theatre Arts and Dance
RA: Stephanie Lein Walseth, MA/PhD Program, Theatre Arts and Dance

Part 1: Background and Research Question(s)

For the past year, the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance has been engaged in the early stages of the Writing Enriched Curriculum pilot project, in collaboration with Pamela Flash from the Centre for Writing. The goal of the project is to enrich writing pedagogy by having faculty devise a consensus statement about what constitutes effective writing in their specific discipline, and a strategy for how component writing abilities can be systematically taught at all levels and in all parts of the curriculum. By the conclusion of Spring 2010, the WEC process in TAD will have amassed a vast data pool, including surveys of students and faculty; transcripts of focused meetings in which faculty discuss the characteristics and abilities of writing in their discipline; and interviews with a range of adjunct and permanent faculty, from designers and choreographers to puppeteers and voice coaches, about how they understand the relationship of writing to both their artistic practice and their work as teachers.

This research has revealed a deep, but not unsurprising, divide in the discipline between those faculty who identify primarily as scholars and those who identify as artists, with writing – traditionally understood – considered to be the property of the former and little concern of the latter (even when they used it with frequency in their teaching). This kind of schism between practice and scholarship is typical of arts departments in US higher education. At its worst, it results in accusations of anti-intellectualism from one side, and detachment from an institution that "doesn't get practice" on the other, while students struggle to conceptually bridge these two dimensions of their curriculum, often abandoning one in favor of the other. The surprising discoveries of the WEC process, however, began to emerge once the definition of writing was expanded to encompass embodied, ephemeral, material and visual forms of communication. Both practitioners and scholars talked eloquently, and concretely, about the ways in which performing bodies articulate, making writing integral to art-making and artistic creativity to writing. They theorized writing practice in ways that may aid in developing teaching techniques and instruments to support a thoroughly integrated performance curriculum.

In this project, we ask how performance practitioners describe the relationship between their artistic work and textual practices of writing. How might understanding writing in this expansive sense, and on the terms of practitioners, aid in redesigning curricula in Theatre, Performance, and Dance, and motivating students in writing instruction?

Part 2: Project Description

I will analyze the data gathered in the WEC process (Spring 2009 through Spring 2010) in collaboration with the graduate RA who has been responsible for much of the WEC research, Stephanie Lein Walseth. Together, we will write and publish two articles that examine the ways in which Theatre and Dance faculty understand the role of writing in
artistic practice and pedagogy. My hypothesis is that an expanded definition of writing (as "the making of physical marks in the service of communication," the WEC project definition) can help practitioners articulate the underlying conceptual structures that shape performance practice—their logics and syntax, as it were—that often remain opaque to colleagues who ally themselves with the dominant epistemological and expressive modalities of the liberal education curriculum. The articles will outline the ways in which my Department's WEC-assisted discussion about these structures provides the basis for reimagining our curriculum, transforming pedagogical practice, and for communicating disciplinary principles that integrate practice and scholarship to students.

The proposed project builds on, but significantly diverges from the WEC research that the RA is currently engaged in. Where the WEC process uses interview and survey data only to derive a list of discipline-specific writing characteristics and abilities, and to audit current writing instruction through gathering syllabi and assignments, this project will conduct a thorough analysis of that data. It will write this analysis up and disseminate it to a broader disciplinary readership, bringing it into dialogue with existing scholarship on embodied epistemologies and performance pedagogy.

Methodology
The data on which this project is based consists of a series of transcripts of meetings (3 with the entire Departmental faculty; 9 with a self-selected group of tenure/tenure-track faculty (predominantly scholars of theory, history and criticism in Dance and Theatre)), and of 20 focused one-on-one interviews with a range of tenure/tenure-track, adjunct and part-time faculty, selected to be representative of their specific areas (Design, Performance, Acting, Dance technique, Dance composition). My analysis will revisit the WEC data, focusing on the following questions: how do the interview subjects define writing? How do they articulate its relationship to practice? What is the value and what are the limits of using the terminology of writing, traditionally understood (for instance, syntax, grammar, structure) to describe performance practice, and vice versa? To what extent can we understand performance practices such as dance or improvisation as "languages", "compositions", "articulations", "inscriptions" or "communications", and to what extent are they analogous or translatable to more tradition forms of textual writing? How do the interview subjects move in their pedagogy between physical expression, material modes of inscription (eg sketches, photographic documentation), and textual modes?

Role of Research Assistant
ISW grant funds would be used to support a graduate RA (Stephanie Lein Walseth) for a period of six weeks (at 50%) over summer 2010. During this time, she would compile a literature review, and conduct initial coding and analysis of the interview transcripts that were gathered during WEC-funded research from Spring 2009 through Spring 2010. The two articles would be co-authored by the PI and the RA. This project will significantly contribute to Lein Walseth's professional and scholarly development, augmenting her credentials in critical and performance pedagogy (one of her major areas of research interest), and garnering publication credit in the year before her entry into the job-market.
Timetable
The project would commence on May 17 2010, with the RA’s appointment lasting through June 30 2010. At the conclusion of this period, the coding and analysis of interview transcripts, and the literature review would be complete, with the majority of both articles completed in draft form. The articles would then be finished by the PI, ready for submission 1 September 2010.

Part 3: Relevance and Plans for Dissemination

Contribution
This project will be of value to teaching-with-writing initiatives in the Arts, which have been hampered by differences between practitioners and scholars over the forms of “literacy” that should be privileged within these disciplines. Theatre, Performance, and Dance Studies have a significant theoretical literature that critiques the text-centric epistemologies that prevail over institutionalized learning in the US, and advocates for a recognition of the kind of “corporeal intelligences” and ways of knowing privileged in the practice of performance. There has likewise been some work on the historical tensions between practice-based and scholarly agendas in departments of Theatre, Speech, and Dance in US liberal higher education. None of this literature, however, has examined the ways in which practitioners actually teach (and, in teaching, theorize) the exercise of corporeal intelligences in institutional environments structured to foster other kinds of abilities. Nor does it move beyond the level of critique to assay the common ground that practitioners and scholars already share, or to craft curricular and class-room level remedies to address these issues.

This project will address these shortcomings by presenting to teachers and administrators in the Arts a series of rationales for expanding the instruction of writing—and indeed our understanding of what we mean by “writing” itself—beyond the purview of the traditionally “scholarly” precincts of their disciplines. The promise of these rationales is that they arise out of the practice and self-understandings of artist-teachers, and are thus likely to achieve cross-disciplinary buy-in (in ways that previous Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Intensive initiatives did not). Such an approach appeals to the challenges that college-level arts programs face in integrating their practice-based curricula with the broader institutional mandates of liberal education, and providing continuity to the student experience of learning in their disciplines.

Intended audience and dissemination
This project would make the methodologies of the ground-breaking WEC study accessible to other Theatre, Performance, and Dance programs in the US and beyond through publishing articles in two major field journals: Text and Performance Quarterly and Dance Research Journal. The originality of the WEC study’s approach hinges on the principle that prioritizing distinctive disciplinary methods and understandings of writing, as defined by faculty themselves, is fundamental to improving college-level writing instruction. But few faculty in Theatre and Dance keep abreast of Writing Studies and Education literature; this article will be invaluable in translating the pilot’s findings for this disciplinary audience. In addition, we will convene a panel to feature this research at
the 2011 American Association for Theatre Research conference, where it will reach a broad audience of practitioners and scholars. With the assistance of Pamela Flash, I will look for opportunities to present this work to other Arts and practice-based disciplines at the University of Minnesota, especially as they enter or contemplate entering into the WEC process.