The WPA as (Journal) Writer: What the Record Reveals

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The Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators had its inception as a pamphlet called "Issues in Writing Program Administration," edited and published by yours truly as a part of the first MLA teaching of Writing Division convention program in New York City, December, 1976. Of the seven sessions at that convention devoted to issues in teaching writing, one had been reserved for an organizational meeting of a new thing under the sun, an association to serve the interests of people administering writing programs in American and Canadian colleges and universities. That association was of course WPA: the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The purpose of the pamphlet was to suggest to whoever showed up at that organizational meeting, and to anyone else who might be interested, some of the issues such an association might address. The list of authors contributing to the pamphlet is an illustrious one. It contains the names of a number of people who have distinguished themselves in this field in the past decade, but who at that time were obscure workers in the vineyards, as we all were. Among them are Joseph Comprone, Harry Crosby, Timothy Donovan, Erika Lindemann, Elaine Maimon, Donald McQuade, Nathaniel Teich, and Stephen Witte.

In contributing to this pamphlet each author undertook, as the introduction puts it, to survey "an issue that writing program administrators face in their long-range planning and in their day to day work." One thing the brief essays in the pamphlet show is that the topics that concern WPAs have not changed very much in the past decade. Many of the same issues have been dealt with over the years, but in much greater detail, both in the newsletter that immediately followed the organizational pamphlet and in the fourteen issues that the journal has published as a refereed publication since it went between red covers with Volume 3, in Fall, 1979. What I think has changed, though, and very much for the better, is the sophistication and knowledgeability with which we are addressing these topics. What a rereading of the WPA journal for the past six years suggests to me, is not just an increasing awareness that the issues concerning us are complex. Equally important, that rereading suggests to me first, an increasing awareness that, from the point of view of writing program administration, the key to understanding and dealing with those complex issues is their common relationship to program structure; and, second, the increasing sense of professional integrity of those who practice Writing Program Administration.

In one area, in fact, there has been little change, because change was not greatly needed. Every issue of *WPA* to date has contained at least one piece intended to explain how to do something, how to accomplish effectively some particular task that is part of almost every WPA's responsibilities. Many of these topics were first addressed, briefly, in the pamphlet I described earlier. Articles of this sort are the bread and butter of such a journal as ours and are often the articles that readers quite rightly turn to first. *WPA* has published how-to articles over the years on evaluating writing programs, dealing with outside evaluators, evaluating teaching, training lab tutors, hiring composition specialists, retraining older faculty as composition teachers, establishing writing-across-the-curriculum programs, running regional conferences, dealing with faculty unions, dealing with problems of part-time faculty, fostering cooperation between high schools and college writing programs, and evaluating lab programs and new composition textbooks. And of course WPA has published since 1981 an excellent tool for this latter task, its annual bibliography of the year's crop of newly published composition textbooks.

The general quality of the journal's how-to articles has always been relatively high. Each one isolates a single issue and addresses it practically. As a result, we are gradually developing a systematic, generalized core of knowledge of the sort that is basic to any professional practice.

The articles in the second category I would like to mention are how-to articles also, but of a special kind. They put how-to into context. Instead of dealing with issues individually, these articles deal with them as interrelated. Contextual how-to articles of this type tend to make a common assumption: the relation of program structure to educational quality. This is an important assumption. It underlies, for example, the difference between the editorial policy of *WPA* and the editorial policy of *CCC* and other journals that publish articles on teaching writing. *WPA* does not publish articles on classroom practice, theory of composition, or research in composition unless they deal with the relationship of these topics to program administration. The distinction is important, because as writing teachers, all of us—and all the teachers who work in our programs—naturally tend to equate the quality of education at any institution with the quality of teaching that goes on there and with the quality of resources—library, laboratories, and so on—available to students and teachers. What WPAs learn to assume is that, with regard at least to writing programs, another factor affects educational quality as well. That factor is the way the elements in a program are organized, articulated, and sustained.

It matters a lot to us, of course, that our institution has a faculty of effective composition teachers, effective ESL teachers, effective basic writing teachers, effective lab tutors, and effective library personnel. But as WPAs, it also matters to us that each group of effective teachers knows what the other groups are doing, each group adapts its teaching to

what the others are doing, and each group is aware of its part in carefully organized sequential and parallel patterns of instruction that make the program as a whole easily accessible to students and answerable to their needs. This relation of educational quality to program structure is a central issue for WPAs. In the past few years in the pages of *WPA* the analysis and critical understanding of this central issue has become increasingly sophisticated and well informed.

Again, some particulars may help make my point. A number of articles in *WPA* have not just told us how to do our job better. They have also told us how the job and the tools it takes to do the job suit the general purpose of the job. Articles have analyzed, for example, the complexities of the relationship between writing lab faculty and their assumptions and practices on the one hand and English Department faculty and their assumptions and practices on the other hand. Articles have analyzed and evaluated the uses and abuses in writing programs as a whole, of computers and word processors. Articles have analyzed and evaluated testing procedures in large, multi-institutional systems and also of testing as used in a wide variety of other institutions nationwide. And articles have analyzed and evaluated the professional implications of training and using peer tutors. The quality of this analysis and evaluation of the systems we are involved in has risen, I think, as our professional self-confidence has risen. The quality of these articles shows that we are increasingly able to accept and make good use of the not always entirely flattering results of our analysis and evaluation.

This new ability to criticize ourselves and put that criticism to good use is especially evident, I think, in the last and somewhat smaller category of articles I shall mention. This category interests me especially because it contributes to making the Council of Writing Program Administrators more than just a professional guild looking after the welfare and institutional interests of its members. The category is comprised of a few articles appearing mainly in the past two years, that address directly or indirectly the issue of the professional identity of WPAs and of our national organization.

In discussing this category I will be mentioning several articles specifically. I will not be singling these articles out, though, to award palms. These are not necessarily Ken Bruffee's Oldies but Goodies. In discussing them I make no claim for their quality, nor do I cast aspersions on the quality or value of the many excellent articles I will not be able to mention. I choose these five to discuss in detail only because they seem to me capable of being read as a special type—the type that helps us tell ourselves who we are. Each is implicitly or explicitly about "the process of defining, redefining, and attempting to exercise control over" the skills required to work competently as a WPA (Turner and Hodge, in Jackson 72).

One of the earliest articles of this type is Leon Coburn's "Notes of a Freshman Comp Director: Give Up Hope All You Who Enter Here" (Coburn gives the quotation in the original Italian, of course), published in the Spring, 1982, issue of *WPA* (Vol. 5, No. 3). This article, in spite of its glum title and Candide-like narrative form is remarkable for its revelation of the author's conscious professional self-awareness as a WPA. This awareness is evident first in the reasons he gives for becoming a WPA after "10 years as a specialist in eighteenth-century British literature." Coburn lists the following as "my main reasons for taking" the job:

1. I had been a severe critic of the composition program for several years and felt that it was time to either put up or shut up.

2. Rightly or wrongly, I thought I could do better a job than the other candidates for the position.

3. I thought there might be more opportunities for SIGNIFICANT research in composition than in my academic specialty (9; emphasis mine).

Coburn's professional self-awareness is clear also in one of his first acts as WPA: to make contact between his local program and its national context by engaging a pair of WPA Consultant/Evaluators to visit his campus. Finally, the conclusions Coburn draws from his experience are conclusions we all easily understand and recognize as insights central to this professional field:

1. No job on campus is as thankless or as demanding as directing the writing program.

2. No other job offers a better opportunity to have a significant impact on students' education.

3. There is a potential rapport among writing teachers that can be mutually supporting and very satisfying.

4. What we do really matters (13).

In the next issue of *WPA*, Fall-Winter, 1982 (Vol. 6, No. 1) Stephen North's "Helping Ed" tells us some more home truths about being a WPA. North had the courage to look at the vital quick of any writing program, one student's career through the program at North's own institution. The result is a frank, unadorned story of almost total programmatic incoherence. However successfully lucid and neat the program in question might appear on paper, where it counts this program (and it might just as easily be the program of any one of us) beyond question fails. North draws our attention to the payoff in writing program administration: beyond the facts and figures, beyond the committee meetings and the curricular descriptions, lies the experience of our students. It is

perhaps the toughest criterion we have to measure ourselves by. And it is an important milestone for us as professionals that, as the appearance of North's article in *WPA* suggests, we have begun to hold ourselves to it.

The healthy programmatic self-criticism of North's article is shared also by John C. Bean and John Ramage's article in the Fall-Winter, 1983, issue of *WPA* (Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2) entitled "An Experimental Program to Increase the Efficiency of Freshman English at Montana State University: An Initial Report." Like North, Bean and Ramage take a risk. They describe a large innovative program that they are themselves in great measure responsible for designing and administrating. What is important about the article from my point of view is that these writers carefully detail their program's failures as well as its successes; they tell us their doubts about it as well as their reasonable certainties. The article is no white wash. It is no show-and-tell public relations piece written with one eye cocked toward the institution's higher administration. It is written on the assumption that its intended audience will read sympathetically and with knowledge born of plenty of its own administrative experience. It is written to fellow professionals who know the meaning of a batting average. For members of an organization to be able to assume that kind of audience in addressing their colleagues nationally bespeaks, in my view, a high degree of professional maturity on the part of us all.

That we are working toward such a level of professional maturity is attested to also by the publication in the Spring, 1983, issue (Vol. 6, No. 3) of Stephen C. Zelnick's "A Report on the Workshop on the Administration of Writing Programs, 1982." This article raises a sensitive professional issue for public debate within the profession's acknowledged medium of exchange, its journal. The issue is one that every stable profession must address publicly sooner or later, and on which the profession's integrity rests. That issue is the nature of the expertise essential to the profession and how that expertise shall be developed, maintained, and passed on: what its members shall be taught and how they shall be taught it. The kind of knowledge this particular article suggests as essential to the practice of our profession may or may not be the readers' notion of it, but whoever addresses the issue of professional development next at least has this early attempt at hand, either to build on, revise, or reject.

The last article I would place in this category of writing that helps us tell ourselves who we are is Anne Ruggles Gere's review of Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley's book *Evaluating College Writing Programs*, Spring, 1984 (Vol. 7, No. 3). As most of you know, Witte and Faigley are fairly astringent in their criticism of the WPA Consultant/Evaluator program. They give the program little quarter—not even to allow that WPA was battling dragons with whatever weapon came to hand fully five years before Witte and Faigley armored in gleaming research entered the fray themselves.

What is important about Gere's response to the book is that she meets its criticism, as a representative of WPA and as a member of the WPA Board of Consultant/Evaluators, with the utmost diplomacy. She demonstrates with discreet tabular comparison and a minimum of comment that in fact all but six of the evaluation criteria that Witte and Faigley bring to bear on writing programs have analogues in the WPA Consultation/Evaluation Self-Study Questionnaire. Having argued in WPA's defense in this restrained way, her conclusion is not that WPA has been harshly or unfairly treated. She concludes instead that "Witte and Faigley offer... a clear statement of the complexity of evaluating writing programs, a statement which should interest all members of WPA" and which "should affect the way WPA Consultant/Evaluators proceed" (41).

Now, my point is not that Gere has been generous. *Evaluating College Writing Programs* is a good book. It needs no gestures of generosity. My point is what Gere's review says about WPA as an organization and about the growing professional integrity of WPAs generally. Rereading once again, from the perspective of Gere's 1984 article, Leon Coburn's 1982 essay about first taking on the job of writing program administrator, there seems to be evidence, even during the short, two-year interval, of still another level of development in the profession. With no intention, of course, to contrast the two articles per se unfavorably in any way but to view them for the moment merely as milestones representative of the profession's collective state of mind, it seems possible to speculate that we continue to undergo the deepening in professional self-understanding that I have been talking about. We seem to have arrived as a profession at the point that Coburn says he had to arrive at in order to offer to become his institution's WPA. As a profession we seem to have arrived at the understanding that it is time we collectively either put up or shut up. That strikes me as a wise conclusion and a mark of considerable professional maturity.

This maturity tends to be confirmed, furthermore, if we compare Gere's response to Witte and Faigley's criticism of WPA with, for example, the response of the American Medical Association or American Bar Association to criticism on almost any topic directed from outside the inner circle of membership. Granted, the AMA and ABA are large, old, and grandly self-possessed organizations. WPA is small, new, and *arriviste*. Still, I think Gere's response reveals an attribute if not unique to WPAs as professionals, certainly important to the successful practice of writing program administration. It is the ability to hear valid criticism. Not just listen to it. Hear it, and turn it to good use.

Note

In drafting this article I have drawn on John Archer Jackson, Ed., *Professions and Professionalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), especially Jackson's introduction and the chapter "Occupations and Professions" by C. turner and M. N. Hodge."